The Power of Writers in *by*-Phrase Agents: Textual Analysis in Research Methodology

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Abstract

This study examined the power of writers in by-phrase agents used in applied linguistics research methodology. Previous studies focused on agentless passive voice in medical texts, academic texts, and business news. The results showed that people contextually interpreted the omitted agents of passive voice widely known agents, such as doctors, researchers, and businesspeople. Although the writers know the agents are contextually known and therefore use passive voice, it is intriguing to explore why they spell out the by-phrase agents in applied linguistics methodology. To investigate this fact, the study's method was purposive sampling. The data were SCOPUS Q1 databases from System, English for Specific Purposes and Studies in Second Language Acquisition, and reputable international publications.

There were 45 applied linguistics research methodologies. The researchers collected all passive voice constructions with by-phrase agents in the methodology section and found a total of 52 tokens. The data analysis followed the PDI theory (power, distance, and imposition) (Brown & Levinson, 1987), the sociolinguistic framework of power and distance. The results of this study showed that the researchers discovered the power of artful passive voice through morphological and syntactic analysis. The researchers found the morphological feature in the plurality marker-s in 50 percent of the cases. The syntactic features of combined NP (noun phrase) and collective NP were found at 28.85 percent and 19.23 percent, respectively. The discussion in this study reveals that morphological inflections and syntactic noun phrases reflect the sociolinguistics of democratic power in English-speaking contexts. Even though the quality of a writer's academic writing is influenced by various factors, the results of passive constructions and by-phase agents in this study allow us to visualize the formal tone of academic writing in English.

Keywords: By-phrase agents, Applied linguistics research methodology, Language and power, Sociolinguistic implications

Introduction

English is a no-null-parameter language (Chomsky, 2014; Radford, 2023). Despite some exceptions, such as imperative, English requires a subject in all clauses, highlighting its importance. Omitting the subject results in the ungrammaticality of the sentence, such as like. Due to this principle in English, the concepts of subject and agents are controversial, as many people are confused between the two. While the subject of the sentence, spelled out in the position of the Spec T in syntactic representations, must be overt (Radford, 2023), the agent, who instigates the action, can remain covert, as seen in verbless adverbial clauses, non-finite clauses, and passive constructions. This issue is viewed differently between syntacticians' viewpoints and semanticists' viewpoints. Some learners mistakenly believe that they can use active and passive voice interchangeably, which presents a common problem. Although interchangeable use may provide the same semantic denotation, they are pragmatically different. This study will point out that passive voice is not the other form of active voice. Paraphrasing active voice into passive voice may be semantically correct,

but the pragmatic discourse of givenness may become controversial.

Cognitive grammar explains passive constructions in English through the concepts of figure and ground theory. This means that different people look at the same things from their points of view (Langacker, 2013; Radden, 2007). From the viewpoints of syntacticians and semanticists, passive constructions are different. The subject of the sentence is not an agent, so the agent and the subject of passive constructions in English are different people. Consider the following examples to understand the given statement.

(1) *Jack* broke the window.

(2) *The window* was broken.

Example (1) is a VP complement. The pronoun *Jack* is syntactically known as the subject, and the semantic role of the noun phrase is agent or (+agent). The controversial issue is the DP *the window* in example (2). Whilst syntacticians explain the NP *the window* as *the subject*, semanticists explain this DP as *the theme*, referring to the entities to undergo an action. Accordingly, their perspectives differ in that one focuses on the structure, but the other views the same things through the lens of meaning.

The *by*-phrase agents in passive constructions are syntactically adjuncts. Omitting this information does not impact the grammaticality of the sentence (Radford, 2009; 2023). However, it is an important piece of information once spelled out as a new piece of information in example (3).

(3) Tom was walking with his toy poodle in the garden. *The garbage truck suddenly hit it.*

The writer introduces the garbage truck as a new piece of information. The information is useful because it enables a comparison between the two objects involved in the incident. The results of the situation can be predicted. Therefore, not only does the meaning in *by*-phase agents represent the agent, but it could also have a deeply insightful meaning to interpret if spelt out. While most previous studies on passive constructions in English aimed to explain why writers omitted agents, particularly in medical and political texts, this study highlights how agents are interpreted in passive constructions within applied linguistics research methodology.

