

Passives: why omit the agent?

Why do we omit the agent in a passive construction? These examples are taken from Chapter 22 of my *Making Sense of Grammar* (2004).

- If we do not want to identify the performer of the action (and especially if we do not want to draw attention to ourselves)

The window's been smashed.

The catalogue has to be checked.

The organist has to be asked to stand down.

- If there is not a need to identify the performer of the action because it is obvious from the context or unnecessary because the listener does not need to know:

Bob played Jim today and Jim was beaten.

Smith was acquitted.

We're getting the house painted.

Mary's had her hair done.

- If we have no choice, because we do not know who the performer is or it is impossible to say:

Order is being restored in the capital.

No trace has been found of the runaways.

Three killed in motorway pile-up.

Our house was built in the 1930s.

The pictures have been stolen.

- If we want to express an impersonal or objective stance, as in a scientific report or academic text:

Water needs to be added to the mixture.

This needs to be borne in mind.