

Passive voice in the Italian translations of English simplified texts: a case study of layperson summaries of clinical trials

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ABSTRACT

The present paper aims at analyzing verb voice in a comprehensibility-enhanced text type (ascribable to the Plain Language variety), i.e., the layperson summary of clinical trials. More specifically, the Italian target texts of these documents (originally written in English) were considered and compared to their source texts. Canonical passives as well as less prototypical ones (including passive-related constructions) were examined. The passive voice is particularly significant in language simplification (notably in simplified versions of specialized texts) as it is known to be cognitively harder to process than the active voice; at the same time, though, it is a distinctive feature of Languages for Specific Purposes (LSPs) – one of those linguistic traits that Halliday (1990: 57-58) refers to when he talks about “a typical syndrome of grammatical features” in specialized discourse. For these reasons, it is interesting to delve into this aspect. The main result was that the number of canonical passives increases in the Italian texts, going against the universal of simplification in translation.

KEYWORDS

Plain Language, layperson summaries of clinical trials, voice, translation, Italian target texts

1. INTRODUCTION

In *The Dictionary of Accessible Communication* (Hansen-Schirra et al. 2021: 118), the homonymous concept is defined as a “form of communication that is accessible and usable for people with different communication needs”. This is tightly connected – among others – with language simplification, which includes Easy and Plain Language and has been receiving increasing attention in the last years. Some works regarding the impact of Easy and Plain Language in the medical field, which is the area examined in this paper, are those by Perego (2020), Maaß and Rink (2017; 2018), as well as the volume by Ahrens et al. (2022) titled *Accessibility – Health Literacy – Health Information. Interdisciplinary Approaches to an Emerging Field of Communication*.

The present paper aims at analyzing verb voice in a text genre written in Plain Language, namely the layperson summary of clinical trials. More specifically, its purpose is to evaluate the translations into Italian (from the source texts in English) of this particular aspect. A similar work has already been carried out in order to analyze voice in English texts and the corresponding German translations (Pedrini 2022), and will be taken as a starting point in this paper (e.g., as far as the methodology is concerned).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In *Syntax. Ein internationales Handbuch zeitgenössischer Forschung*, voice (also called *diathesis*) is defined as an array of grammatical verb conditions such as active, passive, middle, reflexive, antipassive, causative, or applicative (Wunderlich 1993: 730). In the analysis of many languages, this is reduced to the traditional opposition between active and passive voice. An instance is Svartvik (1985: 5), who regards voice as “a grammatical system in the verbal group with two terms: active and passive”, and states that “the active term and the passive term are in formal binary opposition”.

In the present section, an overview of the theory concerning the passive voice will be provided. Firstly, in 2.1. I will present an outline of passives in English and Italian based on some grammar books and other scientific works; in 2.2. the passive voice will be considered in relation to Languages for Specific Purposes. In 2.3. I will focus on the passive voice with respect to its cognitive implications and the guidelines existing for Easy and Plain Language.

2.1. PASSIVES IN ENGLISH AND ITALIAN: AN OVERVIEW IN GRAMMAR BOOKS AND OTHER SCIENTIFIC WORKS

In the present section an overview of passives in some English and Italian grammar books as well as scientific articles will be presented. The purpose is to point out which aspects are thematized in these theoretical works and what is considered to be a passive. As a matter of fact, the definition of passive voice is not as trivial as it may seem. See the following excerpt from Svartvik (1985: 3), preceding a list of the types of constructions that he regards as passives:

Most attention will be given to the passive, and we shall try to view it in its own right by reversing the customary procedure of analysis and making the passive our point of departure. This mode of analysis presupposes that we know what is meant by the term 'passive voice' in English. Any attempt to define its boundaries by reference to previous work will soon reveal that there is no agreement among grammarians as to what constitutes an English passive.

In various languages there are passives which are canonical and are also universally regarded as such, and others which are not prototypical and whose status is more debated. This applies also to English and Italian.

As far as English is concerned, in *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1427-1447) start with an introductory section defining voice and the active-passive dichotomy in this language. The following subchapter deals with the syntax of passives. The two scholars call the prepositional phrase with *by* – the one that expresses the agent – *internalized complement* in order to differentiate it from the semantic role *agent*. Depending on whether the internalized complement is expressed or not, they also distinguish between long and short passives and argue that the latter do not have active equivalents, since these would have to encode information about the subject that is not explicitly encoded in the passive form. From a syntactic point of view, they also distinguish between *be*-passives, *get*-passives and bare passives (as in “The guy *mauled by our neighbour’s dog* is in intensive care” [emphasis added]). The following subchapters deal with complements externalized from the passive verb phrase, adjectival passives, an *excursus* about *get*-passives, and pragmatic factors favoring actives or passives.

With respect to Italian, in *Grande grammatica italiana di consultazione*, Salvi (1991: 85-98) deals with the selection of passive auxiliary verbs *ESSERE*, *VENIRE*, and *ANDARE*. *ESSERE* may give rise to ambiguities between two interpretations, one referred to an action and the other to a state. Depending *inter alia* on agent expression, adverbials, and tense choice, the former or the latter are favored. *VENIRE* may be employed exclusively with simple tenses, only has an action interpretation, and is used especially when the auxiliary *ESSERE* cannot be employed (“la mamma è baciata” vs “la mamma viene baciata”) or favors a statal interpretation (“la porta è chiusa” vs “la porta viene chiusa”). Unlike the other two auxil-

iaries, *ANDARE* cannot be used with an overt agent. Other auxiliaries are *RESTARE*, *RIMANERE*, *FINIRE*, as well as *PREFERIRE* and *DESIDERARE*. Salvi also mentions other two passive constructions, which, however, are not constructions with a predicative complement like the ones examined so far. One involves the verb *AVERE* and the other *VOLERE*, and two instances are “Il sergente ebbe la testa tagliata da un ussaro” and “Voglio queste battute suonate più a tempo”, respectively. Other subchapters deal with sentences which are not passivizable, passives with intransitive verbs and impersonal passives, as well as passive functions. Another construction which expresses passivity discussed in detail in Salvi’s volume is the passive (or passivizing) *SI* (as in “Si mangiano le mele”, *ibid.*: 102), where the object is promoted to subject and therefore agrees with the verb (as in standard passive constructions). The differences between these two structures are analyzed thoroughly (*ibid.*: 107-108): among others, with the passive *SI* the agent phrase cannot be introduced by the preposition *da*, but by *da parte di*; the subject (even if implicit) must be human and plural – and not in the first or second person; unlike in passive constructions, with the passive *SI* a preverbal subject is not always acceptable.

