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## Letters

### First Person: Immodest or Insecure?

The present writer would like to add his comment to that of Court (1) about ascribing false modesty to the use of *I* or *we* in the editorial entitled "Passive voice" [*Science* 125, 529 (1957)]. That editorial sought to discourage the view that *I* or *we*, used in scientific communications, is indicative of immodesty. It intimated that "the active voice is, in general, more robust and more direct" than the passive voice. The latter was said to inveigle authors into grammatical inexactness, this in turn leading to scientific inexactness.

As one concerned with teaching professional writing to graduate students in psychology, and as an advocate of the passive voice as well (2), the present writer follows closely the style manual of the American Psychological Association (3). Ever since the first scientific psychologist, Wundt, considered that the expression of feeling in language was more important than communication (4), psychologists have been concerned with both functions of language. Scientists in other fields may be interested in knowing how psychologists treat person and voice in their style manual. Presumably their treatment of the appearance of feelings, or other aspects of the personality, in scientific writing has been influenced by empirical investigations with a relatively long history.

Instead of the first person being seen as "robust and . . . direct," psychological stylists claim that "inexperienced and insecure investigators . . . think in the first person because they are so overwhelmingly concerned with what they themselves did, felt, found, or left undone" (3). Such novices were also said to have a tendency toward an excessive use of *we*. Psychologists, then, would seem to disagree with the editorial viewpoint expressed in *Science*.

It is interesting to note, however, that both the editorial and the manual presented illustrations of faulty and clumsy usages of the passive voice and their correction. Beyond this similarity there was little agreement.

Whether the active voice expresses robustness or inexperience, whether the passive voice indicates false modesty or objectivity, the remedy for an involved and clumsy usage of the passive voice seems to lie more in attitude than in rule. The passive voice can be well used, as the editorial pointed out, if the writer is maturely aware of his material and his reader as well. In such cases, as indicated in the psychological manual, the writer perceives himself chiefly as a link between the two. It is the research which is important, not the researcher. Employment of the third person would seem to

emphasize the writing; utilization of the first person, the researcher, be he immodest or insecure.

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### References

1. A. Court, *Science* 128, 1532 (1958).
2. D. Lebo, *J. Clin. Psychol., Monogr. Suppl.*, No. 13 (1959).
3. *Publication Manual*, rev. ed. (American Psychological Assoc., Washington, D.C., 1957), p. 16.
4. W. Wundt, *Sprachgeschichte und Sprachpsychologie* (Engelmann, Leipzig, 1901); *Volkerpsychologie*: vol. 1, *Die Sprache* (Engelmann, Leipzig, 1911-1912).

The debate over the appropriateness of the active and passive voices will doubtless continue as long as we have a living language. We should like, for the time being, to close the debate with the following quotation from Richard Asher's "Why are medical journals so dull?" [*Brit. Med. J.*, II, 502 (23 Aug. 1958)]: ". . . avoiding 'I' by impersonality and circumlocution leads to dullness and I would rather be thought conceited than dull. Articles are written to interest the reader, not to make him admire the author. Overconscientious anonymity can be overdone, as in the article by two authors which had a footnote, 'Since this article was written, unfortunately one of us has died.'"—G.DuS.

### German Scientists and the Atom Bomb

Reviews of Robert Jung's *Brighter than a Thousand Suns* [J. Cockcroft, *Nature* 182, 547 (1958); R. R. Wilson, *Sci. American* 199, 145 (Dec. 1958); E. U. Condon, *Science* 128, 1619 (1958)] have not mentioned Werner Heisenberg's recorded opinion of why German scientists failed to develop nuclear weapons during World War II. Jung's interpretation of the brief and selective quotations given on page 89 of his book, that such research was restrained by humane scruples, is not supported by a fuller reading of Heisenberg's article. An abridged translation [W. Heisenberg, *Nature* 160, 211 (1947)] of Heisenberg's 1946 statement in *Naturwissenschaften*, "Research in Germany on the technical application of atomic energy," includes the following assertions.

"We have often been asked, not only by Germans but also by Britons and Americans, why Germany made no attempt to produce atomic bombs. The simplest answer one can give to this question is this: because the project could not have succeeded under German war conditions. . . . Finally—and this is a most important fact—the undertaking could not even be initiated against the psychological background of the men re-

(Continued on page 523)