

The Sesotho passive voice: A significant resource for witnesses in Lesotho commissions of inquiry

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Abstract

Effective communication plays a vital role in commissions of inquiry. Through such communication, commissioners can probe witnesses, receive the information they need for their investigations, and make informed conclusions and recommendations. Bearing in mind the role played by language in communicative events such as inquiry commissions, witnesses seem to use language for purposes other than the apparent purpose of providing information to the commissioner. This paper adopts a qualitative approach to critically analyse the use of passive voice by witnesses summoned to testify before the Leon and Phumaphi commissions in Lesotho. Analysing the audio recordings compiled during the commission proceedings, the study reveals that passive voice became a protective resource that testifiers utilised to withhold sensitive information, particularly the names of individuals involved in the atrocities that occurred during the political riots in the country. It also signified individuals that witnesses either did or did not know. The study draws on the theory of implicature and politeness theory to unravel the implicature behind the witnesses' utterances. In the end, the implications of the study for transforming discourse in inquiry commissions are discussed.

Keywords: Commissions of inquiry; passive voice; implicature; witnesses; communication

1. Introduction

Language plays a critical role in any effective communication. Observing this vital role, language users seem to use their linguistic skills to achieve different communicative purposes. In commissions of inquiry, language is seen as portraying a variety of functions that its speakers, consciously or subconsciously, intend to achieve. For over a decade, literature has shown extensive work on language in commissions of inquiry. The focus has been on how interpreting is handled during the inquiry proceedings in a multilingual setting (e.g., Mohlomi,

2011), as well as the interpretation mistakes, transcription errors, cultural transferal mistakes, simultaneous translating, and literal interpreting used to handle the semantic loads of linguistic elements such as figurative language (e.g. Ratele, Mpolweni-Zantsi and Krog 2007; Anthonissen 2008). These interpreting errors that are often observed mean that the interpreters' incomprehensible renditions influenced some of the decisions taken by the commission. Literature has also focused on linguistic aspects such as selected markers of evaluation, namely shifts in tense, the inclusion of direct speech, and code-switching. These were found to perform various functions, such as expressing evaluative meanings and positioning testifiers related to the events they described (Bock 2008, 2009, 2011). These linguistic strategies were used to invoke negative judgment, recollect painful moments, style some witnesses as heroes and not as victims, and allow the speakers to signal their rejection of the historical voice and the ideologies represented. Other forms of literature covered language use in political speeches. For instance, Habwe (2010) reveals how dialogue in political speeches is used by the audience to re-direct what the speech topic should be and by the politician to gain popularity and engage the audience that could otherwise feel bored and leave the rally. Jakaza (2013), on the other hand, examined parliamentary discourse, looking specifically at the argumentative strategies, forms of strategic manoeuvring, and how appraisal resources are realised in the argumentation process. There is, however, a dearth of empirical literature on the use of linguistic strategies in commissions of inquiry, specifically on the use of passive voice that witnesses use when responding to questions. The use of passive voice as a communicative strategy is mainly explored by scholars in law, political speeches, and healthcare (Tanner 2003; Kulo 2009, Saarinen 2015), and not in commissions of inquiry. This paper, therefore, critically analyses the use of passive voice by witnesses who were summoned to testify before the Leon and Phumaphi commissions in Lesotho. The paper forms part of a bigger study on communicative strategies employed by witnesses in commissions of inquiry.

