Passive Permissives: being let and allowed[1]

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Abstract

The 'let NP bare infinitive' construction differs from other common

permissive constructions, such as 'allow NP *to*-infinitive' and 'permit NP

to-infinitive' in being exceedingly rare in the passive. That is, while

somebody may well be 'allowed to do' something, they are very seldom 'let

do' something. Even more seldom are they 'let to do' something. This

chapter explores possible reasons for the rarity of both of these passive *let*

constructions, which are contrasted with passive *allow* constructions. It is

argued that the difference in distribution between the constructions with the

two matrix verbs is related to two factors. The first is a difference in the

sorts of force dynamic relations which they typically encode. The second is

related to the difference in semantics between the two infinitive forms. The

argument is supported by corpus data from both British and American

English.

1. Introduction

The matrix verbs *let* and *allow* are both very common in English. Indeed, when used to report permission in active clauses they are about equally common (Egan 2008: 220). When the matrix verb is in the passive voice the situation is very different, however. While *allow* is again one of the half dozen most common matrix verbs in English, *let* is extremely rare, being represented by only 22 tokens in the whole of the British National Corpus (BNC), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Tokens of permissive active and passive *allow* and active *let* in the BNC, projected on the basis of a randomly downloaded sample of 1,000 tokens, with the actual total number of tokens of passive *let*

	allow to V	*let* V
active matrix verb	15,300	14,100
passive matrix verb	4,700	22

Thus the construction in (1) is very common, the construction in (2) very uncommon.

(1)   Few towns can boast they do not have a problem with dogs *being allowed to roam* the streets and Darlington is no exception. (BNC K54 6237)

(2)   She *shouldn't be let roam* the hills alone. (BNC G0X 7)

The fact that *let* tends to be avoided in the passive has often been noted. Thomson & Martinet (1986: 23), for instance, note that '*let* in the passive is often replaced by another verb', and Carter and McCarthy (2006: 99) agree that '*let* is not normally used in the passive when it means "allow/permit"'. However, there is very little in the literature about why *let* should resist the passive. In this paper I examine both active and passive complement clauses containing *let* and *allow* from the point of view of force dynamics. I show that the almost complete absence of *let* passives is at least in part a consequence of the type of force dynamic relations prototypically encoded by *let*.

This chapter is structured as follows. Section 2 contains an analysis of the force dynamic relations of *let* and *allow* constructions with both positive and negative active matrix verbs in the BNC. Section 3 contains similar data and analysis of constructions with passive matrix verbs. Section 4 discusses data from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), including examples of the passive *let to*-infinitive construction, which is not found in the BNC (apart from in a quotation from *The Origin of Species*). Section 5 considers the development of both passive *let* constructions in the light of the evidence of the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA). Finally, section 6 contains a summary and conclusion.

2. Constructions with active matrix verbs[2]

The data for sections 2 and 3 were taken from the British National Corpus. As there are almost 30,000 tokens of the verb *let* and over 30,000 of *allow* in the BNC, it was impossible within the scope of this study to investigate all tokens. I decided to restrict my investigation to a certain number of randomly chosen utterances containing each matrix verb, and to examine this subset of utterances for tokens containing bare and *to*-infinitive complement clauses. 1,000 randomly selected tokens of *let* and *allow* were downloaded from the corpus and the tokens containing non-finite complements were extracted from the two databases. There were in all 621 tokens of *allow* and 774 of *let* with non-finite complements in the downloaded sample. Both *allow* and *let* are polysemous and both may be used in senses that do not encode permission (or prohibition) as such. It was therefore necessary to weed out from the data tokens which do not encode permission. These include (3) in which *allow* means *admit* or *consider* rather than *permit*. Also excluded were tokens of the two multi-word verbs 'let x know' (= 'inform x') and 'let x have' (= 'give x'), illustrated in (4) and (5), and first-person plural suggestions, of the sort illustrated in (6).

(3)   We can apply the test to the technical and technological subjects, and not only those, but the professional subjects also; and the boundary line will run now on this side, now on that; but the things that it

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divides are different in kind, and only on one side of that line lies

what we *ought to allow to be* education. (BNC A69 383)

(4)   And we *let her know* from the start that we trusted her. (BNC G35

1029)

(5)   I *will let you have* a list of his customers and I want them contacted,

in the first instance by telephone. (BNC HWP 1159)

(6)   *Let's assume* one of your employees drinks too much both at work

and at home. (BNC A05 29)

Having removed the non-permissive tokens we are left with 462 tokens of

active voice 'allow x *to*-infinitive' and 490 tokens of 'let infinitive' that

clearly encode permission or its negative counterpart, prohibition. There

were also 145 relevant tokens of 'be allowed *to*-infinitive'. These will be

discussed in section 3. There was not a single token of 'be let bare

infinitive' among the 1,000 randomly downloaded tokens of *let*.

In an influential paper on causation, Kemmer and Verhagen characterise

permissives as encoding the removal of a barrier preventing what I will term

the 'permittee' from realising some goal.