Methodology is a crucial section of research articles. It establishes reliability and validity for the results of a study. Although writers could apply a variety of syntactic structures in this section, such as transitive complements, subjective complements, and noun clause complements—they tend to use passive constructions productively. Previous studies (Amdur et al., 2010; Leong, 2021; Rodríguez-Vergara, 2017; Wongkittiporn, 2022) found that writers omit agents in passive voice either because the agents are widely known or unknown. This study used sociolinguistic concepts how language is applied in a certain genre of writing to explain the spelt out *by*-phrase agent in applied linguistics methodology. This information leads to the following objective of the study.

Objective of the Study

1. To define power in adjunct phrase agents in applied linguistics methodology

2. To examine how writers express their power through *by*-phrase agents in applied linguistics methodology using morphological forms.

3. To examine how writers express their power through *by*-phrase agents in applied linguistics
   methodology using syntactic structures.

Research question

1. How do you define power in adjunct phrase agents in applied linguistics methodology?

2. How do writers express their power through *by*-phrase agents in applied linguistics methodology using morphological forms?

3. How do writers express their power through *by*-phrase agents in applied linguistics methodology, both syntactically and semantically?

Literature review

This section provides the theoretical concepts in this study. They are principles and parameters in generative grammar, syntax of passive constructions, semantics and pragmatics of passive construction, sociolinguistics, and the genre of applied linguistics research articles.

Principles and parameters in generative grammar

Principles and parameters are theoretical concepts in government binding theory (Chomsky, 2014). They are rules and systems of a language.

Violating the rule would lead to ungrammaticality of language use. An example of a principle in English is Extended Projection Principle (EPP). EPP states that the finite T is extends into a TP that has a subject. Another principle in English is VP internal subject hypothesis (VPISH), stating that the subject originates in VP core before moving to be tensed in the position of T (Radford, 2023). In terms of parameters, Thai is a null subject parameter. Omitting the subject does not affect the grammaticality of the sentence. In contrast, English is a no-null-subject parameter. This means that the subject in English is required in all clauses. This information shows that the subject in English is required and remains in situ. A typical structure in English is the subject with a predicate, as *Mary cried*. Mary is the subject of the sentence, while *cried* is the predicate. The structures in English where the subject remains in situ, such as SV, SVO, SVOO, and SVC, are interpreted as unmarked forms or regular patterns in English. However, the structure in English, where subject moves from one to another, position is interpreted as a marked pattern, and we should explain the reasons for these subject movements. This leads to the explanation of passive constructions in the following section.

Syntax of passive constructions as a marked structure

In English, the passive construction allows the omission of the agent (Radford, 2009, 2023), and it is known as an irregular structure. This study explains the passive constructions syntactically, semantically and pragmatically. According to generative grammar, the structure of argument movement, technically known as A-movement, classifies passive constructions (Radford, 2009, 2023). The principle of the no-null-subject parameter explains the A-movement in passive constructions. Since the subject in English is required in all clauses, omitting the subject of the sentence results in ungrammatical things such as *love*. Omitting the subject in passive voice results in the movement of the object to become the subject, which is called *A-movement*. To understand this process, the explanation of A-movement is given via the counterparts of active and passive voices as in (4) and (5).

(4) Martin **bought** a new car.

(5) Martin bought a new car.

Example (4) is active voice, whereas example (5) represents passive voice. Radford (2023) explained four steps for transforming passive voice in English. The first is the A-movement from the object to be the subject in Spec T. The second process is adding the auxiliary *be* according to the tense of the finite verb in active voice. Third, the active voice transforms the main verb into the past participle. The final process is to add the *by-*agent if needed. The A-movement in (5) is *a new car*, which is moved from the object position to be landed in Spec T. This movement complies with the principles and parameters of *Extended Projection Principle* (EPP) and no-null-subject parameter. In English, the subject must fill the position of Spec T (Radford, 2023).

Semantics and pragmatics of passive constructions

In addition to the syntactic structure of passive constructions in generative grammar, Swan (2015) classifies the semantic interpretations of by-phrase agents in passive constructions into four types. There are widely known unknown, concealed, and unimportant agents. The widely known agents in passive voice refer to omitting predictable agents. The unknown agent in passive voice refers to unpredictable agents. The concealed agent in passive voice refers to the agent for reputable maintenance. The unimportant agent refers to the agent who does not necessarily need to be spelled out (Swan, 2015). The–following examples provide these omitted agents

(6) Peter was prescribed antibiotic drugs to take for 7 days.