1.1 Passive voice

Sesotho and English have two types of voice, namely active and passive (Thompson 2012). Each time we speak, we express our thoughts actively or passively by employing the active or passive voice. Thompson (2012) further denotes that the active voice, on the one hand, involves the speaker or writer with the content of their speech or writing. It denotes who did the action. For instance, in the sentence *Tom prepared supper* the active voice is employed because it mentions the person, Tom, involved in the act of cooking dinner. On the other hand, the passive voice is a way of phrasing sentences such that the subject or doer or actor does not refer to the person or thing responsible for the action. Thompson (2012) comments that it is a way of distancing the speaker or writer from the utterance or the act in question. As they describe the structure of the passive voice, Frazer and Miller (2009) explain that the direct or indirect object of the active sentence becomes the subject of the corresponding passive sentence, and the subject (if retained, because sometimes it is not included) appears after the verb in a by-clause. For instance, in the utterances, *Supper was prepared by Tom* or *Supper was prepared*, the doer of the action is mentioned at the end or sometimes not mentioned at all. Generally, the by-clause, as in *by Tom*, is usually used for emphasis purposes (Xiao, McEnery and Qian 2006). One of the pragmatic functions of passive voice is that it is used when the speaker/writer wants to be vague or tactful about who is responsible (Corson and Smollett 2019). The Sesotho passive voice's construction and functions are similar to the English passive voice. The subject takes the position of the object and structurally becomes the receiver of the action, as is also the case in English. According to Demuth, Moloi and Machobane (2010), Sesotho passives are acquired

relatively earlier than English passives because adults frequently use Sesotho passive constructions. The following are the pragmatic functions of the passive voice, as listed by Corson and Smollett (2019: 1): passive voice is used when the actor is unknown, when the actor is not important to mention, when the speaker or writer wants to be vague or tactful about who is responsible, and when one wants to emphasise the person or thing acted on. Omenogor (2019) further adds that the passive voice is useful for polite, non-confrontational, and non-committal communication.

1.2 Conversational implicature and Politeness theory

Grice's conversational implicature is founded on the notion that people do not always say what they mean: they tend to say one thing by saying another. Kasmirli (2016) interprets Grice's conversational implicature as denoting the act of meaning or implying one thing by saying something else; that is, there is a difference between what is expressed literally (i.e., the surface meaning) in a sentence and what is suggested (i.e., the deeper meaning) by an utterance of the same string of words. In other words, the speaker must be understood to convey something other than the literal meaning of their utterance, which is the implicated meaning. Figures of speech such as metaphor, irony, simile, personification, and many others are examples of implicature. The concept of implicature is categorised into two main classes, namely the conversational implicature and the conventional implicature.

On the one hand, conversational implicature relies heavily on conversational context; that is, one needs to understand the context of the conversation to interpret what is being implied correctly. On the other hand, the conventional implicature has its implicature derived from the linguistic meaning of a sentence. The conventional meaning of the words used determines both what is said and implicated. This kind of implicature is recognised by any competent hearer irrespective of the context and it cannot be stripped away or cancelled. Thus, knowledge of the conventional meaning of the sentence uttered is adequate to assist the hearer in interpreting both what is said and what is implicated (Grice 1975). The Neo-Gricean approach, as proposed by Leech (1983), Horn (1984), and Levinson (1995), maintains that the Gricean maxim plays a role in linguistic communication. However, they pay special attention to how Grice's rules contribute to meaning production and interpretation (Dynel 2013). For instance, Leech (1983) argues that the pressure to be polite can be so powerful that the Gricean maxims are affected. He argues that indirectness allows the conveyance of messages that are less face-threatening than they might have been if they were followed. Horn also ascribes a high status to the quality maxim; he regards it as a felicity condition for all other implicatures. However, he reduces the other Gricean maxims to pragmatic inference. Levinson (1995), on the other hand, argues that the maxims be revised and reduced. His argument is that Grice's distinction between what is said and what is conveyed should be refined (Sbisá 2005)

Despite the contribution made by the Neo-Griceans, this paper adopts Grice's principles in their entirety. The theory is applicable in this study because it helps interpret participants' responses that have implied meanings. The correct interpretation of participants' utterances is maintained even though they may have deviated from their literal meaning. This study uses both conversational and conventional implicatures to understand participants' intentions regarding the information communicated to the commissioners. This means that every piece of information shared with commissioners, implied or literal, is brought to the surface and interpreted by drawing on the aspect of implicature.