A fourth type [of causation], *enablement/permission*, involves not the

exertion of force on an entity to bring about an event that otherwise

would not have happened, but the removal by the causer of a conceived

barrier that was preventing the causee from carrying out or undergoing

the effected event. *Enablement* refers to the case where the barrier is physical […] and *permission* to the case where the barrier is social or sociopolitical in nature […]; we can thus consider enablement and permission as subvarieties of one type.   (Kemmer & Verhagen 1994: 120)

Figure 1 illustrates this type of permission or enablement, wherein the matrix verb subject, the permitter (S1), removes a barrier which was blocking the path of the complement verb subject, the permittee (S2), permitting the latter to continue unimpeded on his or her way.
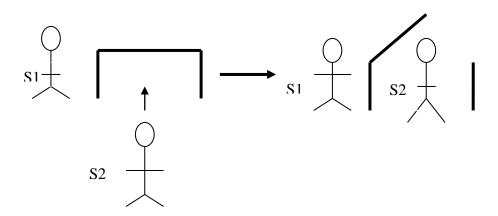

Figure 1: *Barrier-removal* by the permitter (S1) enabling the permittee (S2) to pass.

Figure 1, however, illustrates only one of two main forms of permission described by Talmy (1986), who distinguishes between what he calls *onset letting* and *extended letting* as follows: 'onset letting correlates with the cessation of impingement and extended […] with its nonoccurrence' (Talmy 1986: 76, see also Talmy 2000: 418). While accepting Talmy's distinction between these two types of permission, I prefer to use the term *barrier-removal*, based on Kemmer and Verhagen (1994), rather than *onset-letting*. For the concept which Talmy calls *extended letting* I will use the term *non-imposition* (of any barrier). I will also eschew Talmy's terminology (*agonist* and *antagonist*) for the participants in the act of permission, preferring the more specific terms *permitter* and *permittee*. The form of permission which I term *non-imposition* is illustrated in Figure 2.
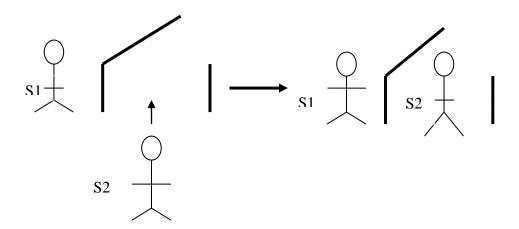

Figure 2: *Non-imposition* of barrier by the permitter (S1) enables the permittee (S2) to pass.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate permission rather than its opposite, prohibition. It is only matrix verbs with positive polarity that encode *barrier-removal* or *non-imposition*. Negative polarity matrix verbs encode *barrier-retention* or *imposition*. These will be discussed below. Table 2 contains details of the numbers of positive and negative polarity matrix verbs in the downloaded samples.

Table 2: Constructions containing positive and negative polarity active voice matrix verbs *allow* and *let* with horizontal percentages

Matrix verb	Totals		Percentage totals	
	Positive	negative	positive	negative
allow	414	48	89.6%	10.4%
let	372	118	76.0%	24.0%

All positive polarity tokens were examined with a view to determining whether they encoded *barrier-removal* or *non-imposition*. The two types of permission were taken to comprise mutually exclusive categories – either a barrier existed or it did not. Distinguishing between the two sometimes involves a considerable amount of trawling through the co-text in an effort to ascertain the possible prior existence of barriers. In other cases the immediate co-text contains sufficient information to conclude that such a

barrier existed. Possible evidence for the existence of a barrier may include the presence of a temporal adverbial like *later* in (7) or an adjective like *new* in (8).

(7) The US pilots <u>later</u> *allowed an Iraqi search-and-rescue helicopter to fly* to the crash site and then return to its base. (BNC CBE 784)

(8) In an attempt to remedy this the SLORC introduced <u>new</u> banking laws in July 1990 which *allowed foreign banks to open* branches in Myanma. (BNC HLD 4402)

We can also make inferences about the prior existence of a barrier on the basis of other sorts of information in the immediate co-text, as in (9), or using our general world knowledge as in (10).

(9) She *allowed herself to feel* all the pain she'd denied herself <u>for so long</u>. (BNC HGM 851)

(10) Claudia relaxed her fingers, *letting the pencil drop* to the desk. (BNC H8J 2708)

In (9) it is the presence of the adverbial 'for so long' in the relative clause that allows us to infer the previous self-imposed barrier to the feeling of pain. In (10) our knowledge of the function of taut fingers as a container of

objects allows us to conclude that prior to their being relaxed the fingers constituted a barrier to the pencil's falling.

Another type of barrier takes the form of a *sine qua non* condition, as in (11) – (12).

(11)   If you re recall back in nineteen eight five Tony the Government brought in <u>the transport bill</u> which *let operators compete*. (BNC KM8 236)

(12)   <u>The two centre holes</u> *allow a retaining wire to be fitted*. (BNC HH6 1902)

(11) is similar to example (7) in that it contains a temporal adverbial, 'back in nineteen eight five'. However, the presence of the adverbial is not necessary for us to make the requisite inference. The very fact that it is the bill that is the permitter implies the prior impossibility of competition, in other words the existence of an earlier impediment. Similarly in (12) without the presence of the two centre holes a wire could not have been fitted. Thus the presumed absence of these two holes amounts to a prior barrier.

Examples (7) - (12) all encode situations of *barrier-removal*. To categorise them as such it is sufficient to identify the earlier existence of a barrier, which may either be implicit or explicit. The prior non-existence of a barrier is less easy to stipulate, for obvious reasons. We may sometimes

draw on our world knowledge, as in the case of (13) – (15). Often we must trawl the co-text before we can conclude that no such barrier existed.

