

# A MODEST PROPOSAL

by

John Philip Bachner\*

This opportunity to address members of CGEA is appreciated by me. For my initial article, the issue of the passive voice is being addressed by me. Why? Because, all my ranting notwithstanding, the passive voice still seems to be preferred by most geotechnical engineers when reports are written by them, because, it is guessed by me, reports always have been written by geotechnical engineers that way.

Geotechnical engineers have been told in college that the “scientific style” is represented by the passive voice. Unfortunately, any number of problems are created by the “scientific style,” such as ambiguity, awkwardness, confusion, heightened risk, and needless liability, all because unnaturalness is embodied by the passive voice; i.e., the passive voice is not thought in by people and the passive voice is not spoken in by people. (Can it be imagined by you if the passive voice *were* spoken in by people? At weddings, it would be heard by us, “Is it solemnly sworn to by you that this woman will be taken by you, for holding and having purposes, should illness be contracted by her or not, and regardless of the amount of wealth or debt that is accumulated by you, for as long as life is lived by you, and until your parting is created only by death?” To which it would be answered by the groom, “It is done by me.”) So, why then would it be wanted by anyone to have things written by them or others in the passive voice, given that it is harder writing by them that way and problems are created for readers by the results? The answer so often heard by me is, “Because the way it always has been done by us is that. It was learned by us that way and the most comfort is given to us by us when we continue doing that which we were taught by our teachers.”

The time has been brought to us now for a change. A geotechnical engineering report is developed by many people, including administrative staff members, drillers, field representatives, engineers, geologists, project managers, and more, by whom it could be said in unison, “We are the firm.” Thus, it is occurred to by me the thought that a geotechnical engineering report could be written in the active voice, and, where the subject of a verb is called for, all rules of the known universe could be bent by the engineer by whom the report is written by using (accurately) “we” as the subject of a verb, as in “We performed the exploration” (vs. “The exploration was performed”).

What is thought about this by you? Your comments could be sent to me by you if it is so inclined by you.

*\*John Philip Bachner is the executive vice president of ASFE/The Best People on Earth. CGEA is an ASFE Regional Organization. As a result, all CGEA members are Regional Organization Affiliates of ASFE, and are entitled to a variety of benefits. These benefits include a special ASFE newsletter issued six times each year, special pricing on a variety*

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