Politeness theory, proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), is a build-up on Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle (CP). It provides politeness as one of the reasons why people often say one thing and mean another. The theory of politeness involves concepts such as 'face' and 'face-threatening acts'. Face is principally an image or identity that an individual has and wants to build on. Brown and Levinson (1987) perceive it as a positive social value or a self-image that people effectively claim for themselves by the line others assume they have taken during a particular contact. Brown and Levinson (1987) attest that face can be considered something that is emotionally expended, can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must always be cared for in an interaction. A face-threatening act is an act that, by its nature, challenges the face wants of an interlocutor: they threaten one's social image. Participants are expected to take measures to mitigate face threats in situations where they must occur. Face-threatening acts may threaten either the speaker's face or the hearer's face. Politeness is therefore the strategic behaviour of an individual that is practised to satisfy the needs of the face of both self and others, usually during instances of threat. In accordance with this theory, individuals have both a positive and a negative face that needs to be protected. Politeness theory is used in this study to interpret communicative strategies that pose a threat to either positive or negative face and those that participants use to mitigate a threat to face.

1.3 Context

This paper is part of the main study that explored communicative strategies employed in commissions of inquiry. The paper analyses the use of the passive voice by witnesses in the two commissions of inquiry in Lesotho. These commissions came about as a result of two major political upheavals that happened in 1998 and 2015 which negatively impacted the country's peace and stability. One of the contributing factors to the unrest was inadequate communication and false information shared among political party members and between leaders and the general public. Makoae (2019) asserts that such failure to communicate adequately further distorted the peace already on edge in Lesotho. The Langa Commission, established to find facts about the 1998 general elections, did not provide sufficient information about whether elections were rigged or not. This further fuelled Basotho's anger, who were left unsure of what the Langa report could mean. According to Ngwawi (2014), some of these political upheavals have long been in the country, and they have earlier on resulted in people being sent into exile, including King Moshoeshoe II, the head of state, who was sent into exile by the then-prime minister, Dr Leabua Jonathan, because he wanted to attain more powers than were granted by the constitution. They also led to elections being nullified, the suspension of the constitution, and killings (Ngwawi 2014).

The political unrest that took place in 1998 arose from dissatisfaction with the results of the general election, which were interpreted as being fraudulent and corrupt by the then-opposition parties. The situation was fuelled by the Langa Commission report, which gave very ambiguous and inadequate communication on whether elections were rigged or not. This led to the looting of shops and arson by some members of the opposition parties. Further political unrest in 2015 resulted from the power struggle within the Lesotho Defence Force (LDF) and among the political leaders. It led to the killing of the LDF commander, Maaparankoe Mahao, and the detention of some members of the LDF who were accused of alleged mutiny. In both instances, the Lesotho government made efforts to restore peace and stability by establishing the Leon Commission in 1998 and the Phumaphi Commission in 2015, intending to find the facts that led to the upheavals and make recommendations that would help restore peace and stability.

This paper critically analyses the witnesses' use of the passive voice, one of the linguistic strategies employed by witnesses to respond to commissioners' questions.

2. Methods

This paper adopted a qualitative research design. This design is suitable for this study due to the following reasons: first, this study involves data in the form of words and expressions, and its data is sourced from transcripts of audio recordings of the commissions' proceedings. The source and the type of data described make this study qualitative in nature. Second, the nature of the research questions that the data needs to answer requires description and interpretation, hence the suitability of the qualitative design. Creswell and Creswell (2003) remark that the nature of research questions, methods of data collection, and data analysis are the factors that determine the type of research design the researcher must employ. Moreover, the general aim of this research paper corresponds with that of qualitative research, which is to provide in-depth descriptions of phenomena by generating insiders' perspectives of the phenomena or practices being studied (Creswell and Creswell 2003).

The study derived its data from the two commissions, namely Leon and Phumaphi (named after the commissioners who led the proceedings). It must be noted that ours is a non-intrusive study that did not have direct contact with participants through interviews but relied on information that was audio-recorded during the proceedings of the commissions. The study analysed transcripts of the audiotapes and CDs of the two commissions in Lesotho. For ethical reasons, the study purposively selected audio recordings of the two commissions based on their availability in the public domain and disregarded those that the general public did not have access to. It therefore used non-probability sampling. The study had access to a total of 26 recordings. There were recordings of 10 participants in the Leon Commission (eight army officers and two members of the opposition) and 16 in the Phumaphi Commission (four army officers, four members of the opposition, four government officials, three police officers, and one member of the general public). Instances of passive voice usage were derived from the 10 witnesses who actually used this linguistic device as they addressed commissioners' questions. The other 16 witnesses mainly used the active voice. All instances of the passive voice were analysed. Hammarberg, Kirkman and de Lacey (2016) assert that all the data should be utilised particularly when the dataset is not adequately large. The sample was male-dominated, as there were 23 male and three female participants. This sample could not be balanced because the female participants in both commissions were generally few; there was one in the Leon Commission and two in the Phumaphi Commission. The inquiry as a whole was male-dominated because it comprised political party leaders, government officials, police officers, and army officers who were mainly men. The researchers therefore had no control over such data.