(13)   With the tension reaching boiling point, it was finally announced that the French officials *had allowed the result to stand* and they had to be applauded for a sporting decision. (BNC A40 42)

(14)   Have they all *let their membership lapse*? (BNC HHV 24488)

(15)   Race starter Captain Keith Brown was also criticised for *allowing the horses to line up* too close to the start line which led to the tape twice being broken. (BNC K45 1259)

(16)   So we *let the blacks come down to us,* we didn't go looking for them. (BNC FAY 933)

We can infer from (13), without searching the co-text, that the officials in question had the power to alter the result but chose not to exercise this power. In other words (13) is an instance of *non-imposition*. Similarly in (14), by not renewing their subscriptions the members abstained from imposing a barrier to their resigning their membership. Even if our world knowledge does not include an acquaintance with the rules of horse-racing, the fact that the race starter has been subjected to criticism in (15) allows us to infer that he should have imposed a barrier to the horses' approaching too close to the starting tape. These three tokens do not require any further knowledge of the co-text in order to determine the type of permission

involved. (16) is different in this respect. It is only by acquainting ourselves with the co-text that we can be sure that (16) does not imply a prior prohibition on the descent of 'the blacks'. In fact (16) merely states that the permitters did not themselves make any effort to seek them out.

Tokens such as (16) may appear at first sight to be ambiguous. However, this sort of ambiguity usually evaporates when one conducts a thorough examination of the co-text. Whenever such an investigation reveals no clue as to the previous existence of a barrier to the realisation of the situation encoded in the complement clause, the token in question is labelled as encoding *non-imposition*. The question of the presence or absence of a barrier is a black-and-white question. Either such a barrier existed, or it did not. If it existed one may expect it to have been either explicitly mentioned or at least implied by the speaker.

Examples (7) – (16) show that both *barrier-removal* and *non-imposition* may be encoded using both *allow* and *let*. How often are the two constructions actually used to encode the two sorts of permission? The answer is shown in Table 3 in which we see that while *allow* is used to encode *barrier-removal* in almost nine cases out of ten, *let* favours *non-imposition* by a margin of almost four to one.

Table 3: Constructions containing positive active voice matrix verbs *allow* and *let* encoding *barrier-removal* or *non-imposition* with horizontal percentages

Construction	Totals per sample		Percentage totals	
	barrier-removal	*non-imposition*	*barrier-removal*	*non-imposition*
allow to-inf.	365	49	88.2%	11.8%
let bare inf.	81	291	21.8%	78.2%

The difference between the two constructions with respect to encoding *barrier-removal* or *non-imposition* is statistically significant (p<0.001). Moreover, there is not as much overlap between the two constructions, especially in the encoding of *barrier-removal*, as appears at first sight in Table 3. Of 81 tokens of *let* encoding *barrier-removal*, as many as 25 contain the predicate *go*, while among the 365 tokens of *allow* encoding *barrier-removal*, on the other hand, just one contains the predicate *go* and this one does not encode the *release* sense, which is the most common meaning of 'let x go'. In addition, of the remaining 56 examples of *barrier-removal* encoded by *let*, another 27 contain other motion verbs, such as *drop*, *slide*, *visit* and *come*. The prototypical sort of barrier in the case of *barrier-removal* readings of *let* is thus one prohibiting physical movement.

We turn now to active voice constructions containing negative polarity matrix verbs *let* and *allow*, which encode either *barrier-retention* or *barrier-imposition*. These two forms of (refusal of) permission are illustrated in Figures 3 and 4.
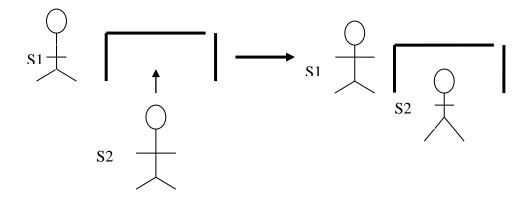
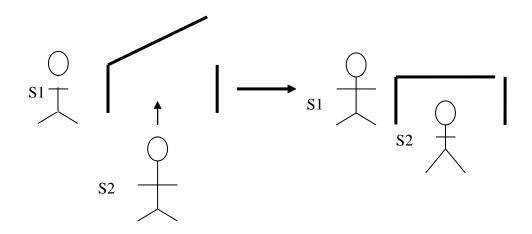Figure 4: Retention of barrier by S1 hinders S2 from passing.

Figure 5: Imposition of barrier by S1 hinders S2 from passing.

The criteria for distinguishing between *barrier-retention* and *barrier-imposition* are similar to those used to distinguish between *barrier-removal* and *imposition*. We again find that both types of prohibition may be

encoded by both constructions as exemplified by the tokens of *barrier-retention* in (17) and (18) and *barrier-imposition* in (19) and (20).

(17) It is our interests, rather than those of a degenerate and selfish minority, that the police should protect; and if the law at present *does not allow them to do so* then the law must be changed. (BNC C88 1105)

(18) They *don't let women drive* cars, let alone fly an aircraft. (BNC BNV 987)

(19) '*Don't let her get away*, Tim!' he shouted. (BNC B0B 478)

(20) After the feud he *refused to allow Jamila to visit* her parents. (BNC A6V 790)

Table 4, which may be compared to Table 3, contains details of how often the two constructions are used to encode the two types of prohibition.

