

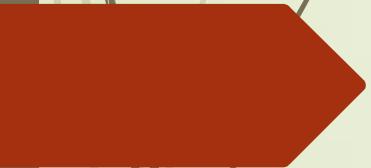
IIT Madras

BSc Degree

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Structure and Functions of Passives in English



Dr. Om Prakash

Passives

- ▶ Passive is a grammatical category that applies to verbs.
- ▶ Two types of sentences:
 - ▶ **active**: the subject does the action
 - ▶ **passive**: the subject receives the action

Canonical Passives

- In passive constructions, a form of the verb be (or sometimes get) is used as an auxiliary together with the past participle (V3) form of a transitive verb.

1. Deepa wrote a novel. [Active]
2. A novel was written by Deepa. [Passive]

Subject-Object dilemma in Passives

- ▶ Grammatical relations
 - ▶ Subject (usually agent/doer of the action) but there can be non-agentive subjects as well)
 - ▶ Direct Object
 - ▶ Indirect Object
- ▶ Thematic/Logical/Semantic contents
 - ▶ Agent
 - ▶ Patient
 - ▶ Recipient
 - ▶ Instrument
 - ▶ Theme etc.

Indirect Objects in Passives

Consider the following:

- ▶ Ravi gave Deepa a book.
- ▶ Deepa was given a book by Ravi.

- ▶ In the active form, *gave* is the verb; *Ravi* is its subject, *Deepa* its indirect object, and *a book* its direct object. In the passive forms, the indirect object has been promoted and the direct object has been left in place.

- ▶ Ravi gave a book to Deepa.
- ▶ A book was given to Deepa by Ravi.

Restrictions on Promotion

- ▶ promotion of the indirect object takes place from a construction in which it precedes the direct object, whereas promotion of the direct object in such cases takes place from a construction in which the indirect object follows the direct object;
- ▶ Ravi gave Deepa a book. → Deepa was given a book.
 - ▶ (and not *A book was given Deepa.)
- ▶ Ravi gave a book **to** Deepa. → A book was given **to** Deepa.
 - ▶ (and not *Deepa was given a book to.)

Functions of Passive

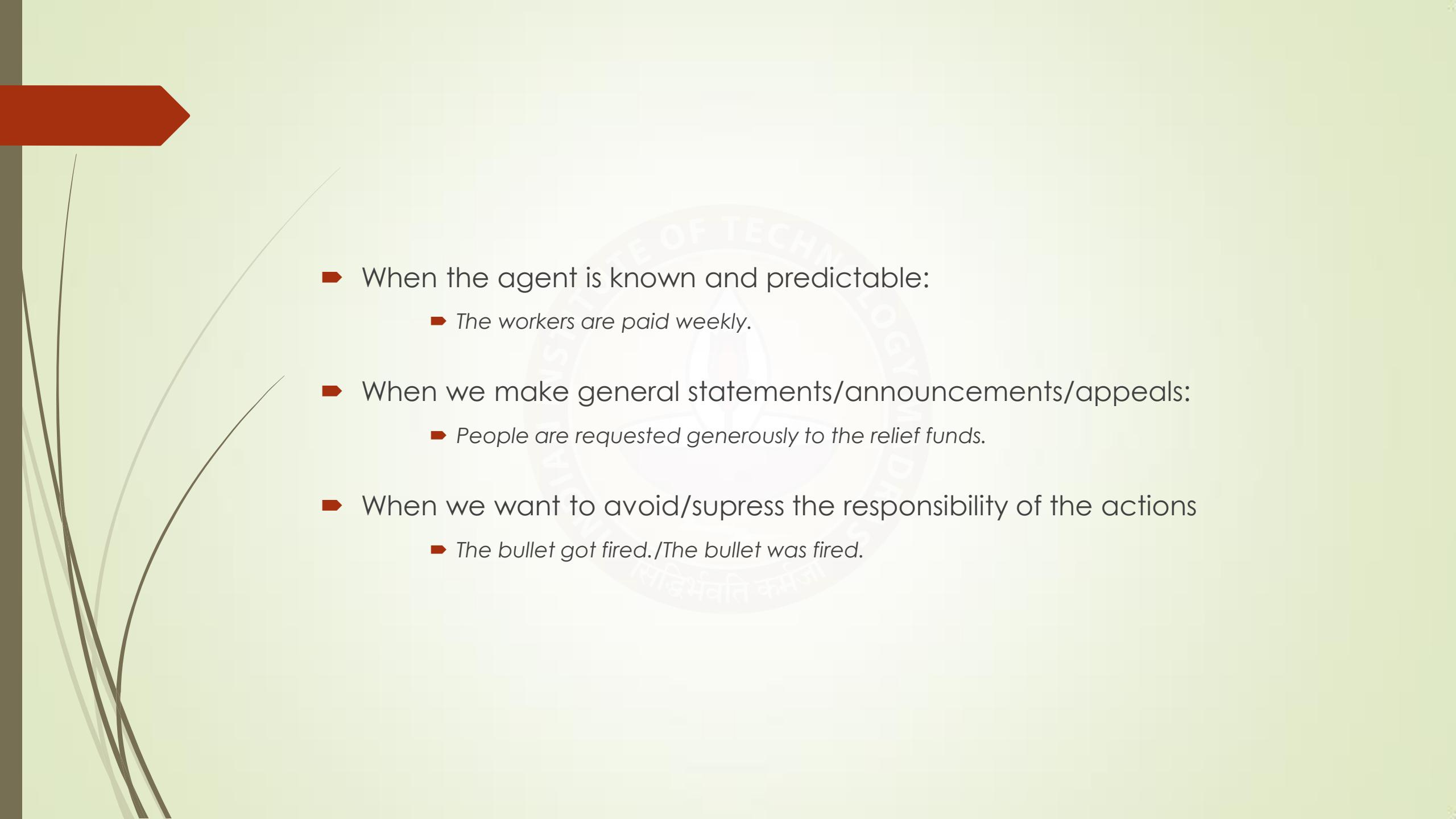
► Contexts where the passive is preferred:

1. "When the actor is unimportant."
2. "When the actor is unknown."
3. "When you want to hide the actor's identity."
4. "When you need to put the punch word at the end of the sentence."
5. "When the focus of the sentence is on the thing being acted on."
6. "When the passive simply sounds better."

Source: Garner, Bryan A. (2016). *Garner's Modern English Usage*. Oxford University Press. pp. 676–677.

More Functions:

- ▶ When we want to emphasize the receiver of the action:
 - ▶ America was discovered by Columbus.
- ▶ When we don't know who did the action (the agent):
 - ▶ Some rare artefacts were stolen form the museum.
- ▶ When we think the agent is not important.
 - ▶ *The bridge is being repaired.*

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- ▶ When the agent is known and predictable:
 - ▶ *The workers are paid weekly.*
 - ▶ When we make general statements/announcements/appeals:
 - ▶ *People are requested generously to the relief funds.*
 - ▶ When we want to avoid/supress the responsibility of the actions
 - ▶ *The bullet got fired./The bullet was fired.*