The recordings were in both Sesotho and English because the proceedings of the two commissions were conducted in both languages. The Sesotho recordings were translated into English and then transcribed, while the English ones were only transcribed because they were already in English. The transcribed data was read repeatedly for a thorough comprehension of the content, context, and all other essential features of the data. The next step was to code the data, which was done based on the overarching research question, namely, how has the passive voice been used by witnesses who were summoned to testify before the Leon and Phumaphi commissions in Lesotho? The data reached the saturation stage as the majority of the data

signified three main functions of the passive voice. These functions were translated into themes as follows: passive voice used as a protective linguistic resource, passive voice used to signify the known actor, and passive voice used to identify the unknown actor.

3. Results

The findings of this study reveal the use of the passive voice by the witnesses of both commissions of inquiry. The kind of passive voice found in utterances is the one without a by-clause. Interestingly, the strategy is mainly common with the junior army officers in the Leon Commission, while in the Phumaphi Commission, it is found among police investigating officers. The commission remarked (as the proceedings commenced) that the officers seemed uncomfortable and scared to say anything to the commission. One police officer was subpoenaed to give evidence, which implies his unwillingness to provide information to the commission.

3.1 Theme 1: Passive voice as a protective linguistic resource

The passive voice seemed a convenient device that enabled witnesses to shield some information, particularly the names of individuals who could be of interest to the commissions. The strategy helped witnesses to deviate from taking responsibility for what they said in their evidence. Therefore, the passive voice seems to be uniquely used as a protective resource in this study. Witnesses appeared to have used it to protect themselves from the harm that could befall them after they had testified. This is prototypically evidenced in Excerpt 1 below:

Excerpt 1:

LC: Then, from there you went to Roma.

W (5): *Ho joalo mohlomphehi.*

Translation: It is so, my lord.

LC: Why were you going to Roma?

W (5): *Re ile ra hlalose^{soa} hore re lokela ho ea ha tonakholo.*

Translation: It was explained to us that we were supposed to go to the prime minister's place.

LC: Why were you going to his place?

W (5): *Ho ile hoa hlakisoa hore se entsoeng ha letona ke sona se lo etsoa mono eleng ho chesa ntlo ea hae.*

Translation: It was made clear that what was done at the minister's place was going to be done there, and that was the torching of his house.

LC: Where else did you go?

W (5): *Re ile ra laeloa ho ea Mafeteng.*

Translation: We were instructed to go to Mafeteng.

LC: Who is this person who was giving you instructions?

W (5): *Ka hlompho e kholo mohlomphehi, ha ke nahane ho bolokehile hore ke bolelele mabitso.*

Translation: With due respect, my lord, I do not think it is safe for me to disclose names.

In Excerpt 1, the witness uses the passive voice to respond to the commissioner's questions. By this strategy, the witness is able to explain where he went with the group he was with, what they were going to do there, and where they went next. The passive voice is realized by the statements that do not include the doer of the action; the witness just mentions how they were instructed to go to Roma without saying who instructed them. He explains what they were told to do and where they went next without mentioning who gave them these instructions. The witness emphasizes the action rather than the actor or doer of the action. He seems to have used this communicative strategy purposely to avoid revealing the names of those who led the operation, as this would threaten their faces. This is justified by his response to the question that asks him to mention the name of the person who was giving them instructions. His unwillingness to tell who was giving them instructions confirms that he consciously decided to use the passive voice so he could provide information without mentioning names. The trend that the data reveals is that the junior army officers employed the passive voice when giving their evidence before the commission of inquiry. They would say what happened, but they would not disclose their leader in any operation that they were engaged in during the political disturbances in 1998. Thus, the use of the passive voice in this instance is a conversational implicature of which the intended meaning is to withhold sensitive information. According to the Lesotho Government Gazette (2000) witnesses had a misconception as to the true nature of a commission of inquiry. They believed that the inquiry was a court of law with the powers to convict and sentence offenders. The report further states that witnesses also wrongly thought that the members of the commission were sitting members of the Court of Appeal. This study infers that this misconception influenced the witnesses' approaches and their ways of responding to the questions posed by the commissioners. Their priority was to ensure that they maintained good relations with their supervisors by not mentioning their names lest they be convicted.