Table 4: Constructions containing negated active voice matrix verbs *allow* and *let* encoding *barrier-retention* or *imposition*

Matrix verb	Totals per sample		Percentage totals	
	barrier-retention	*imposition*	*barrier-retention*	*imposition*
allow	21	27	43.8%	56.3%

let	25	93	21.2%	78.8%

The totals in Table 4 indicate that there is a greater degree of overlap between the two constructions with negated matrix verbs than was the case with positive ones, as shown in Table 3. Nevertheless, the difference between the two constructions with respect to encoding *barrier-retention* or *imposition* is still statistically significant (p<0.001), indicating that the two are by no means always interchangeable. Taken together, Tables 3 and 4 provide eloquent testimony to there being a clear difference of meaning between the permissive constructions containing *let* and *allow*.

3. Constructions with passive matrix verbs

While active permissive *allow* and *let* are both very common, their passive counterparts differ greatly in this respect. Passive *allow*, as in (1), reproduced here for convenience, resembles active *allow* in so far as it is one of the half dozen most common (passive) matrix verbs in English. Passive *let*, on the other hand, as in (2), is extremely rare, being represented by only 19 relevant tokens (of 22 in all) in the whole of the BNC.[3]

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[3] The irrelevant tokens are the [MAKE REDUNDANT] sense of 'let go', which is causative rather than permissive, in so far as the person dismissed, the causee, has no say in the matter.

(1)   Few towns can boast they do not have a problem with dogs *being allowed to roam* the streets and Darlington is no exception. (BNC K54 6237)

(2)   She *shouldn't be let roam* the hills alone. (BNC G0X 7)

(1) is an example of *non-imposition*, nothing having been done to stop the dogs from roaming. (2) is an example of *barrier-imposition*, the speaker expressing the opinion that a barrier ought to be implemented to prevent the subject's roaming. Just as in the case of active matrix verbs, we also find both *non-imposition* and *barrier-removal* encoded by passive *let*, as in (21) and (22).

(21)   'Things *were being let slide* because it was due to close in five weeks time.' (BNC K3K 401)

(22)   Some relationships *have to be let go* in order that new ones can flourish. (BNC BNF 1571)

There are 4 tokens of *barrier-imposition* encoded by passive *let* in the BNC, one of which has been cited as (2), but none of *barrier-retention*.

All four forms of permission and prohibition are found encoded by passive *allow*. An instance of *non-imposition* has been cited as (1). *Barrier-removal* is exemplified in (23), *barrier-imposition* in (24) and *barrier-*

retention in (25). The total numbers of tokens for both matrix verbs are given in Table 5.

(23) For years Judaism was suppressed in the Soviet Union, practised behind closed doors, and often in fear. The school *was allowed to open* only nine months ago. (BNC KRU 225)

(24) She *hadn't been allowed to bring* anything off the boat except her patchwork leather shoulder-bag which had been thoroughly searched first. (BNC H7W 113)

(25) Because of the Sex Discrimination Act they're *not allowed to advertise* a women only service or recruit only women drivers. (BNC K26 1622)

Table 5: The number of tokens of four types of permission/prohibition with passive *allow* and *let* in two samples with vertical percentages

	'be let bare infinitive' in BNC		'be allowed to-infinitive' in random sample of 1,000 tokens of *allow*	
Barrier-removal	11	58%	48	34%
Non-imposition	4	21%	41	29%
Barrier-retention	0		17	12%

Barrier-imposition	4	21%	35	25%
Total	19		131	

To the question in the title of this paper 'Why are there so few *let* passives?' may now be added another. Why are there almost three times as many tokens of *barrier-removal* encoded by passive *let* when active *let* overwhelmingly favours *non-imposition*? The answer to both these questions lies, I suggest, in the semantics of *non-imposition*. Figures 5 and 6 illustrate passive *barrier-removal* and *non-imposition*, i.e. situations in which the permitter is not explicitly encoded.
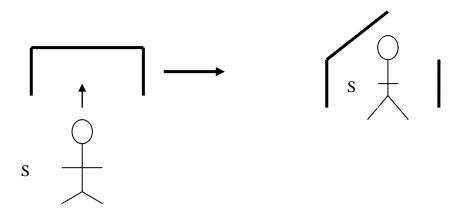
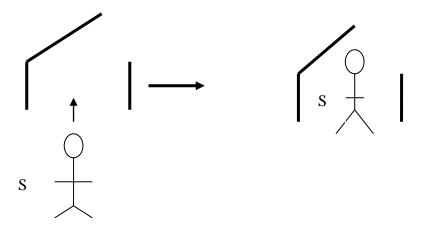Figure 5: *Barrier-removal* enabling the permittee (S) to pass

Figure 6: *Non-imposition* enabling the permittee (S) to pass

In Figure 5 a barrier is removed, enabling the permittee to move unhindered on his or her way. In Figure 6, on the other hand, a barrier is seen to remain unlowered. Moreover, there would appear to be little reason to encode the possibility of its being lowered. In Figure 2, which illustrates the situation with an active matrix verb, this possibility may be inferred from the very presence of the permitter. However, in situations such as the one illustrated in Figure 6 there is little motivation for explicit encoding of a possible (lowered) barrier.

