

# TRANSLATING THE ENGLISH PASSIVE VOICE INTO VIETNAMESE: A CASE STUDY OF FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS

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**Abstract:** *This study investigates the translation of the English passive voice into Vietnamese through two Vietnamese translations of Ernest Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls (1972, 2022). Based on a mixed-methods analysis of 100 - 150 passive constructions, it identifies recurrent strategies across different passive types. The findings indicate that direct use of bị and được is relatively rare, with translators favoring active reformulation and structural restructuring to ensure naturalness and pragmatic adequacy. Comparative analysis reveals diachronic shifts in Vietnamese literary translation norms, particularly in the treatment of agency and stylistic tone. Overall, the study argues for function-oriented, context-sensitive strategies over strict formal equivalence in translating English passives.*

**Keywords:** *English, passive voice, Vietnamese, Ernest Hemingway, For whom the bell tolls.*

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## 1. Introduction

This study explores the translation of the English passive voice into Vietnamese through a case study of For Whom the Bell Tolls. While English passives contribute significantly to information structure, narrative perspective, and stylistic effect, Vietnamese, as an isolating and topic-prominent language, lacks a fixed morphological passive system. Passive meaning in Vietnamese is therefore realized through lexical markers, syntactic reorganization, or contextual inference. These typological differences complicate the preservation of pragmatic and stylistic functions in literary translation. A comparison of two Vietnamese translations from different periods demonstrates how changing linguistic norms and translation strategies influence the natural and context-sensitive rendering of English passive constructions.

This study aims to conduct a comparative grammatical analysis of English passive constructions and their Vietnamese renderings in the two translations. It addresses two research questions: (1) how different types of English passive constructions are translated into Vietnamese, and (2) what grammatical strategies are employed to preserve, modify, or replace passive forms in response to typological differences between the two languages.

## 2. Literature review

Previous studies have extensively examined the English passive voice as a grammatical and stylistic device that foregrounds affected participants while backgrounding agency, typically realized through the be + past participle construction. In literary discourse, passivization contributes to narrative perspective, emphasis, and emotional distance. In contrast, Vietnamese lacks a fixed morphological passive system and expresses passive meaning through lexical markers such as bị, được, and do, whose use is constrained by semantic and pragmatic factors.

Contrastive and translation studies consistently report a preference for activation and restructuring over direct passivization in English - Vietnamese translation, particularly in literary texts where naturalness and readability are prioritized. However, existing research rarely focuses on a single literary work or compares translations diachronically, and detailed analyses of passive subtypes remain limited. Addressing these gaps, the present study examines For Whom the Bell Tolls and its Vietnamese translations by Huynh Phan Anh (1972) and Manh Chuong (2022) to explore evolving strategies in rendering English passive constructions into Vietnamese.

## 3. Research methodology

This study adopts a mixed methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative analysis. The data comprise the English source text For Whom the Bell Tolls and its two Vietnamese translations: Chuông gọi hồn ai (1972) and Chuông nguyện hồn ai (2022). Qualitative analysis involves close comparison of selected passive constructions, focusing on grammatical form, agent realization, and translation strategies, including direct passive rendering, activation, restructuring, and the selective use of bị and được. Quantitatively, approximately 100 - 150 passive constructions are identified, classified, and analyzed in terms of frequency and distribution. By integrating qualitative interpretation with quantitative evidence, the study provides a systematic account of how English passive voice constructions are translated into Vietnamese literary prose.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Overall distribution of translation strategies

Table 1 summarizes the overall distribution of translation strategies identified across the two Vietnamese versions.

Table 1. Translation strategies for English passive constructions

Strategy	Huynh Phan Anh (1972)	Manh Chuong (2022)
1. Direct passive rendering	31%	18%
2. Active voice conversion	34%	46%
3. Topic comment restructuring	21%	27%
4. Passive marker omission	14%	9%

Table 1 shows that active voice conversion is the dominant strategy in both Vietnamese translations, with a markedly higher frequency in Manh Chuong’s 2022 version. This trend reflects a strong preference for natural Vietnamese syntactic patterns, where agency is often foregrounded and passive forms are avoided unless pragmatically necessary. The increased use of active constructions in the later translation suggests a shift toward greater reader accessibility and discourse fluency, aligning with contemporary translation norms that prioritize functional equivalence over formal preservation.