The passive voice is usually acquired late in many languages; however, Sesotho speakers have been shown to acquire this grammatical concept comparatively early (Demuth, Moloji, and Machobane, 2010). The common use of passive constructions is further exemplified by Sesotho literary texts, the narration of which comprises several passive constructions with the intention of avoiding mentioning the agent/actor (Teleki 2006, Maduna 2021). For instance, Maduna's description of the main character 'Moleboheng' is passive in almost all the paragraphs he writes. This implies that the Basotho have become so used to passive constructions that they have even found benefit in their ability to conceal sensitive information, as shown in the above excerpt. As mentioned earlier in this article, Corson and Smollett (2019: 1) confirmed that the passive voice is used when the speaker or writer wants to be vague or tactful about who is responsible. However, this study has not found instances of the passive voice being strategically used as a protective linguistic resource.

Similarly, in the Phumaphi Commission of Inquiry, the passive voice has been used to secure witnesses from harm. This strategy was employed by the junior police officers who were investigating the death of Brigadier Mahao. When the commission became aware at the initial stages of questioning that the witness was not willing to share any information, the witness was released. Others testified, although they were careful not to reveal the names of the alleged perpetrators. As mentioned earlier, it was Brigadier Mahao's death at the hands of his army colleagues that led to the establishment of the Phumaphi Commission. The use of the passive voice by the police officers is shown in Excerpt 2 below.

Excerpt 2:

PC: What was the last activity on this case?

W (15): *Ke ile ka kopa hore ke fuoe li-item tse neng li sebelisoa ka nako ea operation le mabitso a batho ba neng ba le operation-neng. Ke ile ka bolelloa hore ntho eo ke e kopileng ha ho bobebe hore ke e fumane. Ke ntse ke emetse hore ke fumane thuso linthong tseo ke li kopileng.*

Translation: I requested to be given items which were used during the operation as well as the names of people who were in the operation. However, I was told that what I requested was highly unlikely. I am still waiting to be given a response to what I requested.

PC: Please give us the name of the person you were having this conversation with

W (15): *Ke tla sitoa ho etsa joalo mohlomphehi, for safety reasons. Empa e ne e le office ea Sesole.*

Translation: I'm unable to mention names, my lord, for safety reasons, but it was the office of the army.

As Excerpt 2 shows, the witness is asked to tell the commission the last activity his office engaged in during the investigation of the death of Brigadier Mahao. In his evidence, the witness keeps saying “to be given items,” “were used during the operation”, and “I was told”, all of which are in the passive voice. The actor is not mentioned; instead, the receiver of the action or the object (in this case, “I”) has occupied the position of the doer. Here too, the witness seems to want to emphasize what happened and not who was responsible for what happened. The witness mentions that for his own safety, he will not disclose names. The undisclosed actor or doer in the passive construction conversationally implies unwillingness to share information, particularly one that leads to a disclosure of people’s names. The witness wants to preserve his negative face. Brown and Levinson (1987) affirm that every individual has a desire to protect their negative face (an individual’s desire not to have their freedom imposed upon them), and any form of threat can threaten one’s negative face. During the period of the murder of Lieutenant Mahao, there were several killings which were occurring in the country to the point that people did not have freedom of speech; they could not speak ill of the army in case they got followed up and possibly murdered (SADC Commission of Inquiry, 2015). As a result, the witness might, despite being a police officer, have felt unsafe to disclose the names of people responsible for certain acts. The witness confirms that he will not disclose names for safety reasons. Consequently, the use of the passive voice served as a hedge to protect their face and maintain the face of those in authority. Similar to this study is the study conducted by Kulo (2009), who found that political speeches effectively use the passive voice (as one among many communicative strategies) to conceal some elements in a situation. The participants in the present study withheld some information for a purpose not yet covered by the previous literature, namely the use of the passive voice as a protective linguistic resource. This paper therefore adds another pragmatic function of the passive voice to those already mentioned by Corson and Smollett (2019) and Omenogor (2019).