This explanation, however, raises another question, which is why there are so many tokens of *non-imposition* encoded by *allow*. After all, if Figure 6 accurately reflects the situation pertaining to cases of *non-imposition*, should not such cases be equally rarely encoded by the 'allow *to*-infinitive' construction? In fact, as shown by Table 5, this is not the case. The difference between *let* and *allow* may be ascribed, I think, not to the matrix

verbs themselves, but to the form of the complement clause, in other words to the difference between the semantics of the bare and the *to*-infinitive. In Egan (2008: 99) a *to*-infinitive complement is said to encode 'a situation, viewed as a whole [and] profiled as the more/most likely of two or more alternatives in some specified domain'. In other words the *to*-infinitive always encodes a targeted alternative, with one or more alternative situations lurking in the background, as it were. Figure 7, which illustrates *non-imposition* encoded by a passive matrix verb and a *to*-infinitive complement, incorporates the element of a latent alternative.
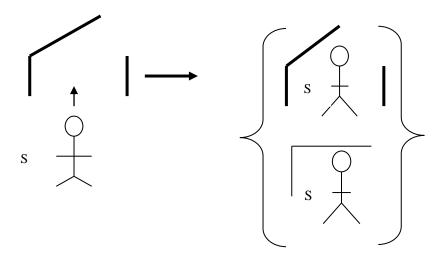

Figure 7: *Non-imposition* enabling the permittee (S) to pass, with an implied latent alternative of *barrier-imposition*

Is there any evidence of the implication of such latent alternatives among the tokens of 'allow *to*-infinitive' in the corpus?[4] Five of the 41 relevant tokens are in *if*-clauses, as in (26), and five in questions, as in (27). In these cases there is a clear implication of a latent alternative to the situation actually realised in the complement clause.

(26)   If the teeth *are allowed to become sharp*, the cheek then becomes

bruised and cut, causing pain thus making it difficult for the horse to

chew properly. (BNC BPB 852)

(27)   *Are* you *allowed to use* bulletproof jackets? (BNC FM7 942)

There are no *if*-clauses or questions among the 4 tokens of *non-imposition* 'be let bare infinitive'. Among the 11 tokens of *barrier-removal* 'be let bare infinitive' there is one *if*-clause. Among the 48 tokens of *barrier-removal* 'be allowed *to*-infinitive', there are no *if*-clauses and only one question.

Some other examples of *non-imposition* encoded by passive *allow* are cited as examples (28)–(32). To what extent are latent alternatives implied in these tokens?

(28)   Family Division President Sir Stephen Brown, making an open court

statement after an hour-long private hearing, said: 'I do hope the

child *will be allowed to continue* her life in these present

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[4] The notion of latent alternative implies an element of choice on the part of a human permittee. In (27) the fact that one is allowed to use a jacket, does not imply that one is obliged to use one. In other words the construction is [+Choice], to adopt the term used by Rudanko (2014).

circumstances in peace and without any form of harassment.' (BNC K5D 11288)

(29)   I remain astonished that this state of affairs *is allowed to exist.* (BNC CH1 8165)

(30)   So far, Mr Berlusconi *has been allowed to keep* three national TV channels – the same number as RAI.   (BNC CRC 2418)

(31)   Expert witnesses *are* usually *allowed to remain* in court during the testimony of other experts in their field, and sometimes throughout the hearing if it is important that they hear all the evidence.   (BNC J76 852)

In (28) the fact that the speaker expresses a hope that the complement situation may continue without interruption implies that there is a real possibility of this not happening. In (29) the fact that the continued existence of the complement situation arouses astonishment in the speaker implies that it should be brought to a halt. From the adverbials *so far* in (30) and *usually* in (31) we may infer that the realisation of the complement situation may be blocked in certain circumstances. In all four of these tokens the existence of a latent alternative is strongly implied by the speaker.

Turning our attention to negated passive matrix verbs, we saw in Table 5 that *barrier-imposition*, illustrated in Figure 8, may be encoded by both *let* as in (32) and *allow* as in (33).
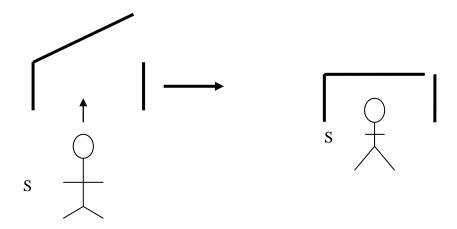
Figure 8: Imposition of barrier hinders S from passing.

(32)   When I was left at school I was savage at *not being let go home*; and
        when I went home, my mother did nothing but find fault with my
        schoolboy manners. (BNC HXG 917)

(33)   As it turned out, Mario *wasn't allowed to race* at Monza because he'd
        driven a dirt-track race within the previous twenty-four hours, and it
        wasn't until Watkins Glen at the end of 1968 that he first drove in a
        FI race. (BNC CD9 1448)

Neither (32) nor (33) encode a permanent ban on home-coming or racing as
evidenced by the adverbials *When I was left at school* in the former and *As it
turned out* in the latter. They are therefore classified as instances of *barrier-
imposition* rather than *barrier-retention*. The latter form of prohibition with
passive matrix verbs is illustrated in Figure 9.

Figure 9: Retention of barrier hinders S from passing.

The situation in Figure 9 is not encoded at all by *let* in the BNC, presumably for similar reasons to those adduced in the case of *non-imposition* above. Basically there is very little happening for the speaker to encode. In the case of the passive *allow* construction, on the other hand, the *to*-infinitive form of complement implies the possibility of a latent alternative, as illustrated in Figure 10, which may be compared to Figure 7.

