Why are there so few *let* passives?*

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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.

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

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*

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 a consequence of the type of force dynamic relations prototypically encoded by *let*.

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2. Constructions with active matrix verbs

The data for the study 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

(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 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 'allow x *to*-infinitive', 145 tokens of 'be allowed *to*-infinitive' and 490 tokens of 'let infinitive' that clearly encode permission or its negative counterpart, prohibition. There was not a single token of 'be let 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 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.

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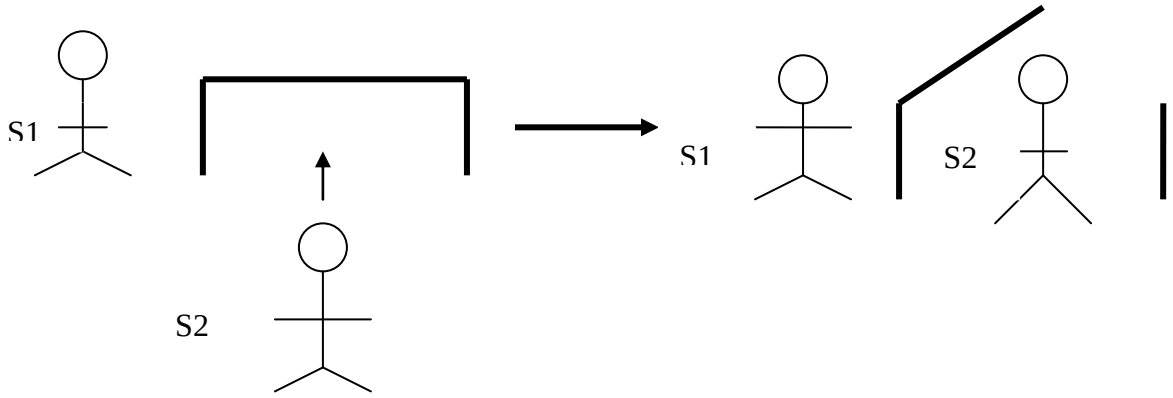

Figure 1: *Barrier-removal* by the permitter (S1) enabling the permittee (S2) to pass.

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, 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.

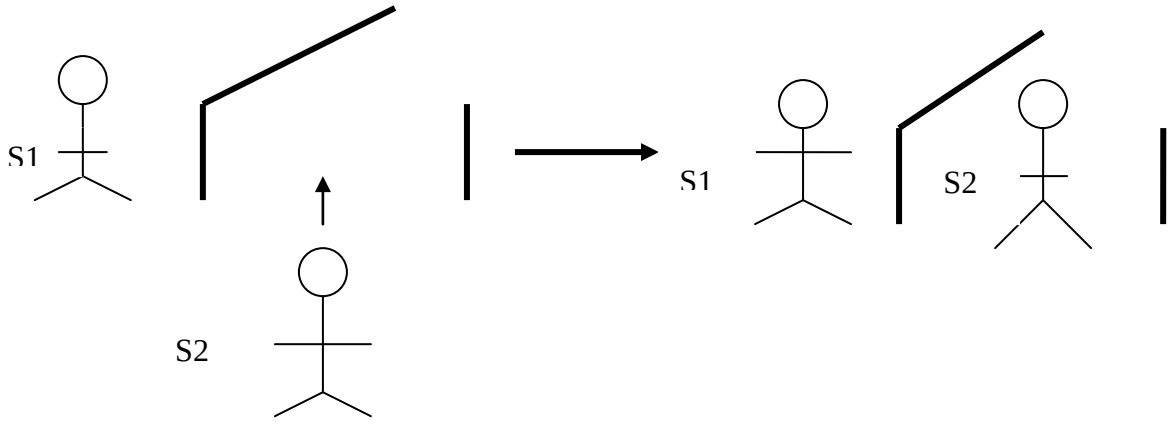

Figure 2: *Non-imposition* of barrier by the permitter (S1) enables the permittee (S2) to pass.

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.