(7) The ruby necklace was stolen at the auction.

(8) Due to economic regression, 500 employees were laid off.

(9) The house was perfectly cleaned.

Examples (6) - (9) show passive constructions for various reasons. People interpret the missing agent in example (6) as a widely known agent. The agent who can prescribe antibiotic drugs is only a doctor. People interpret the missing agent in (7) as an unknown agent. The robber is unknown, so the agent who performed the stealing action cannot be spelled out. People interpret the missing agent in example (8) as a concealed agent. Spelling out a company name would affect its positive reputation. The writer does not spell out the agent in

example (9) because the agent in not the focus of the sentence.

While people's semantic interpretations of agentless passive constructions affect the sentential transformation of A-movement, they sometimes explain the movement through the pragmatic discourse of givenness. The given information is an old information linked with the-previous sentence. On the other hand, the postverbal position is a new piece of information (Birner, 2006). The structural transformation of active to passive voice is due to the pragmatic discourse of givenness.

(10) Tom hated ***Jerry. He*** hit him. Then Tom ran away.

Example (10) shows how writers use passive voice in an area adjacent to the structure of transitive verbs. The passive voice uses A-movement in line with the pragmatic discourse of givenness, linking old information to the previous discourse through a case marking system, such as the pronoun *he*. Accordingly, passive construction is a structure used to link different pieces of information, as in Figure 1.

S-V-<u>O. O</u>+V+<u>S. S</u>+V+O

Figure 1 shows that the A-movement in passive voice is the given information to link with the information in the previous sentence. On the other hand, the agent is moved to the final position to link with the information in the following sentence, which is known as *information packaging* (Roberts, 1996).

Semantic principle of compositionality

According to Kearns (2011), the semantic principle of compositionality refers to the arrangement of word order in a language. This arrangement of word order affects the meaning of delivering information. The sentence *Tom hit Jerry* is different from *Jerry hit Tom*. Although the compositionality between the two sentences is the same in terms of syntactic structures as in S-VP NP, they are different in terms of semantic roles. *Tom* in the former sentence plays the semantic role of *the agent*, referring to the one who instigates an action. So, *Tom* is the hitter. On the other hand, *Tom* is the latter sentence received the theta role of theme, referring to the one who received the energy of an action. However, this study's semantic principle of compositionality is different, as passive voice is a reversed structure of active voice in English.

(11) Tom hit Jerry.

(12) Jerry was hit.

According to the principles of semantic roles, Tom receives the semantic role of agent, whereas Jerry receives the semantic role of theme. When transferring to the passive voice, the semantic role remains the same. Jerry remains in the same role as the theme. However, the movement of the theme to be the subject of the sentence is due to principles and parameters in linguistics. That is the principle of EPP and no-null-subject parameters. The study identified a gap was found in this area of agentful and agentless passive constructions in sociolinguistic implications. Researchers question why the agents in passive constructions in applied linguistics research articles are either agentful or agentless.

Pragmatic discourse of End-Weight principle

The end-weight principle is the linguistic principle in information packaging, which refers placing a longer piece of information at the final position of the sentence (Smolka, 2017). A structure in the English language is an end-weight structure. It is a common practice in English to place a longer piece of information at the final position of the sentence. The longer piece of information refers to adjuncts or additional information, whereas omitting this information does not impact the grammaticality of the sentence. The adjuncts could be adverbial clauses to refer to places, manner and time. If the readers want to get more information, they could read further at the end of the sentence.

PDI theory

The PDI theory was originated by Brown and Levinson's (1987). Scholars commonly used a classic theory to analyze power and distance between interlocutors, interchangeably known as the speaker and the hearer in context. The contextual factors of PDI include *power* (P), *distance* (D), and *degree of*

imposition (R). For example, in a family, mother has a higher power than her son. In a school, teachers have a higher power than their students. Nevertheless, the power between the two parties in the same context can be equal, such as a student and a student in the same grade.

Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics is a branch of language studies to learn the relationships between language and societies. The branch focuses on how language is applied when relevant to social indications, such as gender, age, education, socioeconomic status, social class and power (Holmes & Wilson, 2022; Meyerhoff, 2018). Labov (2006) applied a variety of indicators to study how the postvocalic /r/, such as the *fourth floor*, is used among different groups. The examples of indicators in his study are gender, education, and socioeconomic status. His study showed that females used the postvocalic /r/ more frequently than males. The participants with higher levels of education frequently used the postvocalic /r/ more than people with lower education levels. To conclude the results in his study, the postvocalic /r/ is a variant to indicate social prestige in the United States of America. Most previous studies explored sociolinguistics and phonetic variants to examine how language is pronounced and applied in different communities. This study pays attention to the study of sociolinguistics and syntactic structures in academic prose.

Previous studies

It is believed that different genres have their own preferences of language use (Wongkittiporn, 2025). This section reviews the studies of passive constructions in different genres, such as medical texts (Amdur et al., 2010; Rodríguez- Vergara, 2017), business news (Wongkittiporn, 2022), and academic writing (Leong, 2021). Writers productively use passive voice in academic writing, such as textbooks and research articles. People who conduct research are widely known as researchers, so they are not required to be spelled repeatedly. In addition to that, the genre of news prefers the use of passive voice due to several reasons. For example, news reporters protect themselves from being sued for a negative reputation by avoiding mentioning specific people's names. A similar interpretation of

passive voice is applied to medical report writing as the doctor conceals their name to avoid being sued by their patients.

Regarding the comparison between adjunct agents with previous studies, those previous studies sought to understand why adjuncts agents in passive voice must be omitted, such as repetition, to spell it out again. It refers to the researcher in the study. The explanation for omitting the agents in previous studies was the horror aequi principle (Amdur et al., 2010; Rodríguez-Vergara, 2017), referring to avoiding repeating known information. In contrast, the study explained the existence of by-phrase agents in terms of the negotiation between the researchers and the reviewers. It was valid to make enough experts to check their methodology.

Applied linguistics research articles

Passive construction is a commonly used structure in doctoral reports (Lubis et al., 2024). It is also frequently used in news reports (Almahameed, 2022). Both genres of medical and political news reports exploit the passive construction in English to conceal the agents. Sometimes, psychologists take notes about their patients but do not spell out their names, as the patients' information must be kept confidential. Spelling out someone's name in political news may lead to political issues. While we know enough about using passive voice in medical reports and political news in English, this study sheds light on the textual analysis of passive constructions in applied linguistics research articles. Applied linguistics research articles are written texts for studying language use, teaching approaches, language evaluation, technology, and language teaching. Applied linguistics research articles are considered reliable materials for studying language use in context. Before a research article is published, it goes through several processes. The editor-in-chef first judges whether the research article can be reviewed or not. If the editor does not reject the paper, they distribute it to experts in the fields. The reviewers' send their comments back to the researcher to fix accordingly. Some reviewers help check the researcher's language use in his/her writing. The paper then goes to the stage of proofreading, which is usually the responsibility of native English speakers. This lengthy process ensures the content validity and the language accuracy of a published article in English. Therefore, analyzing passive constructions in applied

linguistics research articles can help English language learners understand learn how language is used in this genre.

Methodology

This section presents the methodologies in this study. To comply with the study's objective, the research design is a qualitative method to gain insightful information about passive voice in the community of applied linguists. The researcher uses a purposive sampling method to understand how language is used in specific context.

Data collection

The data collection in this study was applied linguistics research methodology from Q1 SCOPUS indexation. *System*, *English for Specific Purposes*, and *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*. This data collection was based on several criteria. The first criterion was the reputability of journals, referring to the acceptability of the research papers among scholars in the field and the number of research subscriptions internationally. The second criterion was the Q1 SCOPUS indexed database, which helps confirm the content reliability and the accuracy of language in use, which is called *academic writing*. In addition to the criteria of journal reputation, the up-to-date journal was the other selection criteria. The researcher selected journals published between 2023 and 2025 for the study. This made sure that the study of language in this research study is present-day-English.

Regarding the data collection procedure in this study, the applied linguistics research articles were published from 2021 to 2025. The data collection in this study included 45 articles,15 from each journal. Fazilatfar and Naseri (2014) followed this number. The researcher found a total of 52 tokens of *by*-phrase agents in this study. An example of data extraction is given (13).