3.2 Theme 2: Passive voice signifying known actor

There were few instances that revealed the use of the passive voice in circumstances where the utterance implies that the actor is known, and there is therefore no need to mention what is already known. This is shown in Excerpt 3 below:

Excerpt 3:

PC: Tell us what you did as an investigating officer after you were informed of the death of Brigadier Mahao.

W (24): ... *Re ile ra laeloa ho ea mono hore re kopane le basebetsi mmoho ba bang. Re ile ra bolelloa hore re lokela ho attend-a a certain scene sepetleleng sa Makoanyane mme ra ea moo. Ho fihleng hoa rona re ile ra isoa ka ward-eng ea bana. Ke hona moo re fumaneng setopo sa Brigadier Mahao. Re ile ra nka setopo ra se isa Lesotho Funeral Services moo se ileng sa etsoa postmortem.*

Translation: We were instructed to go there and meet other colleagues. We were told that we had to attend a certain scene at Makoanyane hospital, and we proceeded there. Upon arrival, we were taken to the children's ward, and that is where we found the corpse of Brigadier Mahao. We took the corpse to Lesotho Funeral Services, and the postmortem was conducted on the 3rd July 2015.

Excerpt 4

PC: How is the attitude of other soldiers towards their commander?

W (19): Relationship is not good *hobane boholo ba masole* are not happy *ka bolaodi ba sesole. Lebaka ke hobane ho no so etswa di operation tse seng molaong mme sena sa utloisa masole a mangata bohloko.*

Translation: The relationship is not good. The majority of the soldiers are not happy with the commander. The reason behind this is that there were illegal and unauthorized operations that were conducted that hurt many of the soldiers.

In Excerpt 3, the witness seems to use the passive voice merely because it was not so important to mention the actor. The information shared was not harmful; the names of people instructing the officers could be shared if such a need arose. The witness' answer suggests that the actor is implied and therefore not important to mention. The witness says they "were instructed", "[they] were told", etc., which is a conversational implicature denoting that it was his supervisor or someone senior to him who was instructing or telling. The person of authority instructs or gives orders to lower-rank officers.

Similarly, telling the commission the name of the officer who took them to the children's ward was not so important. The implicature is that one of the nurses working at the hospital did that. The commission does not insist on knowing the persons responsible, hence no further inquiry is made. Similarly, in Excerpt 4, the actor in the utterance "there were illegal and unauthorized operations that were conducted" can be inferred based on the discourse that preceded the passive voice. The witness has made it clear earlier on that the soldiers are not happy with the commander, which implies that the commander is responsible for the illegal and unauthorised operations taking place. The utterance "unauthorised operations" further implies that there is an authority that the commander answers to that should approve the operations undertaken. Thus, the use of the passive voice in this instance marks the known actor. This is based on the shared conversational context (Grice 1975), the shared knowledge of the authority of those in leadership, and how hospitals and mortuaries operate. This knowledge made it unnecessary to mention the actor and therefore the use of the passive voice was maintained. Despite being described by prescriptivists as bloated, indirect, and evasive (Ferreira 2021), the passive voice

seems a significant resource for Lesotho witnesses as it enables them to avoid mentioning actors that can easily be inferred by the hearer.

3.3 Theme 3: Passive voice signifying unknown actor

There are instances where the passive voice was used because the actor is unknown. This is prototypically illustrated in Excerpt 5 below:

Excerpt 5

PC: In what condition were the deceased clothes?

W (24): *Li ne li le metsi, e ne e ka li hlatsuoe.*

Translation: They were wet; it was as if they were washed.