Among scientific works dealing exclusively with passivity in the English language, a study which is worth mentioning is the one conducted by Puckica (2009), who points out that the passive voice clearly does not limit itself to the construction *BE + PAST PARTICIPLE*. He divides passive constructions into central passive constructions, which all entail a passive past participle form, and marginal passive constructions, which do not include a past participle. The first category encompasses *BE OR GET + PAST PARTICIPLE*, but also other linking or copular verbs whose status is more uncertain, such as *BECOME*, *SEEM*, *REMAIN*, *LOOK*, and *FEEL* (*ibid.*: 222-223), as well as postnominal participial attributes and constructions with *HAVE + OBJECT + PAST PARTICIPLE*. The second category entails what he calls *V-ING passive constructions* and *V-ABLE₁ passive constructions*, i.e., constructions like “The carpet needs cleaning”¹ (*ibid.*: 225) and passive adjectives with the suffix *-able*, respectively.

With respect to Italian, some recent works concerning passives are those by Giacalone Ramat (2018) and Grochowska-Reiter (2020). Besides the canonical auxiliaries *ESSERE*, *VENIRE*, but also *ANDARE*, Giacalone Ramat lists *FINIRE*, *RIMANERE*, and *TROVARSI*, which she defines as “passives with aspectual connotations” and as object of an ongoing grammaticalization process. She also takes into account the verb *VEDERSI*, which she considers to be subject to grammaticalization. Grochowska-Reiter provides a similar overview, although she seems to regard all these verbs as proper auxiliaries. She states that the auxiliary without additional connotations is *ESSERE*, while *VENIRE* has a more dynamic reading (Giacalone Ramat & Sansò 2014: 22, in Grochowska-Reiter 2020: 35). She then

1 Such constructions are mentioned also by Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1199-1200), who call them *concealed passives*.

describes passives with *ANDARE*, which have two functions: one as a loss passive² and the other as a modal passive (with a deontic connotation). After these more canonical, widely accepted auxiliaries, she examines *RIMANERE*, *RESTARE*, *VEDERSI*, *TROVARSI*, and *FINIRE*, with their additional connotations and the full verbs they usually introduce.

In order to better understand the results of the corpus analysis, it is also useful to look at voice from a contrastive and typological perspective. In this respect, works in the field of translation studies often provide interesting insights into interlinguistic differences. In her analysis of the medical language and of its translation, Magris (1992: 71) notes that the passive voice in English is maybe more frequent than in Italian (and German), as in this language there are no other constructions with the same functions. She also mentions the pronoun *ONE* but adds that it is too informal for specialized discourse. In the same vein, Palumbo (1999: 105) states that in the English language passives are the main way to achieve depersonalization. He points out that this may also be obtained by using the pronoun *ONE*, which, however, is usually avoided as it is quite cumbersome. He also adds that the passive voice is also frequent in the Italian translation of the English source text which he discusses, namely a university textbook for students of architecture and construction technology. Taylor (2006: 30) first reports some considerations by Scarpa (2001: 133), who, discussing linguistic features pertaining to special languages, also points out that interlinguistic differences start being visible at the morphosyntactic level, and that in the linguistic combination English-Italian some “typical potential clashes” are to be found “in the use of singular and plural nouns, prepositions, participles, subordination patterns, nominalisation processes, passive formations, modality, etc.”. Then, he deals with the phenomenon of nominalization in English scientific texts, whose structure is exemplified as follows: “Noun Phrase + copulative verb (+ past participle in passive formation involving restricted number of verbs) + NP”³ (Taylor 2006: 31). In this respect, he notes that

[o]ther languages nominalise too, though the syntactic structure may differ (cf. impersonal *si* formations and active verb forms with impersonal subjects in Italian) and this must be constantly borne in mind to avoid such errors as forcing another language into, for example, a passive formation that is grammatically correct but conventionally inappropriate. (ibid.: 32)

Similarly, Garzone (2020: 107) points out that impersonal or passive *si* constructions prove to be useful for the translation of English constructions without a direct counterpart in the Italian language. More precisely, she states that pas-

2 Here Grochowska-Reiter (2020: 36) uses this label to refer to passives expressing loss or destruction (in general, adversativity) through recourse to past participles such as *perso*, *disperso*, *smarrito*, *speso*, *sprecato*, *versato*, *distrutto*, *buttato*, *abbattuto*, and *venduto*.

3 Here, *NP* stands for ‘noun phrase’.

sive constructions with verbs like *show*, *report*, and *find* may be suitably translated, for instance, through recourse to the impersonal *si* construction followed by a dependent declarative clause or other constructions.⁴

Some interesting findings from the field of corpus linguistics are those of Musacchio (2006), who compared two corpora in the attempt to evaluate translation quality. One corpus was made up by Italian translations (parallel component) and one by original Italian texts (comparable component) in the fields of economics and physics. Based on the comparable texts in the physics corpus, in the Italian subcorpus scientists are mentioned much less frequently than in the English subcorpus; instead, preference is given to passive or impersonal forms. These results are quite interesting as they seemingly contradict the trends shown by the linguists cited thus far.

In the field of purely contrastive linguistics (i.e., not referring to translation studies), some interesting considerations concerning voice are to be found in Pierini (2012), who points out the different repertoire of constructions available in English and Italian (ibid.: 147). In particular, she notes that passives are frequently used in the former language as they are the main resource which signals depersonalization and topicalization, whereas for these functions Italian can also resort to the impersonal construction with *si* and left dislocation,⁵ respectively. Pierini (ibid.: 186) also deals with the different types of passive voice which are possible in the two languages. While in Italian only direct objects may be promoted to the subject position, in English constituents like indirect objects and objects of prepositions may be promoted, too.⁶ The author also provides a comparison between the functions – and interplays with aspect – of the auxiliaries found in the two languages (ibid.: 186-187). She states that standard passives (referring to the auxiliaries *BE* and *ESSERE*) are usually resultative, i.e., the process or action they express results in a state. In addition, she lists the auxiliaries with a more dynamic reading, which focus on the process: *ANDARE* and *VENIRE* in Italian, which she compares to *GET* in English. Finally, she compares the use of *ANDARE* with a deontic connotation to the English periphrastic form *BE + TO + BE + PAST PARTICIPLE*.