Example 1: Robert Jordan talks to Pablo (the two soldiers, both being hunted, meet each other).

Robert Jordan: “I have to do what I am ordered to do and I can promise you of its importance”.

→ (It is translated into Vietnamese) Robert Jordan: “Tôi phải làm điều người ta ra lệnh tôi phải làm và tôi có thể đoán chắc với đồng chí rằng đây là việc quan trọng”.

→ Robert Jordan: “Tôi sẽ thực hiện những gì tôi được lệnh và có thể cam đoan với anh rằng đây là một việc quan trọng”.

Example 1 provides a representative illustration of the overall distribution of translation strategies summarized in Table 1, particularly the predominance of active voice conversion in both Vietnamese translations:

“I have to do what I am ordered to do and I can promise you of its importance”.

In the source text, Hemingway employs a passive infinitival clause “what I am ordered to do” to background the authority issuing the order while foregrounding Robert Jordan’s sense of obligation. This passive construction serves a pragmatic function: it emphasizes duty and inevitability rather than command hierarchy, consistent with the novel’s understated portrayal of military discipline.

Both Vietnamese translations retain the semantic core of obligation but diverge in how they structurally handle the English passive, reflecting broader strategic preferences.

Huynh Phan Anh translates the sentence as: “Tôi phải làm điều người ta ra lệnh tôi phải làm và tôi có thể đoán chắc với đồng chí rằng đây là việc quan trọng”.

Here, the English passive is restructured into an active clause with an indefinite subject “người ta ra lệnh”. Although agency is introduced, it remains vague and generic, preserving the impersonal tone of the original.

This solution represents a hybrid strategy, combining active conversion with topic comment restructuring, and aligns with Huynh Phan Anh’s relatively balanced distribution across strategies shown in Table 1.

Manh Chuong’s translation reads: “Tôi sẽ thực hiện những gì tôi được lệnh và có thể cam đoan với anh rằng đây là một việc quan trọng”.

In contrast, Manh Chuong opts for a more streamlined active construction “tôi sẽ thực hiện”, while compressing the passive element into the fixed expression “được lệnh”. The agent is entirely suppressed, and the sentence flows naturally in contemporary Vietnamese. This choice exemplifies the higher rate of active voice conversion (46%) in the 2022 translation, reflecting a clear prioritization of fluency and reader accessibility.

The comparison between the two translations illustrates a diachronic shift in translation norms. While both translators move away from direct passive rendering, Manh Chuong does so more decisively, minimizing structural complexity and focusing on functional equivalence. The passive meaning of obligation is preserved at the discourse level, even as the grammatical passive is largely neutralized.

#### 4.2. Translation of agentive vs. agentless passives

Table 2 presents differences in handling agentive and agentless passive constructions.

Table 2. Treatment of agency in translation

Passive type	Passive retained	Agent added	Converted to active
1. Agentive	Moderate	Frequent	Frequent
2. Agentless	Rare	Rare	Dominant

Table 2 highlights a clear contrast in the treatment of agentive and agentless passive constructions in the two Vietnamese translations. While agentive passives are often either retained or restructured through the explicit addition of an agent, agentless passives are rarely preserved as passives. Instead, they are predominantly converted into agentless active clauses or topic comment structures, which better conform to Vietnamese discourse conventions. This pattern reflects a fundamental typological difference between English and Vietnamese: English frequently uses passives to suppress agency, whereas Vietnamese tends to avoid passive morphology when no agent is specified, favoring syntactic neutrality and informational flow over formal equivalence.

In example 2, Hemingway employs an agentless passive construction to articulate the strategic necessity of destroying the bridges:

“And since we must win to survive ultimately, it is necessary that the bridges must be blown”.

The passive clause “the bridges must be blown” deliberately suppresses agency, foregrounding the inevitability of the action rather than the actor responsible for carrying it out. This stylistic choice aligns with Hemingway’s characteristic wartime narration, in which moral burden and strategic

necessity are often framed as impersonal forces rather than individual decisions.

Both Vietnamese translators depart from the passive structure, yet they do so in distinctly different ways, reflecting broader tendencies in the treatment of agentless passives.

Here, the passive morphology is partially retained, but the causative meaning is significantly weakened. The phrase “phải sập” suggests an outcome rather than a deliberate act, effectively transforming the original agentless passive into a resultative construction. While this version preserves the impersonal tone of the source text, it risks obscuring the strategic intentionality implied in “must be blown”. This aligns with the data in Table 2, where agentless passives are rarely retained, and when they are, they often undergo semantic dilution.