Figure 10: *Barrier-retention* hindering the permittee (S) from passing, with an implied latent alternative of *barrier-removal*

One example of *barrier-retention* encoded by 'be allowed to' has already been cited as (25). Other typical examples are (34)–(37).

(34)   <u>During that time</u> *no* Chadian resident *was allowed to seek* information about the prisoners, as they risked becoming prisoners themselves. (BNC CJP 23)

(35)   The press *are not* <u>normally</u> *allowed to be present* during chambers applications. (BNC J76 824)

(36)   The Club will make the necessary arrangements, but *no-one is allowed to go* into town <u>before clearing immigration</u> nor should the skipper or any of the crew visit immigration as they will be told, in

no uncertain terms, to return to the club immediately. (BNC G37
606)

(37)   Magistrates who deal with family matters have been specially trained
       and *are not allowed to sit* in the Family Court <u>until that training has
       been completed</u>. (BNC B03 1986)

All four tokens (34) – (37) encode situations in which barriers have not been
raised, specifically in order to hinder the permittee from proceeding. They
all, however, also contain adverbials (underlined) which imply that there
may exist circumstances in which the barrier in question might be raised.
Thus in (34) the adverbial *During that time* allows us to infer that the barrier
to seeking information may have been lifted at a later date. In (35) the
adverbial *normally* allows us to infer that the barrier to the present of the
press may be lifted in exceptional circumstances. In (36) the adverbial
before clearing immigration allows us to infer that the barrier will be
removed when this proviso is satisfied. Similarly, the adverbial *until that
training has been completed* in (37) allows us to infer the future possibility
of the rescindment of the prohibition. 7 out of a total of 17 tokens of
barrier-retention encoded by passive *allow* contain this sort of adverbial as
opposed to just 3 of 35 tokens of *barrier-imposition* passive *allow* and none
of the 4 tokens of *barrier-imposition* passive *let*. There are, as we have
already seen, no tokens of *barrier-retention* encoded by passive *let*. The

difference between the two sorts of prohibition in this respect is statistically significant at the level of p=0.01.

4. Passive *let* in COCA

In section 3 we saw that the passive *let* construction is used in the BNC for both forms of permission and one of two forms of prohibition. In this section we ask whether American English, as represented in COCA, displays the same distribution. The numbers for COCA are given in Table 6, with the numbers for the BNC repeated from Table 5 for ease of comparison.

Table 6: The number of tokens of four types of permission/prohibition with passive *let* in the BNC and COCA

	'be let bare infinitive' in COCA	*'be let bare infinitive' in BNC*
Barrier-removal	84 86%	11 58%
Non-imposition	11 11%	4 21%
Barrier-retention	0	0
Barrier-imposition	3 3%	4 21%
Total	98	19

Since there are at time of writing some five times as many words in COCA as the BNC (530m. compared to 100m.), we can conclude that the construction is equally common in the two varieties. Moreover, American English resembles British English in not employing the 'be let bare infinitive' construction to encode *barrier-retention*. There are proportionately more tokens of barrier-removal in COCA than in the BNC. As many as 74 of these are tokens of 'be let go' coding the [RELEASE] sense, exemplified by (37) and (38).[5]

(37)   After each snake had been marked, it *was let go.* (COCA Fiction 2009)

(38)   She *was let go* after being questioned by police. (COCA News 2001)

Not all tokens of 'be let go' permissives encode the [RELEASE] sense. There are tokens of *barrier-removal*, which do not involve releasing, as in (39), as well as tokens coding *non-imposition* as in (40), and *barrier-imposition* as in (41).

(40)   I actually felt as though this nuisance that was hanging onto me for these two years was now *being let go* and I could move forward with my life. (COCA Spoken 1991)

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[5] In addition there are 355 passive tokens of the causative [MAKE REDUNDANT] sense of 'let go'.

(41)   The house we moved into *had been let go*. (COCA Fiction 1998)

(42)   And that's another focus of this thing that *should not be let go*.

   (COCA Spoken 1994)

(40) encodes the removal of a barrier to the speaker's having surgery to amputate an arm and shoulder, which doctors for several years had tried to save. (41) encodes the deterioration of the property when steps had not been taken to stop this, in other words *non-imposition*, and (42) the need to put in place a mechanism to stop something (Bill Clinton's peccadillos) being forgotten, i.e. *barrier-imposition*.

   There are only seven tokens of 'be let bare infinitive' that contain verbs other than 'go', and four of these contain 'stay'. Two of these encode *non-imposition*, as in (43), and two *barrier-imposition,* as in (44).

(43)   […] this was so even when you were practically sure you *would be let stay* on for another ride. (COCA Fiction 2007)

(44)   If he's known then what he does now, Dawson Kalliam wouldn't have been exiled and Feldin Maas *wouldn't have been let stay*.

   (COCA Fiction 2012)

The final three tokens contain the verbs 'run', 'die' and 'be', all three of which encode *non-imposition*.

We turn now to the passive *let* construction containing the *to*-infinitive rather than its bare counterpart, exemplified here by (45) – (47).