- 4 An instance provided by Garzone (2020: 107) is the following: “The benzodiazepine agonists have been reported to produce [...]”, with the Italian equivalent being “Si è riscontrato che gli agonisti delle benzodiazepine producono [...]”.
- 5 The divergence between the two languages with respect to the topicalization resources available is exemplified by Pierini (2012: 145) through the sentence “A Franco gli ho detta la verità”, whose English counterpart would be “Frank was told the truth”.
- 6 Some instances Pierini (2012: 186) provides for the promotion of these constituents are “Anna was given a book” and “The problem was talked about”, respectively.

Traditionally, in Languages for Specific Purposes (LSPs) morphosyntax was considered to be of secondary importance, as scholars focused primarily on terminology and phraseology. It goes without saying that, on the contrary, some significant linguistic features are observable also on this level of analysis. The substantial difference lies in the fact that, while technical terms are easier to spot, as they are not found in general language and differ for every special language, the morphosyntactic features proper of LSPs can be found also in general language. As pointed out by Borgwaldt and Sieradz (2018: 66), this is due to the fact that lexis may be expanded quickly through the introduction of neologisms and borrowings, while grammar does not change so rapidly, therefore LSPs have *the same* linguistic resources of general language on the morphosyntactic level, but with an increased or decreased frequency. According to these scholars, passives belong to the former category. Likewise, Garzone (2020: 77) states that “scientific discourse is characterized by a ‘a typical syndrome of grammatical features’ which tend to co-occur in it (Halliday 1990: 57-58) and are abnormally more frequent than in general language”. More specifically, Garzone refers to the phenomena of passivization, nominalization, and information condensation. However, she then focuses almost exclusively on nominalization and pays only limited attention to verb categories, including voice, which is examined more thoroughly by other – innumerable – scholars.

As stated by Allen (1959: 290), “[w]e ought to stress the fact that the passive voice has an important and special place in the language; most sentences that are good in the active voice are just grotesque curiosities when put into the passive voice”. This author also purports that “a great deal of harm has been done by teaching the passive voice as if it were merely another way of expressing a sentence in the active voice” (ibid.). Therefore, the active and passive voice are not mere morphosyntactic alternatives. Those who delve into the passive voice in LSPs often discuss the reasons leading to its increased frequency, i.e., the functions differentiating it from the active voice.

According to Magris (1992: 70), an advantage of passives is their capacity to introduce information with neutrality, that is highlighting the action rather than the agent, which is often omitted. Similarly, Borgwaldt and Sieradz (2018: 67) state that the passive voice leads to depersonalization and a neutral fact presentation, where the action itself is highlighted and the agent is considered redundant or unimportant. Scarpa (2008: 46) presents anonymization as one of the functions of passives in LSPs along with theme-rheme progression. When examining the LSP of the juridical field, Lenz (2006: 215-216) states that the most important function of passives consists in agent omission – which, in fact, occurs in 80% of *Vorgangspassiva* (processual passives) in her corpus. The causes are manifold: for instance, the fact that the agent is mentioned in the context (with a predominance of anaphoric agent ellipsis compared to a relatively low

frequency of cataphoric agent ellipsis), or its excessively general nature, so that its explicitation would not be fruitful. If the agent does occur, the functions of the passive voice are – yet again – linguistic economy and its unmarkedness in allowing a natural-sounding theme-rheme progression.

Puato (2017: 152-154) – dealing with passive functions also outside of LSPs, from the point of view of language teaching – discusses first of all stylistic aspects of the passive voice. According to her, it allows sentences to be structured in a parallel, linear way, which in certain cases would be impossible if the active voice were to be used twice in a row;⁷ it makes it possible to avoid metonymy (Lütze-Miculinić 2011)⁸ or redundant information when the agent has already been mentioned; and it allows a certain expression variation. Secondly, she looks into deagentivization: passives – especially German impersonal passives, such as “es wird gearbeitet” – highlight the action itself, and the focus is on the patient rather than the agent, which, as mentioned above, may even be omitted. This occurs for several communicative reasons: if the agent is unknown, irrelevant, or considered to be known by everyone; for generalizations; for the sake of concision; in case encyclopedic knowledge is considered to be sufficient to infer it; if the action is to be carried out by the reader; to achieve anonymization, thus to conceal who is responsible for a certain action, as a face-saving strategy.⁹ Thirdly, she mentions theme-rheme progression.

2.3. VOICE AND TEXT COMPREHENSIBILITY

The passive voice is generally considered to be more difficult to understand than the active voice. This increased complexity is shown, among others, by its relative late acquisition in children. Language learners need to “dissociate the subject from the agent interpretation” (Wanner 2013: 55-56), which is easier in case the passive is irreversible, i.e., when it is semantically impossible for the subject to be the agent (Pinker et al. 1987, in *ibid.*). With regard to German, Lenz (2006: 75) highlights that passives are not easy to acquire for learners of German as a

7 The instance Puato (2017: 152) provides is the following: “Die Vorstellung dauerte 90 Minuten; Kritiker haben die Vorstellung begeistert aufgenommen → Die Vorstellung dauerte 90 Minuten und wurde von Kritikern begeistert aufgenommen”.

8 Lütze-Miculinić (2011: 198-199) discusses metonymy and personification as causes leading to passive use in German. An example she provides, taken from Zifonun et al. (1997: 1831), is the following: “*Seitens des Gerichtes* wurde er aufgefordert, seinen Wohnort nicht zu verlassen” (emphasis added). As she points out, this preference is language-specific. For instance, Croatian would accept an active sentence with an equivalent metonymy far more easily.

9 Di Meola and Puato (2021) analyze passives among linguistic categories suitable to leave information implicit in financial articles. Agent omission in particular is an effective face-saving strategy for journalists who do not wish to mention their own name (*ibid.*: 110).

foreign language. Likewise, in Italian passive constructions are usually introduced in grammar syllabi for foreign learners at a B2 level and beyond – thus at a quite advanced stage (Grochowska-Reiter 2020: 38-39). Some considerations with respect to German – but which could also be applied to English and Italian – have been made by Bredel and Maaß (2016: 313-314), according to whom the complexity of the passive voice is attributable to two main reasons, i.e., semantic and morphological factors. The semantic factor implies that the passive voice is more abstract than the active one, whereas the morphological factor refers to the fact that canonical passive forms – in German, English, Italian, as well as many other languages – have an analytic structure.