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

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

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 involved 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 contained 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 later **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 new 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 for so long. (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 **the transport bill** which **let operators compete**. (BNC KM8 236)
(12) The two centre holes **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. Figure 3 contains

figures for the BNC as a whole projected on the basis of the results in the random samples of 1,000 tokens of each verb.

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%

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

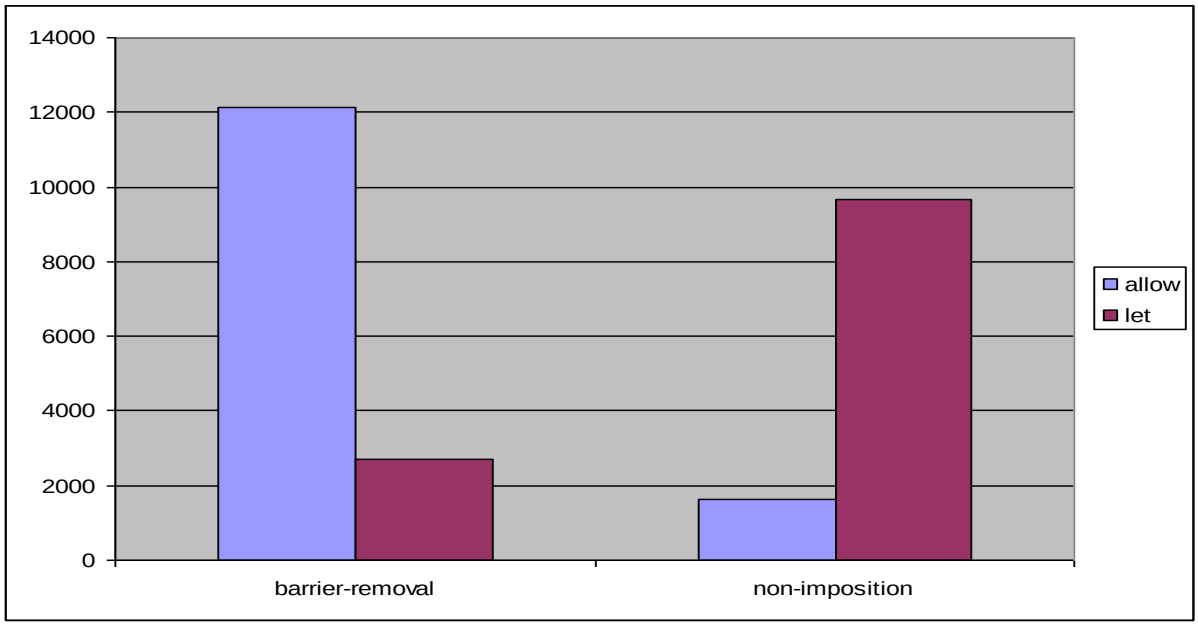

Figure 3: Projected number of tokens encoding *barrier-removal* versus *non-imposition* with positive matrix verbs *let* and *allow*

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 4 and 5.

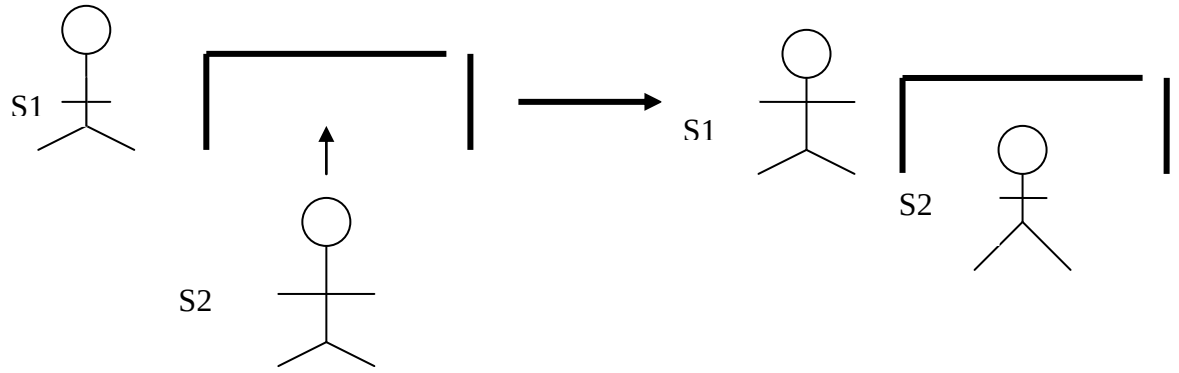

Figure 4: Retention of barrier by S1 hinders S2 from passing.