(13) One researcher first coded all transcripts **(PASSIVE VOICE WITH *BY*-PHRASE AGENT)**. Another trained coder used the same coding scheme to code four transcripts (10%) for all measures except those computed through a lexical profiler. (Trofimovich, et al., 2025: 5)

Example (13) shows the data collection in this study. The keyword in this study is the preposition in

passive constructions. The preposition was a key for the manual search in this study. The main part of the study is the by-phrase agent, such as *by one researcher.*

Data analysis
Syntactic structures

This study's data analysis of passive constructions follows generative grammar (Radford, 2023). In this study, passive constructions were regarded as the counterpart of active voice. This means that the sentence 'Tom hit Jerry' is identical in form and meaning to itself. The subject, *Jerry,* was moved in passive voice via A-movement to fill in the Spec T position. This study classified the by-phrase agent as an adjunct, allowing its omission. Omitting the agent does not affect the grammaticality of the sentence. However, keeping the agent indicates that it conveys important information, sometimes referred to as an *obligatory adjunct*. Omitting this piece of information might impact the maxim of quantity.

(14) The data was collected.

(15) The data was collected ***by one researcher.***

Saying 'the data were collected' in (14) seems tautologic. Adding the *by*- phrase agent, as in (15), complies with the maxim of quantity. The readers receive adequate information as given by the writer. Syntactically, this piece of information is called an *obligatory adjunct*.

The PDI theory

As suggested by an expert in the field, the author of this study realized that there are many interesting approaches to examining power distance, such as *stylistic conventions in scientific writing* or *linguistic theories on subjectivity* and *depersonalization*. However, this study's analysis of language and power follows *the PDI theory* to contribute something new to the field. The data analysis in this study followed Brown and Levinson's (1987) contextual factors, including power (P), distance (D), and degree of imposition (R). One of the indicators to address power (P) is the subject. The subject refers to the position of the subject. For example, the doctor has a higher power than his patients. Teachers have a higher power than their students. However, the power between the two parties can be equal, such as classmates and roommates. The study adopted the concept of power (P) as the analytical

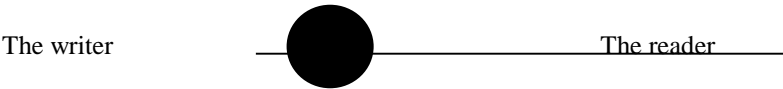framework. The representatives of power in the analysis were either (+P) or (-P). The (+P) means that one party has a higher power. On the other hand, the (-P) means that one party has lower power than the other. This study analyzed unequal power between the two parties, as illustrated in Table (1).

Table 1 Examples of data analysis of power

Agents	Minimal-Pair Analysis	
Researcher-Reader	Researcher (+P)	Reader(-P)
Teacher-Student	Teacher (+P)	Student (-P)

The analysis of power in this study investigated whether the writers show power over the readers or not. In research studies, those who write the research articles are the researcher(s), so the researchers are the interlocutors. The readers who read the paper are message receivers, so the readers are the other interlocutors. The two parties interacted based on the linguistic patterns in written texts. The dot in the continuum represents the dot of power that one would hold over the other.

The writer ⚫————————The reader

Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of language and power, researchers is likely employ different language techniques to reflect the other party's power. Research methodology is the part that is negotiable depending on the scale of the study. For example, the researcher usually wanted to finish their study quicker by doing a smaller scale. However, the review thought it may be too small to generalize. Third parties, such as experts in the field, could compromise this negotiation. See the following examples for further discussion.

(16) Three experts checked the instruments in this study.

(17) The instruments in this study were check by three experts.

The entities that were the focus is the instrument, which may contain closed-ended, open-ended and focus-group interviews. The writer as the topic or the main focus of the sentence. However, leaving the agents of the sentence can make it questionable who the checkers are. Accordingly, the existence of *by*-phrase agents changed power dynamic of the negotiation between the researchers and the reviewers. Researchers view consensus and agreement in research methodology as important factor. When the that there were three to five experts to check the method, this leads to the perception of reliability and validity in the study results.

Collective nouns are used with the syntactic categories of nouns to refer to a collection of people, things, and animals (Nelson & Greenbaum, 2018). *Plurality markers* are the inflectional morphology that indicates the number of entities that are more than one (Radford, 2023). *Noun phrases* or (NP) refer to people, animals, and objects. They can be common nouns, proper nouns, pronouns, and collective nouns (Radford, 2023). Analysts consider it a noun phrase combination when two types of nouns are combined as the agents of the sentence.

The second factor is the degree of social distance between the two parties. Researchers define social distance as the relationship between the two parties. An interlocutor could have a closer social distance with the other interlocutor, while the other interlocutor could have a further social distance. For example, the distance between the mother and her son is closer than that of the mother and her daughter-in-law.