The passive voice is therefore generally not recommended in simplified language variants, i.e., Easy and Plain Language. In her manual for Italian Easy Language – *Linguaggio facile da leggere e da capire*, Sciumbata (2022: 51-52) states that the active voice should be favored over the passive one, since active constructions allow to immediately find the sentence subject; at the same time, in case the agent is not known or unimportant, the passive voice can be taken into consideration. For Italian Plain Language, some guidelines have been proposed by Fortis (2003). There, the passive voice is mentioned twice. Firstly, the author states that Plain Language does not have proper rules, but rather recommendations; for instance, it tendentially uses active forms, but it does not hesitate to employ passive ones, in case these are necessary (ibid.: 11). Then, a few paragraphs later, Fortis (2003: 12) underlines again that Plain Language favors active forms over passive ones. For the English language, some important guidelines were written by Cutts (2020), who does not seem to support the passive voice either, as he refers to writing full of passives as “passive-infested style” – with a clearly negative connotation – and claims that its use is due to the habit of teaching students to resort to formal, obscure formulations at school. Nonetheless, he also points out the advantages of this voice, i.e., its ability to omit irrelevant or obvious agents, its role as a hedging or face-saving strategy, as well as the fact that it thematizes important information.

3. MATERIALS AND METHOD

In light of this theoretical framework, the present paper aims at analyzing a text genre in the medical field, i.e., the layperson summary of clinical trials, whose publication is required by Regulation 536/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council.¹⁰ The purpose of these texts is to make clinical trial results acces-

10 Regulation (EU) No 536/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 April 2014 on clinical trials on medicinal products for human use, and repealing Directive 2001/20/EC Text with EEA relevance, available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32014R0536> (accessed 4.12.2022).

sible to a wider audience in order to guarantee transparency and enable clinical trial participants to understand what happened during the study.

The analysis was conducted on a corpus of 90 texts, composed of three sub-corpora with the same number of texts: 30 English layperson summaries (the source texts), their Italian translations, as well as the corresponding trial summaries (the texts for experts). These documents were retrieved from the online portals of the following pharmaceutical companies: Bayer, Grünenthal, GSK, Novartis, and Roche.¹¹ Overall, the corpus consisted of 321,764 tokens; the sub-corpus of English layperson summaries contained 92,747 tokens, the subcorpus of Italian translations 99,031 tokens, and the subcorpus of trial summaries 129,986 tokens.¹²

The analysis consisted in two phases, a more quantitative and a more qualitative one. In the former (see section 4.1.), the canonical passives BE + PAST PARTICIPLE for English and ESSERE, VENIRE, AS WELL AS ANDARE + PAST PARTICIPLE for Italian were considered. The main purpose was to calculate the percentage of active and passive sentences (with canonical passives) in the three subcorpora, so as to point out whether the number of passive constructions decreased in the layperson summaries compared to the trial summaries and whether there was an increase or decrease of passive constructions in translation. For the English subcorpora, the occurrences were counted first by using the analysis tool Analyze My Writing¹³ and were then double-checked manually in order to get rid of false positive and false negative results. For the Italian subcorpus, the results were obtained directly by searching for the various forms (in the third person singular and plural as well as in non-finite forms, the options frequent in LSPs)¹⁴ of the passive auxiliaries in the texts and then getting rid of the noise. In addition to these calculations, other considerations were made with respect to canonical passives in the layperson summaries (e.g., mood and tense, or factors increasing text complexity).

In the more qualitative phase (see section 4.2.), non-canonical passives were examined in the layperson summaries: mainly GET + PAST PARTICIPLE, but also BECOME, SEEM, REMAIN, LOOK, and FEEL + PAST PARTICIPLE for English, as well as RESTARE, RIMANERE, FINIRE, PREFERIRE, DESIDERARE, TROVARSI, and VEDERSI + PAST PARTICIPLE for Italian. For alternatives to passives, in the English texts occurrences of HAVE + OBJECT + PAST PARTICIPLE, of the V-ING passive construction, as well as of the pronoun ONE in impersonal constructions were examined; in Italian, impersonal/passive (or

11 In should be noted that for some studies the trial summaries were not published directly on the portals of the pharmaceutical companies. In these cases the corresponding content was retrieved from the portal ClinicalTrials.gov.

12 These calculations were made by using the analysis tool Sketch Engine.

13 Available at <https://www.analyzemywriting.com/> (accessed 4.12.2022).

14 This was also confirmed by observing many examples of the texts to be analyzed.

passivizing) *si*¹⁵ as well as the constructions *AVERE OR VOLERE + OBJECT + PAST PARTICIPLE* were taken into consideration. Furthermore, another linguistic construction that signals passivity and that was taken into account is *ESSERE (OR RIMANERE AND RESTARE) + DA + INFINITIVE*.¹⁶ In addition, other non-language-specific paraphrases which were considered are adjectives with a passive connotation and participial attributes. For this section, phenomena such as the non-canonical passives with alternative auxiliaries were obtained from the subcorpora by searching for the various forms (in the third person singular and plural as well as in non-finite forms) of these verbs in the texts and then getting rid of the noise. For the *V-ING* passive constructions, this was done by searching for the verbs that typically accompany this structure (cf. Puckica 2009: 225, reported in section 4.2.) and getting rid of the noise. Other phenomena were not counted individually due to difficulties in detecting them (for instance, the impersonal/passive *si* in Italian, whose search would have led to too much noise). For them, the exact number of occurrences will therefore not be indicated in section 4.2. and will be replaced by indications on the general trends which have emerged as well as by some examples, which clearly constitutes a limit of the present study.

As noted by Svartvik (1985, see above), voice is not an uncontroversial linguistic phenomenon. The choice of the constructions to be included in the present analysis was based mainly on the grammar books and works listed in section 2.1., with the addition of other features identified on the basis of interlinguistic similarities. However, the controversiality of the linguistic phenomenon “voice” and the undeniable difficulty of defining clear-cut boundaries constitute another limit of the present analysis.

4. ANALYSIS

The present section will examine both canonical passives and non-canonical passives (as well as passive alternatives) in both languages.