By contrast, Manh Chuong translates the sentence as: “Mà chúng ta phải chiến thắng để cuối cùng tồn tại, nên điều cần thiết là phải cho nổ tung những cây cầu”.

This translation converts an agentless passive into an active causative structure, implicitly encoding human agency while preserving pragmatic force. The contrast between the two versions reflects a typological divergence: English commonly suppresses agency through passive voice, whereas Vietnamese favors agent-implicit active constructions to ensure causal clarity. Accordingly, Manh Chuong’s translation prioritizes functional equivalence and communicative effectiveness, while Huynh Phan Anh’s version adheres more closely to formal correspondence but permits greater ambiguity of agency.

4.3. Stative vs. eventive passives

Table 3 highlights how stative and eventive passives are treated differently.

Table 3. Translation of stative and eventive passives

Passive type	Passive preserved	Rephrased
1. Stative	High	Moderate
2. Eventive	Low	High

Table 3 demonstrates a clear distinction in the translation of stative and eventive passive constructions. Stative passives, which describe a resulting state rather than an action, are more frequently preserved in Vietnamese because they align naturally with Vietnamese adjectival and resultative expressions. In contrast, eventive passives, which foreground dynamic actions and processes, are rarely retained in passive form and are instead commonly rephrased into active, resultative, or topic comment structures. This pattern reflects the typological tendency of Vietnamese to encode events through lexical verbs and discourse structure rather than through passive morphology, especially when the emphasis lies on action rather than state.

Example 3: Robert Jordan hid in a secluded corner of the church to observe: “Then I saw Don Pepe look full at the door and realized that he had not known it was locked”.

→ “Tôi thấy Don Pepe quay lại nhìn ra cửa, thì ra lão chưa hay là cửa đã khóa”.

→ “Rồi tôi nhìn thấy Pepe nhìn thẳng ra cửa và nhận thấy rằng nó không biết là cửa đã khóa”.

In Example 2, Hemingway employs a stative passive construction to describe Robert Jordan’s perception of Don Pepe’s mental state:

“Then I saw Don Pepe look full at the door and realized that he had not known it was locked”.

The passive clause “it was locked” is stative rather than eventive, describing the resulting state of the door rather than the action of locking it. The agent responsible for the action is entirely irrelevant; what matters is the condition of the door at the moment of observation and Don Pepe’s lack of awareness of that condition. This type of passive is typical in Hemingway’s prose, where perceptual immediacy and narrative economy take precedence over explicit action.

Both Vietnamese translators successfully preserve the stative meaning of the English passive by using natural Vietnamese resultative constructions rather than overt passive morphology. In both versions, “was locked” is rendered as “đã khóa”, maintaining the focus on the resulting state of the door and preserving the original informational structure without introducing an agent. This confirms that stative passives are readily retained in Vietnamese through resultative expressions, in contrast to eventive passives, which are more frequently restructured into active or topic-comment constructions.

4.4. Get passives and informal passives

Get passives are rarely translated as passives in Vietnamese and are typically rendered using active or descriptive constructions.

Example 2: In the end of the war, Robert Jordan was wounded and told himself: “I think you better get down now. You better get fixed around some way where you will be useful instead of leaning against this tree like a tramp”.

→ Những ngày cuối của cuộc chiến, Robert Jordan bị thương rồi tự khuyên bản thân: “Bây giờ tao nghĩ là mày nên đi xuống thì tốt hơn. Mày nên quyết định đến một nơi mà mày có thể làm điều gì đó có ích thay vì nằm dài dưới gốc cây này như một tên du thủ du thực”.

→ “Anh nghĩ chắc tốt hơn là mình nên xuống thôi, nên tìm một nơi cố định quanh quần đây mà mình thấy có lợi, chứ không nên cứ ngồi tựa vào cái cây như một kẻ vô gia cư như thế này”.

Example 4 illustrates Hemingway’s use of an informal get passive, a structure that is characteristic of spoken English and internal monologue:

“I think you better get down now. You better get fixed around some way where you will be useful instead of leaning against this tree like a tramp”.