The last factor is the degree of imposition. The degree of imposition could be higher or lower depending on the interlocutors. The imposition is the level of disturbance to the other interlocutor. For example, when one borrows a close friend's notes, the imposition is analyzed to be low. In contrast, a student who asks a professor for make-up quizzes due to his absence is analyzed to have a higher-level imposition. The researchers used frequencies and percentages to

calculate the data. The following section reports the findings of the study.

The Results

While only one token does not figuratively imply the existence of the writers' power over the other as in *All transcripts were first coded by one researcher* (Trofimovich, et al., 2025, p. 4), others presented differently. This section presents the qualitative results of the study to show how the writers show their power over the reader and reviewer.

Table 4 reveals the frequencies and percentages of the signs of writers' power in *by-* phrases agents in applied linguistics methodology. The (+P) is expressed morphologically and syntactically via inflectional plurality markers, collective NP, and combined NP. The highest percentage is plurality markers at 50 percent. The second place is combined NP at 28.85 percent. The third place is collective NP at 19.23 percent.

Table 2 Morphology and syntactic analysis of language and power

Agents	Examples
Plurality Marker	(18) The post-survey interviews took place over Zoom and were recorded **by the researchers.** (McCombie & Masaeed, 2025: 6)
Collective NP	(19) The results were blind-scored **by the research team**. (Zhang et al., 2025: 7)
Combined NP	(20) To mitigate subjective biases and ensure accurate interpretations, data analysis was conducted **by two researchers: a teacher educator and course instructor, and a trained research assistant** (Independent auditor). (Fan & Xia, 2025: 5)

Table 3 Sociolinguistic analysis of language and power

The writer	The reader
(+P)	(-P)

The writers' power was hidden in a variety of language patterns in morphology and syntax, such as collective nouns, plurality markers and combined NP.

Table 4 Frequency and percentage

Patterns	Frequency	Percentage
Plurality Markers	26	50
Combined NP	15	28.85
Collective NP	10	19.23
None	1	1.92
Total	**52**	**100**

Qualitative data

This section presents the qualitative data in this study

Plurality markers

The plurality of markers occurred the most frequently in this study, at 50 percent. *Plurality markers* are the inflectional morphology that indicates several entities that are more than one (Radford, 2023). Sometimes, plurality markers are used individually or with arithmetical numbers, such as (21) - (26).

(21) The UGJT underwent construct validation using the known-group technique, administering the test to six English teachers whose performance differed from the study participants, ensuring its construct validity. Content validity was confirmed **by two experts**

in language testing and assessment. (Behbahani & Karimpour, 2025: 5)

(22) The post-survey interviews took place over Zoom and were recorded *by the researchers.* (McCombie & Masaeed, 2025: 6)

(23) All coding was re-examined *by both researchers* until mutual agreement toward undecided cases was achieved. (Lin & Crosthwaite, 2025: 7)

(24) Similar observations were made *by other teachers* regarding their increased autonomy and the contributions of such autonomy to their agency. (Nazari et al., 2024: 7)

(25) The interview data was coded independently *by two coders*, following a pre-established coding protocol. The consistency between the coders exceeded 90%, indicating a high level of intercoder reliability. (Zou et al. 2024: 6)

(26) The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis, with subsequent English translations completed *by the authors*. (Liu & Chang, 2024: 5)

The agents, as presented in (21) - (26), are not individuals, but they several people, such as *authors, coders, researchers, teachers,* and *experts*. The plurality markers here show the grammaticality of the sentences, and indicate that more than one person participated in the activities, such as analyzing, coding, and recoding.

Combined NP

The second place is combined NP at 19.23 percent. Noun phrases or (NP) refer to people, animals, and objects. They can be common nouns, proper nouns, pronouns, and collective nouns (Radford, 2023). Writers can combine two types of nouns as the agents of the sentence, as shown in (27) - (29).