- 15 In line with many other works, impersonal and passive *si* were analyzed together. For instance, D’Alessandro (2007) and Sansò (2018) regard them as two variants of the same syntactic structure.
- 16 This was not listed in section 2.1., as it was not examined in the section about passives of *Grande grammatica italiana di consultazione*, but rather in the chapters concerning subordination (Skytte, Salvi & Manzini 1991: 536). There, the meaning indicated for these constructions is *DOVER ESSERE + PAST PARTICIPLE* and *DOVER ANCORA ESSERE + PAST PARTICIPLE*, respectively. Therefore, a passive as well as a deontic component are inherent in these structures. Another factor which justifies why these constructions should be taken into account here is that analogous structures are traditionally considered to be passive alternatives in other languages. An instance is provided by so-called modal infinitives (even defined *modal passives* by Weinrich [2005: 163-164]) in German, i.e., for example *SEIN + ZU + INFINITIVE*. Interestingly, one of the alternatives of *SEIN* in this construction is the verb *BLEIBEN* (thus, *RESTARE/RIMANERE*).

4.1. CANONICAL PASSIVES

Figure 1 shows the results of the first phase of analysis, i.e., the mean percentages of active and passive sentences with canonical constructions in the corpus:

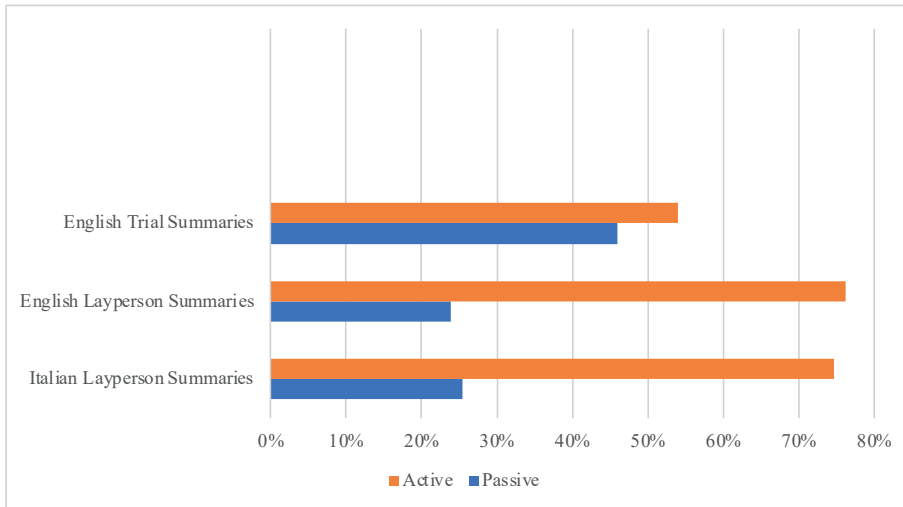


Figure 1 – Average percentages of active and passive voice with canonical constructions in the subcorpora

As was expected, the percentage of passive sentences decreases significantly in the layperson summaries compared to the trial summaries (whose passive percentage is almost twice as high as that of the simplified texts). Of 30 texts, 26 trial summaries have a higher percentage of passive sentences than the corresponding layperson summaries in the English language, while 25 trial summaries have a higher percentage of passive sentences than the corresponding layperson summaries in Italian. In other words, 86.67% of trial summaries have a higher rate of passive sentences than the English layperson summaries, while this percentage amounts to 83.33% for the Italian translations.

Interestingly, the reported data show that the percentage of passive sentences increases in Italian. The difference is not particularly significant (25.36 % vs 23.82%), but of 30 texts, 19 Italian layperson summaries have a higher rate of passive sentences than their English source texts. The Italian text with the highest increase of passive sentences had a percentage of 43.68% against one of 29.21% for the corresponding English layperson summary.

Aside from the mere frequency of passives, it is interesting to look at the type of occurrences found in both subcorpora of layperson summaries. In this respect, Serianni (2005: 255) notes that in the medical field the number of moods, tenses, and persons is reduced. In the same vein, Scarpa (2008: 47) points out

that in special languages the use of verb moods and tenses differs from general language.

In the English language, mood is not particularly differentiated, with a clear predominance of the indicative – detected in the subcorpus of layperson summaries, too. The most frequent tenses in the analysis are the simple present and simple past, also with some occurrences of the progressive forms (present and past progressive, as in “is being done”, “are being studied”, and “was being studied” or “were being treated”). Other indicative tenses are the present perfect, past perfect, and future simple (as in “have been assigned”, “have been conducted”, “had been tested”, and “will be given”). No occurrences of future perfect were found.

In the Italian target texts the predominant mood is undoubtedly (and unsurprisingly) the indicative. The most frequent tenses are *presente* and, notably, *perfetto composto*.¹⁷ There are also many cases of *imperfetto*, *piuccheperfetto*, and *futuro semplice*, although their frequency is far lower than that recorded for *presente* and *perfetto composto*. Some instances are: “potevano essere assunti”, “erano ancora sottoposti al monitoraggio”, “veniva definita”, and “veniva somministrato” for *imperfetto*, “era stato precedentemente studiato”, “era stato assegnato”, “era stato approvato”, and “era già stato testato” for *piuccheperfetto*, as well as “potranno essere utilizzati”, “verranno impiegati”, and “verrà somministrato” for *futuro semplice*. No occurrences of *perfetto semplice*,¹⁸ *piuccheperfetto II* (or *trapassato*), and *futuro composto* were detected.

The subjunctive mood is not rare in these texts, which is to some extent surprising, especially if one considers that it is more complex than the indicative. For instance, in her manual for *italiano facile da leggere e da capire*, Sciumbata (2022: 45-46) suggests resorting to easier and more frequently used moods, i.e., the indicative and imperative rather than the conditional and subjunctive. In the analyzed layperson summaries, the tenses *presente*, *imperfetto*, and *piuccheperfetto* occur, while *perfetto* was not detected. Some examples are “siano causati”, “siano valutati”, “possa essere approvato”, and “venga reso disponibile” for *presente*, “potesse essere ancora rilevato” or “venissero scelti” for *imperfetto*, and “fosse stato assegnato” for *piuccheperfetto*. In particular, an instance of – arguably – hypercorrection was detected in the use of subjunctive *imperfetto* in the Italian translation of the following anaphoric definition: “This study was ‘open label’. This means that both the people taking part in the study and the study

17 The terminology used by Bertinetto (1991: 15) will be favored, as traditional terminology is opaque with respect to verbal aspect and mixes criteria of formal classification with semantic criteria.