(45) I'm sure they were stopped and questioned on their way out, but my understanding is they *were let to leave* the property. (COCA Spoken 1966)

(46) Sir, we enlisted men can't resign. That'd be desertion. But the officers *are let to walk off* whenever they like. (COCA Fiction 2003)

(47) My daddy Strother didn't credit it, though, and he beat Mama near about to death, saying nothing that piddling could be his git, allowing as how I maybe wasn't even human and *should not be let to live*. (COCA Fiction 2003)

(45) is an example of *barrier-removal*, (46) of *non-imposition*, nothing being done to stop the officers leaving, and (47) of *barrier-imposition*, the father wishing to terminate his son's life.

According to the OED 'A few examples of the use of to before the infinitive in this construction occur in all periods; now chiefly when let is used in the passive' (definition 12, b.II.). As pointed out in the Introduction, the only token of this construction in the BNC actually occurs in a quotation from a nineteenth century text. There are, however, twelve tokens like (45) – (47) from Present-day English in COCA. Details are given in Table 7, with numbers for 'be let bare infinitive', repeated from Table 6.

Table 7: The number of tokens of four types of permission/prohibition with passive *let bare infinitive* and passive *let to-infinitive* in COCA

	'be let to-infinitive'	*'be let bare infinitive'*
Barrier-removal	5 43%	84 86%
Non-imposition	4 33%	11 11%
Barrier-retention	0	0
Barrier-imposition	3 25%	3 3%
Total	12	98

We have seen that a large majority of tokens of 'be let bare infinitive' instantiate the lexicalised [RELEASE] sense of 'let go'. This sense is not found at all with 'be let to-infinitive'. If we exclude these tokens in an effort to compare more like with like, we arrive at the numbers in Table 8.

Table 8: The number of tokens of four types of permission/prohibition with passive *let bare* infinitive, minus the [RELEASE] sense of 'let go' and *let to-infinitive* in COCA

	'be let to-infinitive'		*'be let bare infinitive'*	
Barrier-removal	5	43%	10	42%
Non-imposition	4	33%	11	46%
Barrier-retention	0		0	
Barrier-imposition	3	25%	3	13%
Total	12		24	

The distribution of the two constructions shown in Table 8 does not involve any statistical difference. There is however a difference between the two, which is not apparent from the table. This is the type token ratio. Whereas the 24 tokens with the bare infinitive span over just five verbs, with *go* and *stay* accounting for all but three tokens, the twelve tokens containing the *to-*infinitive instantiate eleven different verbs. These include change of location and change of state verbs like *vanish*, *leave*, *pass* and *die* (the only verb to occur twice), but also stative verbs like *abide* and *live.*

So far all the examples but one of the two passive *let* constructions have been taken from fictional or spoken texts. One may wonder whether these texts are typical for the constructions. Details of the text types in which both

occur are given in Table 9. Note that the News and Magazine categories have been merged in the table and that tokens labelled News which occur in interviews have been assigned to the Spoken category.

Table 9: The number of tokens of passive *let bare* infinitive, minus the [RELEASE] sense of 'let go' and *let to-infinitive* according to the various text types in COCA

	'be let to-infinitive'	*'be let bare infinitive'*
Spoken	3　25%	11　46%
Fiction	7　58%	10　42%
News/Magazine	2　17%	2　8%
Academic	0	2　8%
Total	12	24

We see in Table 9 that passive *let* constructions may be found in many genres. Both academic examples, cited as (48) and (49), are from the *Anthropological Quarterly.*

(48)　The water *must be let run* from the crotch of the husband's trousers down to the shoe. (COCA Academic 2005)

(49)   According to many Thai Buddhists […], love (rak) is a kind of

attachment. It can bind us unhealthily to the object of person loved,

and for that reason it *may need to be let go of*. (COCA Academic

2005)

These two examples are from different issues of the journal, (48) from an

article entitled 'Rethinking the Couvade', and (49) from an article entitled

'Orthodox Hybridities: Anti-Syncretism and Localization in the Evangelical

Christianity of Thailand'. The reason for citing the titles is to give some

impression of the register employed in the articles, which is obviously far

from the norm of the spoken language. Having said that, both tokens appear

completely idiomatic, at least to the ears of the present writer. Both passive

let constructions, although they may be rare, would seem to be perfectly

acceptable in a variety of registers in Present-day English. In the next

section I will trace their evolution in American English over the past two

centuries.

4. Passive *let* in COHA

The numbers of tokens of both passive *let* constructions in COHA are given

in Table 10. The data have been divided between three periods with

approximately the same number of words.

Table 10. Both passive *let* constructions in COHA

	Pre-1901		1901 - 1960		Post 1960	
	Approx. 130m. words		Approx. 140m. words		Approx. 130m. words	
	be let V	*be let to V*	*be let V*	*be let to V*	*be let V*	*be let to V*
Barrier-removal	48	5	24	1	16	0
Non-imposition	9	9	9	5	8	4
Barrier-retention	0	0	0	1	0	0
Barrier imposition	9	2	3	2	5	2
	66	16	36	9	29	6

According to Table 10, both constructions were almost twice as frequent in the nineteenth than the twentieth century. This difference may be ascribed to the total incidence of tokens coding *barrier-removal* in the two periods. If we subtract these from the totals, there is no appreciable difference between

the three periods in the table (the probability of their coming from similar populations is over .75 according to a Fisher Exact Test). (50) – (52) are typical examples of the *barrier-removal* sense in the earliest period.

