

Nominalization

Nominalization: Definition	1
Nominalization, passive voice and agency	1
References.....	2

Nominalization: Definition

Nominalization, from the Latin *nomen*, noun, is the process of transformation of verbs into nouns (e.g., the lynching, the attack, the rape).

Franzosi et al. (2012) write:

Nominalization—the transformation of verbs into nouns—is another major linguistic tool used to deny agency in discourse (Fairclough 1992:179–82).²⁴ Thus, sentences like “Sam Hose was lynched by the mob,” “the mob stormed the jail” or “the mob attacked the negro” are nominalized as “the lynching of Sam Hose,” “the storming of the jail,” and “the attack on a negro,” where the agent “mob” disappears. Nominalization is commonly used in newspaper headlines to remove the perpetrators of despicable acts (Fowler et al. 1979:14; Billig 2008:785). Besides passivization, the article on Sam Hose’s lynching (our nominalization!) also makes use of nominalization: “He pleaded pitifully for his life while the mutilation was going on,” where the verb “mutilate” is transformed into the noun “mutilation”; as a result, agency is once again eliminated: The reader is unaware of who was mutilating whom. Like passivization, nominalization is not an inconsequential linguistic choice; it reveals underlying ideological practices aimed at maintaining unequal power relations (Billig 2008:786).

Abut nominalization Moretti and Pestre write (2015:89):

Opacity is hard to understand, so we will break it down into smaller units, beginning with its movement ‘away from concreteness’. In the passage from 2008, the terms action and cooperation belong to a class of words usually known as ‘nominalizations’, or ‘derived abstract nouns’; derived, in this case, from verbs: to ‘act’, to ‘cooperate’. In English, such terms are recognizable by their typical ending in -tion, -sion and -ment (implementation, extension, development . . .); so, we extracted from the Reports all the words with such an ending and hand-checked the top 600 (to eliminate ‘station’, ‘cement’, and the like). . . . According to corpus linguistics, in academic prose the average frequency of nominalizations derived from verbs is 1.3 per cent. In the World Bank Reports, the frequency is near 3 per cent from the start, with a higher peak around 1950, and it keeps growing, slowly but steadily, plateauing at 4 per cent between 1980 and 2005, and dropping slightly thereafter.

Nominalization, passive voice, and agency

Together with verb passive voices nominalization can be taken as a sign of **denial of agency**. In an active sentence, syntactic subject and semantic role of agent overlap and the agent is marked (“the police charged the demonstrators”, the police is bot subject and agent); in a passive voice (“the demonstrators were charged by the police”), the subject is now the demonstrators and the agent is

unmarked. Furthermore, the agent can be omitted altogether in a passive sentence and still produce a grammatically correct sentence (“the demonstrators were charged”).

As Biber et al. write (1998: 61ff): “in nominalizations, actions and processes are ‘separated from human participants’; Nominalization “take(s) ‘actions and processes’ and turn them into ‘abstract objects’.

**Do your documents show a differential use of nominalization and verb passive voice?
Who is hidden behind these linguistic practices?**

References

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