18 In modern Italian, this tense is being used less and less in light of the advance of *perfetto composto* – with the exception of Southern diatopic varieties (Bertinetto 1991: 98-101). It should be noted that the choice of past tense in the layperson summaries corresponds to the recommendations by Sciumbata (2022: 46), who suggests avoiding *perfetto semplice* in favor of *perfetto composto* in *italiano facile da leggere e da capire*.

doctors knew what study medicines people were taking”, translated as “Si è trattato di uno studio ‘in aperto’. Ciò significa che sia i partecipanti allo studio che i medici dello studio sapevano quali farmaci *venissero somministrati*”. In this sentence, the translator could have resorted to the indicative mood, with the use of the tense *imperfetto* (“venivano somministrati”).¹⁹

With respect to the conditional mood, both *condizionale semplice* and *condizionale composto* were detected. Some examples are “potrebbero essere o non essere causati dal farmaco” for the former, and “sarebbe stato somministrato” as well as “avrebbero dovuto essere somministrati” for the latter. No cases of imperative in the passive voice were found. Moving on to non-finite moods, instances of infinitive and gerund in the passive voice were found: “senza essere esposti a un rischio”, “per essere completato”, and “pur essendo state sottoposte”.

Besides the choice of mood and tense, according to Bock (2018: 51) there are other factors that may increase text complexity when the passive voice occurs.²⁰ For instance, she mentions the presence of modals, negation (especially double negatives), nominalization, or very long sentences. It should be noted that her reflections refer to *Leichte Sprache*, German Easy Language, but they could also be applied – to a certain extent – to Plain Language, as these are notoriously factors that hamper comprehensibility individually; therefore, their occurrence together is likely to be counterproductive also in this language variant. An example of a sentence with several of these problematic features is the following: “Tutti i farmaci possono causare effetti collaterali; i partecipanti allo studio sono stati monitorati attentamente affinché venisse verificata la loro reazione ai trattamenti ricevuti”. Here, the problematic features are the presence of more instances of passive voice, nominalization, and hypotaxis. Another sentence with various complex features is the following: “I ricercatori sono inoltre stati in grado di determinare se il cancro potesse essere ancora rilevato mediante scansioni particolari (scansione tomografia a emissione di positroni [o PET] e/o scansione tomografia computerizzata [o CT]) al termine del trattamento”. Here, the fea-

19 Although in certain contexts there are oscillations between the subjunctive and indicative mood in Italian, the indicative is usually favored in a clause introduced by the verb *sapere*. Rati (2016: 121), in a corpus analysis of contemporary prose, notes that *sapere* is the second most frequent verb that introduces complement clauses (after *dire*); of 64 occurrences, all of them are followed by an indicative except for one, which is a subjunctive that, in her opinion, represents a stylistic choice that borders on hypercorrection (“Si è sempre saputo che fossero dei turchi”). In the heated debate around the choice between indicative and subjunctive, Bricchi (2014: 26-28) came up with a pun, calling the unmotivated use of subjunctive *congiuntivite*, and stating that writers who resort to a subjunctive rather than an indicative in such contexts are insecure about their linguistic competence and reckon that subjunctives sound more cultivated.

20 In her opinion, passives are not particularly problematic *per se*; on the contrary, in some contexts (e.g., signs) they are so frequently used and almost idiomatic that an active form would be harder to process. She claims that the passive voice poses issues when it is used together with other linguistic features that are cognitively demanding.

tures which may hamper the correct understanding of the text are the presence of passive voice, subjunctive mood, modal verbs, nominalization, hypotaxis, and terminology. One last instance is the following: “I partecipanti cui era stato assegnato CJM112 da solo hanno potuto passare a PDR001 e CJM112 in caso di aggravamento del loro MM R/R durante lo studio”. This example includes, besides the passive voice and initialisms, an instantiation of preposition omission with the dative *cui* in lieu of the more common *a cui*, which is a linguistic feature belonging to a quite high register (cf. Cinque 1988: 457) and frequent in legal texts.

One last interesting aspect is the auxiliary selection in Italian. As expected, most passive constructions were built with the verb *ESSERE*, followed by frequent cases of *VENIRE*. No occurrences with the auxiliary *ANDARE* were detected.

4.2. NON-CANONICAL PASSIVES AND PASSIVE ALTERNATIVES

As far as non-canonical passives in English are concerned, no occurrences of *get*-passives were detected in the subcorpus of layperson summaries. This feature *in absentia* does not surprise particularly, as *get*-passives are subject to innumerable constraints, first of all of diaphasic and diamesic nature – they sound quite informal and are thus more frequent in spoken discourse than in written texts (cf. for instance Puckica 2009: 222; König & Gast 2009: 125; Wanner 2013: 47). Secondly, they have semantic restrictions. According to many linguists (although there is no consensus in this respect), this type of passive often has an adversative reading (König & Gast 2009: 126) and implies a partial responsibility of the patient (Givón & Yang 1994: 119-121; König & Gast 2009: 126). Four occurrences of passives built with the verb *BECOME*²¹ were found (three entailing the past participle *scarred*, one the past participle *enflamed*), e.g., “an illness where the lungs *become scarred*” and “this causes those cells to swell up and *become inflamed*”. No occurrences were detected for the verbs *SEEM*, *REMAIN*, *LOOK*, and *FEEL*.