(27) To mitigate subjective biases and ensure accurate interpretations, data analysis was conducted **by two researchers: a teacher educator and course instructor, and a trained research assistant** (the second author). (Fan & Xia, 2025: 5)

(28) All three constructs were measured with two sets of questionnaires, which separated English and a LOTE with instructions and item statements specifying the target language. Questionnaires were translated *by the authors and front-line English teachers*. (Zhan & Zhong, 2025: 5)

(29) These codes were then organized into broader categories corresponding to the identified themes of promise and limitations. The coding process was conducted independently *by two coders following a pre-established protocol, achieving a high level of intercoder reliability with consistency exceeding 90%.* (Zou et al. 2024, p. 6)

The agents in passive voice in (27) - (29) are combined NP. For example, the NPs in (27) are educators, instructors, and research assistants. The NPs in (29) are the authors and the teachers. They are people from different roles.

Collective NP

The third place is collective NP at 28.85 percent. As previously mentioned, collective nouns refer to a collection of people, things, or animals (Nelson & Greenbaum, 2018). For example, the word *folk* is plural and refers to a group of people. The word *pod* is plural, and refers to a group of whales. In applied linguistics research articles, the writers use collective nouns as agents in passive constructions, such as the words *team*, *board* and committee, as in (30) - (33).

(30) The results were blind-scored *by the research team*. (Zhang et al., 2025: 7)

(31) 28 participants were recruited from the first-semester Chinese classes at a small private university in North America. All procedures were approved *by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at this university.* (Wang & Yea, 2024: 3)

(32) To ensure the thorough preparation of these preservice educators for the creation of DST teaching packages, a quintet of targeted training workshops was orchestrated **by a team of five seasoned trainers**, leveraging the Zoom platform. (Yu & Wang, 2025: 5)

(33) The study was conducted at universities in Taiwan and was approved *by the university ethics committee.* (Chien & Li, 2024: 17)

The words *team* and *board* are collective nouns, in English. They are similar semantically in that they refer to a group of who are skillful and expert people in the field. The organizers set them up to perform a particular task together.

Discussion

Different morphological and syntactic forms in English concealed the research writers' power. There are plurality markers, collective nouns and combined NP. The most positive way that signals the writers' power in applied linguistics research methodology is inflectional plurality markers -*s* at 50 percent.

Democratic power

A democratic system is defined as a system where the agreement comes from the vote of majority, group, board or committee. Before deciding to vote, people can express their opinions while listening to others. The final result of the vote is the agreement the group should follow (Przeworski, 2024). Suppose one considers that language use is cognitively built up by one's experience of real-world events (Radden, 2007), In that case, people cognitively language features to support the quality of democratic power in the society in which we live. The democratic systems in the United States of America and the United Kingdom have become consolidated. To support this sociolinguistically, linguistic features support the systems in these societies, such as the plurality marker -*s*. While other people say that language is arbitrary, this study explains the existence of inflectional morphology -*s* according to the democratic system, as more than one person votes for a certain situation. The inflectional morphology -*s* is a strong sign of agreement. However, other countries have never become democratic, the sign has never occurred in their language. The following section gives some expressions of this usage.

Inflectional morphology -*s*

The smallest meaningful unit in linguistics conveys the power of the writer. It is the inflectional morphology -*s*. According to Fromkin et al. (2014), morphology is the linguistic branch to explain the smallest meaningful unit in a language. Linguists divide the morphology of a language into derivational and inflectional morphology. The inflectional morphology in English is a closed category. Once you add a unit, you cannot add any further units. They include -*ed*, -*ing,* and -*s*. The inflectional morphology -*s* could have a variety of meanings. They could be possessive, present and plurality.

In applied linguistics, scholars add the plurality marker - s to countable nouns, such as *books* and *teachers*. This follows the rule of grammaticality in English (Swan, 2015).

However, this study shows that the plurality marker -*s* is used for the discourse of power, referring to consensus, agreement, and compliance. According to Moerman (2007), consensus refers to the agreement of the majority of people in a team, group, or community in which one stays. Examples of plural agents appear in (34) - (36).

(34) [...] Content validity was confirmed *by two experts* [...]

(35) [...] All coding was re‑examined *by both researcher*s [...]

(36) [...] it was piloted and reviewed *by five L2 Arabic instructor*s [...]

More than one person completed reviewing, validating, and coding. This suggests that these processes went through consensus and agreement. With this inflectional morphology - *s*, making an argument is possible. However, readers interpret the writer is (+P), holding a higher power in this position because he or she wrote the contents in their methodology via consensus.

Syntactic and semantic interpretations of collective nouns

Collective nouns are syntactically known as noun phrases (NP) (Radford, 2023). The NP does not mark plurality as *team* and *board*, but it includes more than one member. So, collective nouns are a group of people in this study. Examples of agents in passive voice with semantic denotations of plurality appear in (37) - (38).