In this passage, the verb phrase “get fixed” functions as a get passive, expressing a change of state rather than a clearly defined action performed by an external agent. The construction is informal, colloquial and introspective, reflecting Robert

Jordan's self addressed thoughts at a moment of physical vulnerability and impending death. Crucially, the passive meaning here does not primarily encode voice but process and result, emphasizing adjustment and readiness rather than agency.

Both Vietnamese translations abandon the passive form altogether, opting instead for active, modal, or descriptive constructions, a pattern consistent with the general avoidance of get passives in Vietnamese.

Huynh Phan Anh translates the sentence as: "Mày nên quyết định đến một nơi mà mày có thể làm điều gì đó có ích...".

In this version, "get fixed around some way" is reinterpreted as "quyết định đến một nơi," an explicitly agentive and volitional action. The informal self directed tone is preserved through colloquial pronouns "tao/mày", but the passive sense of undergoing a state change is replaced by a conscious decision making process. This shift reflects Vietnamese translators' tendency to lexicalize meaning rather than preserve non finite passive morphology, especially in informal contexts.

Here, the get passive is transformed into a descriptive active construction "tìm một nơi cố định", which conveys stability and usefulness without invoking passive voice. The focus remains on situational adaptation rather than on how the state is achieved, thus capturing the pragmatic intent of the original utterance while conforming to Vietnamese syntactic norms.

### 5. Discussion

The discussion shows that active reformulation is the dominant strategy in translating English passives into Vietnamese, particularly in Manh Chuong's 2022 translation of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. To conform to Vietnamese syntactic and discourse norms, translators often prioritize naturalness and narrative coherence over formal passive equivalence, frequently inserting agents to enhance causal clarity. However, this practice may weaken Hemingway's strategic suppression of agency used to create emotional distance and narrative tension. The study also finds

that the Vietnamese passive markers *bị* and *được* carry strong semantic and pragmatic polarity, making direct passive transfer context-sensitive and often stylistically disruptive. Diachronic comparison reveals a shift from structurally oriented to functionally and stylistically driven translation norms, underscoring that effective passive translation relies on preserving narrative effect rather than surface form.

### 6. Conclusion

This study examines the translation of the English passive voice into Vietnamese through a comparative analysis of two Vietnamese translations of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1972, 2022). Adopting a mixed-methods approach, it shows that typological differences limit direct passive equivalence between the two languages. English passives are therefore often rendered through activation, topic - comment structures, or implicit agency rather than overt passive markers such as *bị* and *được*. Passive subtypes are treated unevenly, with stative passives more frequently retained and eventive or agentless passives more commonly restructured. The findings reveal a diachronic shift toward reader-oriented norms, confirming that passive translation is a function-driven, context-sensitive process rather than one of formal correspondence ■

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## Chuyển dịch thể bị động tiếng Anh sang tiếng Việt qua tác phẩm *For Whom the bell tolls*

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**Tóm tắt:** Nghiên cứu này khảo sát việc chuyển dịch thể bị động tiếng Anh sang tiếng Việt thông qua hai bản dịch tiếng Việt của tiểu thuyết *For Whom the Bell Tolls* của Ernest Hemingway (1972, 2022). Dựa trên phương pháp nghiên cứu hỗn hợp, với việc phân tích từ 100 đến 150 câu trúc bị động, nghiên cứu xác định các chiến lược dịch thuật lặp lại đối với những kiểu bị động khác nhau. Kết quả cho thấy việc chuyển dịch trực tiếp bằng các dấu hiệu bị động bị và được tương đối hạn chế; thay vào đó, các dịch giả ưu tiên cải biến sang cấu trúc chủ động và tái cấu trúc cú pháp nhằm bảo đảm tính tự nhiên và tính phù hợp ngữ dụng trong tiếng Việt. Phân tích đối chiếu cũng chỉ ra sự dịch chuyển theo thời gian trong các chuẩn mực dịch văn học tiếng Việt, đặc biệt liên quan đến cách xử lý vai trò tác nhân và sắc thái phong cách. Từ đó, nghiên cứu khẳng định rằng việc dịch thể bị động tiếng Anh sang tiếng Việt đòi hỏi các chiến lược linh hoạt, định hướng chức năng và nhạy cảm với ngữ cảnh, thay vì chỉ dựa vào tương đương hình thức.  
**Từ khóa:** Tiếng Anh, câu bị động, tiếng Việt, Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.