Moving on to non-canonical passives in Italian, there were no cases of passives entailing the verbs *RESTARE*, *RIMANERE*, *FINIRE*, *PREFERIRE*, *DESIDERARE*, *TROVARSI*, and *VEDERSI*. This was not unexpected, as such verbs are subject to many semantic constraints. For instance, Giacalone Ramat (2018: 107-108) notes that, based on corpus analyses investigating the corpora *la Repubblica* and *CORIS*, *FINIRE* usually introduces past participles depicting violent deaths (such as *assassinato*, *trucidato*, *fucilato*, *avvelenato*, *impiccato*, *distrutto*, and *sepolto*) or verbs like *battuto*, *espulso*, *intrappolato*, and *intercettato*. Therefore, an adversative reading is usually implied (only in one case was the connotation positive, with the past participle

21 As mentioned in section 2.1., *BECOME* is a verb commutable with *BE* for passive construction (cf. for instance Jespersen 1933: 120; Puckica 2009: 222-223), but its status as an auxiliary is far more debated than that of *GET* (*ibid.*) and it is also seldomly mentioned in English grammars.

assolto). The same goes for the verb *RIMANERE*, whose distribution is quite limited; it is usually associated with the past participles *ucciso, ferito, coinvolto, colpito, bloccato, intrappolato, danneggiato, invischiato*, and *schacciato* (ibid.: 108-109). The verb *RESTARE* also shares many similarities with *RIMANERE*; the past participles associated with it are roughly the same (e.g., *paralizzato, incollato, rinchiuso, ucciso, ferito*, and *contagiato* [ibid.: 109]). The verb *TROVARSI* is usually associated with past participles like *assediato, coinvolto, circondato, costretto, estromesso, impegnato, innalzato, intrappolato, invischiato, inserito*, and *immerso* (with *costretto* and *coinvolto* being the most frequent ones [ibid.: 109-111]). Based on a corpus analysis consulting corpora like *CORIS* or *COLFIS*, the distribution of *VEDERSI* is also quite limited; the past participles that it introduces are for instance *abbandonato, calpestatto, condannato, costretto, obbligato, respinto, schacciato*, and *soppiantato*. This passive construction also has an adversative reading, which is due both to the aforementioned past participles and to the verb *VEDERSI* itself. As a matter of fact, some features inherent in the verb *vedere* are the involuntary nature of perception and the subject's lack of control on the situation (ibid.: 114-116). The absence of these types of passives in the Italian subcorpus is therefore due to their semantic constraints, their adversativity, as well as to the fact that – as may be inferred from the listed instances – they are more likely to be found in narrative texts rather than special languages.

Among other linguistic features signaling passivity, in the English subcorpus of layperson summaries seven occurrences of the construction *HAVE + OBJECT + PAST PARTICIPLE* were detected. Some instances are the following: “The participants *had tests done* to make sure they could join the trial”, “The participants [...] *had their health checked* and answered questions [...]”, “People went to the hospital at least 3 times during the study and *had their lung function measured* while they were there”. No *V-ING* passive constructions occur in the subcorpus. This was not unexpected as well, since such structures are far less frequent than formulations with canonical passives, as noted by Puckica (2009: 226), who also points out that there are aspectual differences between these constructions and prototypical passives. While *V-ING* passive constructions tend to highlight the development of the event, i.e., the process, canonical passives are more focused on the result which is to be reached.²² Finally,

only a handful of semantically related verbs can fill the V_i (matrix verb) slot of the construction. All express a kind of necessity or lack and are thus more or less synonymous with *NEED*, which indeed seems to be the verb most frequently used in that position. *WANT* and *REQUIRE* are also fairly frequent although the former is here only found in the ‘spoken’ or ‘informal’ use in which it expresses a need rather than a wish, a use which again is not restricted to the *V-ING* passive construction. The few other possible verbs notably include *DESERVE*, *REPAY* and *MERIT* (ibid.: 225).

22 The sentences Puckica reports to exemplify this distinction are “The carpet needs cleaning” vs “The carpet needs to be cleaned” (ibid.: 225).

Furthermore, no occurrences of the pronoun *ONE* in impersonal constructions were found – which corresponds to the low frequency pointed out *inter alia* by Magris (1992) and Palumbo (1999) and reported in section 2.1.

Among alternatives to passives in Italian, several instances of the impersonal/passive (or passivizing) *SI* were found, as in: “Il FEV₁ *si misura* in millilitri (ml)”, “Per il titolo completo dello studio *si rimanda* alla fine del presente riepilogo”, “Ciò significa che *si è stabilito* in modo del tutto casuale quale dei due farmaci sarebbe stato somministrato ai partecipanti allo studio”, “Sebbene non sia obbligatorio, chiediamo di citare opportunamente GSK come fonte di provenienza quando *si utilizzano* questi dati”, “Di seguito *si riportano* altri interrogativi a cui i ricercatori desideravano dare una risposta”, or “Nell’altra partecipante *si sono osservati*: aumento nel sangue di una proteina detta aspartato aminotransferasi [...]”.²³ No occurrences of the constructions *AVERE* OR *VOLERE* + *OBJECT* + *PAST PARTICIPLE* were detected. In the same vein, no constructions like *ESSERE* (OR *RIMANERE* AND *RESTARE*) + *DA* + *INFINITIVE* were found.

Among features signaling passivity, some instances of adjectives with a passive connotation in the English subcorpus of layperson summaries are *available*, *applicable*, or *chewable*; some examples from the Italian subcorpus are *masticabile*, *consultabile*, *imputabile*, *disponibile*, and *attribuibile*. As for participial attributes, the passive connotation inherent in them is made clear by the denomination of English postnominal attributes in certain grammars (*bare passives*, cf. for instance Huddleston and Pullum [2002: 1429-1430]). These are generally really frequent in the English language (cf. Fabricius-Hansen 2010: 5), and some instances from the corpus are “tumours *caused* by several different types of cancer”, “websites *listed* at the end of this summary”, “a toxic mineral *called* asbestos”, and “through a needle *put* into a vein”. The postposition of past participles is frequent also in the Italian corpus, such as in “medicinale *utilizzato* nell’ambito del trattamento di un tipo di leucemia *denominato* leucemia linfatica cronica (LLC)”, “le dosi e le combinazioni dei farmaci in studio *utilizzate*”, as well as in “Un evento avverso è un segno o sintomo indesiderato *manifestato* dai partecipanti durante lo studio”.