(37) The results were blind-scored ***by the research team***. (Zhang et al., 2025: 7)

(38) All procedures were approved ***by this university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) at this university.*** (Wang & Yea, 2024: 3)

The research team and the institutional review board are the *by-*phrases in (37) - (38). The research team shows group of people sharing the same study objective. A group of people forms the board, set to complete a mission with the same goal.

Pragmatic Discourse of End-Weight Principle

The end‑weight principle explains why agents in combined NPs gained the lowest popularity. As

mentioned (Smolka, 2017), the *end-weight principle* is the linguistic function of information packaging to a longer piece of information at the final position of the sentence, as reproduced in (39) - (40).

(39) Data analysis was conducted **by two researchers: a teacher educator and course instructor, and a trained research assistant** (the second author). (Fan & Xia, 2025: 5)

(40) The coding process was conducted independently **by two coders following** *a pre-*

established protocol, achieving a high level of intercoder reliability with consistency exceeding 90%. (Zou et al., 2024: 6)

Examples (39) and (40) show the use of the long agent in passive voice. Swan (2015) explained that writers use passive voice with the by-phrase agent because the subject is long. As Yaghmaie (2003) mentioned, content validity should come from the validation of two or three experts. The longer expressions at the final position of the sentence are powerful numerically, and people in different fields help check the reliability and validity of the study. The writers tried to show that the data were analyzed from different perspectives, such as educators, instructors, and researcher assistants. This helps reduce the distance (-D) between the writer and the readers.

Conclusion

The current study examines the study of *by*-phase agents in applied linguistics research methodology to seek their sociolinguistic interpretations of language and power as in the following research questions.

What are the signs of writers' power in *by*-phrase agents in applied linguistics methodology?

The results of this study show that inflectional morphology -s, compound NP and combined NP are the language of power hidden in the *by*-phrase agents in applied linguistics research methodology. Despite being the smallest meaningful unit, the inflectional morphology $-s$, as in *the authors* and *the researchers*, was the highest at 50 percent. The compound NP, and the combined NP were 19.23 and 28.85 percent, respectively. The results of this study show that the use of agent passive voice in applied linguistics research articles is not arbitrary.

The results of this study offered new insight into the study of passive constructions. Most previous studies reported a wide of agents in passive voice. People widely knew it as the doctor, the lawyer, and the scientist, so this could be omitted. This study showed that adding the known agents would enhance the writer's power as if sitting on a negotiating table with a reviewer. Based on the framework of generative linguistics, agent passive voice is explained sociolinguistically in terms of language and power. Accordingly, the results of this study theoretically contribute to the field of linguistics. Since reliability in conducting research is important several experts who validate the instrument or analyze the data create consensus and agreement for the study. A number, as applied through language, such as $-s$, *team,* and *board,* is powerful for the writers to defend their information when a reviewer or scholar reviews it in a higher position, such as a university professor. This reflects the democratic system in academic research writing, where consensus is crucial for others to accept. However, when a team or committee are consists of people from different fields, it is important to inform *that two researchers—a teacher educator and course instructor, and a trained research assistant—conducted the data analysis.* This makes the information longer where the pragmatic discourse of the end-weight principle is applicable. If the reader is interested in the information, he/ she will continue reading to gain additional information. It is important to acknowledge the study's weakness in that the data in this study was limited to only the data of applied linguistics research methodologies. It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Since this current study analyzes research articles in the humanities and social sciences, its conclusion may not apply effectively to other fields, such as management and sciences. The study suggests that applying subjectivity and depersonalization as the framework would be valuable. As mentioned earlier, we use passive voice in English specifically because the agents of the sentence can be omitted. This structure is applied sociolinguistically by different genres. For example, politicians use passive voice to avoid mentioning third parties if the message sent is negative. On the other hand, passive voice is used in the court when the killer is unknown to avoid accusation. They mostly appear in a negative context. Generalizing the study's results to other genres, such as novels and newspapers, may not apply to the optimal

level. For scholars interested in this study, selecting other types of materials, such as political news, may contribute something new to the field.

Regarding pedagogical implications, we recommend that non-native English speakers and early-career researchers add arguments in passive voice to enhance clarity, precision. and formality in their research articles.

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