(50)   Just as the anchor *was let go* a signal gun was fired. (COHA

Memoirs 1837)

(51)   […] then, as her head pointed quartering down the river, the stern line

was let go, and we shot away like an arrow from a bow. (COHA

Magazine 1879)

(52)   The canvas was carried clean from the bolt-ropes, the sheets *were let*

go, and the lighter sails clewed up. (COHA Fiction 1868)

The majority of tokens coding *barrier-removal* in the nineteenth century contain the verb *go* used in a nautical context. Many of these usages would be rendered redundant with the decline of sailing ships.

Unlike the case of the 'be let bare infinitive' construction, there are very few instances of *barrier-removal* in COHA encoded by the 'be let *to-infinitive*' construction. As for *non-imposition*, it is found in both constructions, with approximately twice as many examples containing the bare infinitive. (53) and (54) are two nineteenth century examples containing the same verb, *grow*.

(53)   Every moment this hatred *is let grow* in the heart's garden, it spreads

and strengthens, till it gains dominion and makes men slaves, and

madder than before. (COCA Fiction 1874)

(54)   It was her one, eager, passionate longing, in these childish days, that

these locks of hers *should be let grow*. (COCA Fiction 1863)

Grow is one of only three verbs to occur with both forms of complement.

The others are *go* and *live*. We should also note that, unlike the case in

COCA, discussed in section 4, the type token ratio is similar for the two

constructions. If one leaves aside the verb *go*, which is very common in the

bare infinitive construction, with 112 tokens, and much less common in the

to-infinitive construction, with just seven examples, the most recent of

which is from 1905, there are then 26 tokens of 'be let bare infinitive',

containing 22 different verbs, and 24 tokens of 'be let *to*-infinitive',

containing 19 different verbs.[6] Both constructions are used with motion

verbs, such as *run*, *recede* and *come* in the bare infinitive construction, and

walk and *ride* in the *to*-infinitive construction. However, they are also used

with many other sorts of verbs. Moreover both constructions may be used to

encode all four of Vendler's (1967) situations types, illustrated here by (55)

– (58), all containing the *to*-infinitive construction.

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[6] One may note in passing that COHA contains 64 tokens of the the passive causative 'be let go' construction, meaning [MAKE REDUNDANT]. This construction seems to have been first used between the world wars, with all but four examples occurring after 1950.

(55)   [Women] see their blood, and it does them good, while men *are let to*
       be vainer. (COHA Fiction 1953)

(56)   I'm sorrier than I can tell that ever you *were let to fool* with powder.
       (COHA Fiction 1900)

(57)   [...] so the earth *was let to bring forth* animals in the living likeness
       of itself. (COHA Fiction 1966)

(58)   They have certain legends that must be preserved for their public and
       truth so much more fascinating than fiction in most of their cases
       must be let to drop by the wayside. (COHA Magazine 1928)

(55) encodes a stative predication and (56) an activity, (57) and
accomplishment and (58) and achievement.

   Before rounding off this section, mention must be made of one token
that encodes *barrier-retention*, a form of prohibition that does not occur
with passive *let* elsewhere in the BNC, COCA or COHA. This token is (59).

(59)   But there's times, Ann, when just for a bit they're just like children.
       They need comforting without *being let to know* they are being
       comforted. (COHA Fiction 1913)

I stated in section 2 that tokens of the 'let x know' (= 'inform x')
construction were omitted from this study. However, (59) is not an
instantiation of this multi-word verb. Rather *know* here means [REALISE].

The meaning of (59) is that the permittees (men!) should be allowed to remain in ignorance of the fact that they are receiving comfort: in other words that the veil disguising this fact should not be lifted.

6. Summary and conclusion

In this paper I have addressed the question of why there are so few *let* passives and have suggested that the answer is related to the fact that *let* prototypically encodes the form of permission which I have termed *non-imposition*. When the matrix verb is in the active voice the situation encoded is construed as one in which the permitter refrains from acting, thus allowing the complement situation to evolve: in other words '*x* did nothing to stop *y* happening'. When the matrix verb is in the passive, however, *x* is airbrushed from the picture, so to speak, leaving us with 'nothing occurred to stop *y* happening'. Given that this statement could be applied to all situations in which something occurs, it cannot be said to be very informative. Hence it tends to be avoided. This avoidance is not, however, total. We have seen in the data from the BNC and COCA that both types of permissive and one type of prohibition (*barrier-removal*) are encoded, albeit not frequently, by the 'be let bare infinitive' construction. We have also seen that the same three types are encoded in the COCA data by the even rarer 'be let *to*-infinitive' construction.

I have argued that the difference between the passive constructions with *allow* and *let* in the BNC may be ascribed to a difference in the form of the infinitive complement. Whereas the bare infinitive merely encodes a situation as a whole (as described by Langacker 1990: 82), its *to*-infinitive counterpart encodes the targeted of several possible alternatives. It is the presence of latent alternatives in the background, as it were, that licences the use of the passive *allow* construction to encode the relatively content-less situation of permitter-free *non-imposition*. It is for the same reason, I suggest, that the 'be let *to*-infinitive' encodes *non-imposition* to a greater extent than *barrier-removal*, whereas the opposite is the case for the passive construction with the bare infinitive. Similarly, it is the presence in the background of the alternative of *barrier-removal* that licences the use of passive *allow* to encode *barrier-retention*, while the single example in COHA of passive *let* used to encode this form of prohibition also contains the *to*-infinitive.

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