In Excerpt 5, the witness is asked to describe the condition of the clothes the deceased wore. The witness clarified that the clothes were wet after seemingly being washed. The witness does not seem to know who washed the deceased's clothes, which is why he resorts to the passive voice. The phrase "it was as if" used prior to the passive voice, "they were washed," indicates that the witness does not have any idea who wet the clothes since he is only speculating that they were washed. Thus, the conventional meaning of the phrase "it was as if" determines both what is said and what is implicated (Grice 1975). Excerpt 6 below further shows an instance of the passive voice being used because the actor is unknown:

Excerpt 6

PC: Please describe the wounds you found on the deceased.

W: They were gunshot wounds; the deceased was shot several times in his upper body.

The witness testifying in this instance was the one conducting the postmortem on the deceased and was merely providing a report based on what he found as he examined the body. The witness would then know what happened to the deceased and not who is responsible for the action, hence the use of the passive voice. In this instance, the conversational implicature helps with interpreting the passive voice used by the witness. This finding confirms earlier research where the passive voice was found to play a significant role in instances where the actor was unknown (Corson and Smollett 2019, Omenogor 2019, Ferreira 2021). Instances of the passive voice signifying the unknown actor was found.

4. Discussion

In the present study, common functions of the passive voice are found, as stipulated by Corson and Smollett (2019). This study affirms that using the passive voice in instances where the actor was unimportant or unknown did not hinder commissioners' access to information. However, the passive voice that the witnesses used to secure themselves from being harmed was ineffective because it deprived the commissioners of valuable information they required. It was important that the commissioners received as much information as possible with regard to who was responsible for certain acts. This is because one of the terms of reference they were to address was to assist in the identification of any perpetrators with a view to ensuring accountability of those responsible for the death of Brigadier Mahao (SADC Commission of

Inquiry, 2015) and for arson and looting of property in 1998 (Lesotho Government Gazette 2000). The junior army and police investigating officers responded to questions using this communicative strategy. It is to be expected that participants in junior positions would respond the way they did since they would not want to be in trouble with their superiors, who might have instructed them to carry out illegal activities or denied them the opportunity to do the right thing. The Phumaphi Commission commented on some of these participants' evidence, saying they seemed very uncomfortable disclosing information. One of them was even subpoenaed to give evidence but the participant still could not reveal any names. He claimed it was not safe to do so. The passive voice became a convenient communicative device that enabled junior officers to shield some information, particularly the names of individuals who could be of interest to the commissions. Therefore, the passive voice seems to be uniquely used as a security measure for those occupying lower ranks in the army and police division. Considering the witnesses' adequate levels of education (all had obtained high school certificates, while others furthered their education to diploma/degree level) and the fact that the Sesotho passive voice is frequently used by adults (Demuth, Moloji and Machobane 2010), it seems that the witnesses were aware that the use of this strategy would protect them from a lot of harm, including being ill-treated by their supervisors. Corson and Smollett (2019) allude to the fact that some speakers and writers intentionally use the passive voice to be vague or tactful about who is responsible. This study therefore considers the passive voice as a strategy intentionally used to conceal information.

In this regard, the use of the passive voice might have been a setback for the two commissions, particularly when it was used to conceal information. Although this communicative strategy protects the witness, it can also conceal important information. Future witnesses might want to act carefully with this strategy if their mandate is to cooperate with the commission and reveal as much information as possible.

5. Recommendation

The study recommends that, in order to curb participants' reluctance to share information and to encourage them to avoid conversationally ineffective communicative strategies such as the passive voice, a protected disclosures act should be introduced where participants who feel insecure about revealing some information will be allowed to communicate such information without disclosing their identity. Our study has made an important observation that some participants used communicative strategies that assisted in concealing some information because they felt insecure in revealing the misconduct of their colleagues or did not want to incriminate themselves, as did others who confessed, hence the application of such strategies. The introduction of the Disclosures Act may improve participants' readiness (especially those with security issues) to reveal even sensitive information, which will result in the use of conversationally effective communicative strategies that will enhance the provision of information. This legislation already exists in South Africa and it works effectively to provide a safe platform where whistle-blowers can report any criminal conduct without fear of facing any detriment (GoLegal 2019).

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