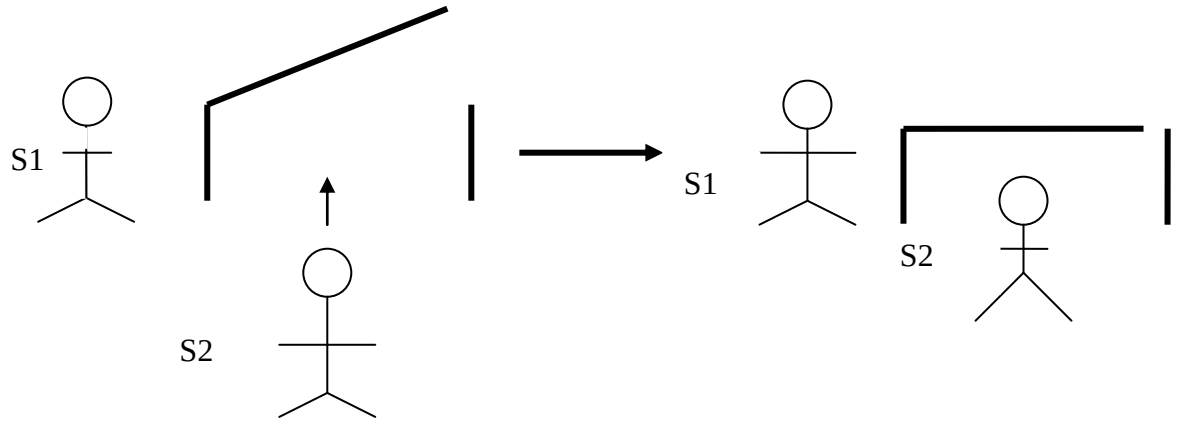

Figure 5: Imposition of barrier by S1 hinders S2 from passing.

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 and Figure 6, which may be compared to Table 3 and Figure 3, contain details of how often the two constructions are used to encode the two types of prohibition.