English prenominal attributes are far rarer than postnominal attributes, since, as noted *inter alia* by Fabricius-Hansen (2010: 5), they cannot be expanded to reach a certain degree of complexity. Some examples from the subcorpus are “*approved* treatment” and “*treated* bleeds”. In Italian both instances were rendered with a postnominal participle, i.e., as “trattamento *approvato*” and “emorragia *trattata*”. In this respect, Mortara Garavelli (2001: 166) points out that participles are “heavier” attributes which tend to be postponed. Many prenominal

23 According to Sciumbata (2022: 49-50), impersonal sentences should be avoided, as they do not clarify whom or what the verb refers to.

past participles have a text-deictic function; here, a list of such participles²⁴ has been searched for in the corpus. Two instances with *suddetto* have been found: “È importante tenere presente che l’obiettivo di questo studio era ottenere risposte il più possibile accurate alla *suddetta* domanda” and “al termine di *suddetti* studi”. The English source text is “It is important to know that this trial was designed to get the most accurate answers to the question *above*” and “at the end of *those* studies”. Clearly, both Italian excerpts are instances of translations where the register has been raised. Examples of past participles with a text-deictic function that occupy a postnominal position rather than their usual prenominal position were also found in the subcorpus, as in “in aggiunta ai farmaci dello studio *summenzionati*”. These aspects are considered, in spite of the hidden character of their passivity (which is due to their high level of grammaticalization) and in spite of their lower impact on text complexity compared to canonical passives, because they are resorted to in lieu of traditional passive forms – which would therefore be even more frequent if these other constructions did not occur.

5. CONCLUSIONS

As reported in section 4.1., the layperson summaries show a decrease in canonical passives compared to the corresponding trial summaries. These constructions tend to increase – albeit not significantly – in the Italian translations. An example of different voice choice (with the active voice used in lieu of the passive one) was provided in section 4.2., with the source sentence “It is important to know that *this trial was designed* to get the most accurate answers to the question *above*” rendered as “È importante tenere presente che *l’obiettivo di questo studio era* ottenere risposte il più possibile accurate alla *suddetta* domanda”. Here, this difference is due to a reformulation in the target language with the addition of the noun *obiettivo*. However, the opposite phenomenon (passivization) occurs more frequently, as shown by the percentages reported in section 4.1. The Italian text with the highest increase of canonical passives compared to the corresponding English layperson summary (again, see section 4.1.) was looked at more in detail and compared to its source text in order to try and detect the causes of said increase.

In some cases, a passive connotation also occurs in the source text, but it is made explicit in the target text; an instance is “The main focus of this study was to compare the safety of the drug *when added* to regular SLE treatment

24 This list was compiled by Ondelli (2014: 35) in a corpus analysis in the legal field, where prenominal past participles are one of the distinctive traits of the language. It includes the following past participles: *detto*, *citato*, *siffatto*, *suddetto*, *menzionato*, *suesposto*, *predetto*, *summenzionato*, *succitato*, *anzidetto*, *richiamato*, *descritto*, and *precitato*.

[...], rendered as “L’obiettivo principale di questo studio era confrontare la sicurezza del farmaco *quando viene aggiunto* al trattamento abituale per il LES”. In other instances, the source text has active constructions which are passivized in translation (passives *ex nihilo*, cf. Pedrini [2022: 200]). Some instantiations of this phenomenon are “the study *is taking place*”, rendered as “questo studio *viene condotto*”, and “patients who *can enrol* (inclusion criteria) and those who *can’t* (exclusion criteria)”, translated as “pazienti che *possono essere inclusi* (criteri di inclusione) e quelli che *non possono essere inclusi* (criteri di esclusione)”. Passivization occurs frequently in the translation of the expression *receive treatment (et similia)*: see “number of patients from each country who *received at least one dose of the study medicine*”, translated as “numero di pazienti di ciascun Paese che *sono stati trattati con almeno una dose del farmaco dello studio*”, “[...] if they *had received treatment with the drug* before starting the study”, rendered as “*erano stati trattati con il farmaco* prima dell’inizio dello studio”, or “[...] if they received any other treatment(s) that affected B cells” translated as “*erano stati sottoposti ad altri trattamenti* che interessavano i linfociti B”. The latter instance is also an example of support verb construction, where the verb is semantically emptied and the noun carries the meaning. Such constructions are generally more convoluted and complex than the corresponding verbs (which, in this case, would be *trattare*). In general, in these texts there are also other linguistic features whose use is not recommended in simplified language variants, such as impersonal constructions. These features, along with the increase in passive constructions of the Italian translations of the English layperson summaries, contradict the universal of simplification in translation. This increase is even more surprising if one considers the interlinguistic differences (indicated in section 2.1.) between English and Italian with respect to passive frequency. However, in spite of the different resources available to express passivity in the two languages (with a consequent higher use of canonical passives in English compared to Italian), other scholars have already pointed out a tendency to increase depersonalization and deagentivization in Italian translated texts (cf. Musacchio 2006, cited in section 2.1.). In the present analysis, an instance of this phenomenon is provided by the translation of “Where did the patients take part in the study?”, rendered as the more abstract “Dove è stata condotta la sperimentazione?”. Thus, this trend may help explain – at least partially – the results of the analysis.

In section 3., it has been mentioned that not all non-canonical passive constructions examined in the qualitative part of the analysis have been counted singularly. This undoubtedly constitutes a limit of the present study; however, it may be claimed that the increase in Italian canonical passives is unlikely to be compensated by these constructions, which do not seem to decrease in translation. As a matter of fact, not all occurrences of impersonal/passive *si* were counted due to the noise that this search would have produced, but these structures are unquestionably more frequent (the instances reported in section 4.2. alone occurred 18 times, if their repetitions in the subcorpus are counted) than the

cases of non-canonical passives in English (4 occurrences of passives built with the verb *BECOME* and 7 occurrences of the construction *HAVE + OBJECT + PAST PARTICIPLE*), which were all counted individually. As for constructions like adjectives and participial attributes, there are no hints²⁵ that these tend to decrease in the Italian translations. In fact, the opposite may be observed in some cases, as in “the medicine *that was tested*”, translated as “il farmaco *testato*”, or “Feeling sick and headache in patients *who took [...]*”, translated as “Nausea e mal di testa in pazienti *trattati con [...]*”.

It may therefore be claimed that the general tendency to passivize constructions in the target texts hints at inadequate knowledge of the text genre and of the rules of Plain Language on the part of translators, who, arguably, often resort to the linguistic features typical of LSPs without taking into account text comprehensibility. In conclusion, a further research desideratum may be to evaluate the impact of these linguistic features on the comprehension of the layperson summaries through a reception study.

25 A clear hint would be, among others, the ungrammaticality of certain constructions: for example, in German postnominal attributes are not possible. This was found to be one of the causes of the increase in canonical passives of the German layperson summaries (Pedrini 2022): English bare passives were often translated as relative clauses with the explicitation of the passive component. In Italian, instead, postnominal attributes are allowed.

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