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%

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

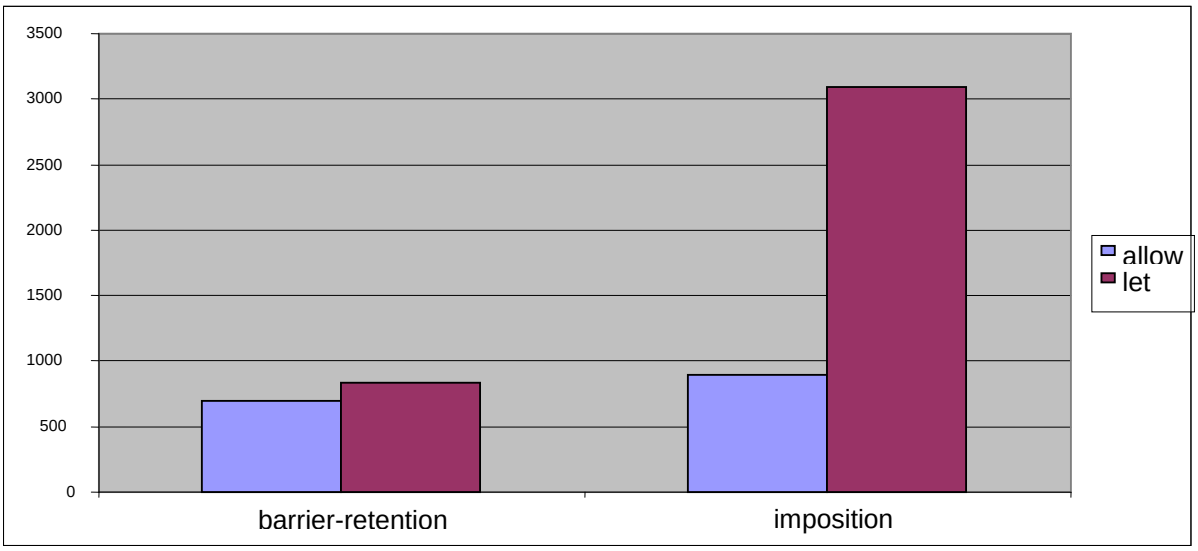

Figure 6: Projected number of tokens encoding *barrier-retention* versus *imposition* with negated matrix verbs *let* and *allow*

The totals in Table 4 and Figure 6 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 and Figure 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 interchangeable. Taken together, Tables 3 and 5 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.

(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)

	'be let 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

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

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

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non-imposition. Figures 7 and 8 illustrate passive *barrier-removal* and *non-imposition*, i.e. situations in which the permitter is not explicitly encoded.

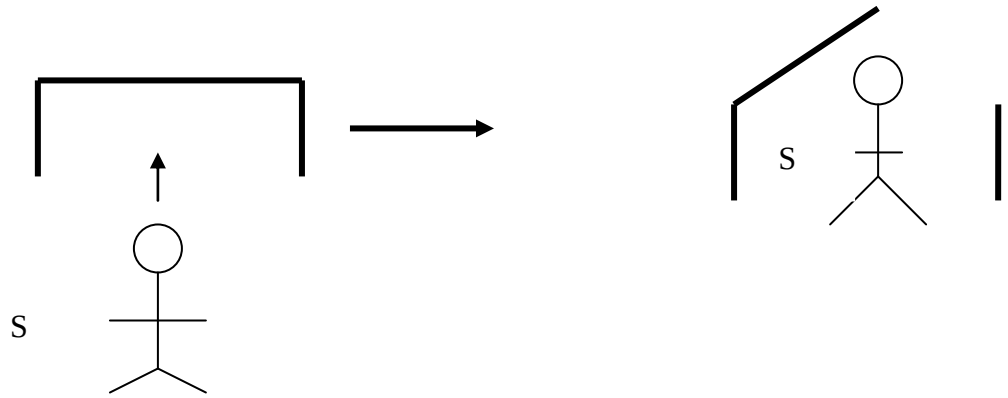

Figure 7: *Barrier-removal* enabling the permittee (S) to pass

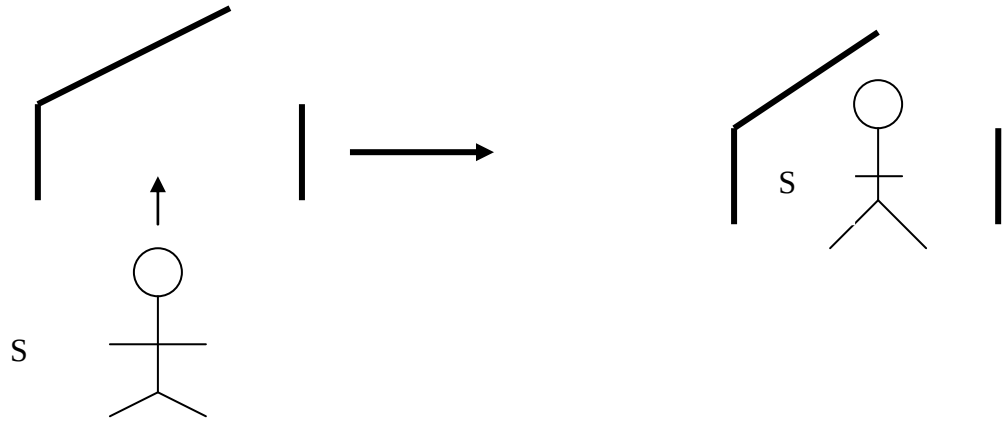

Figure 8: *Non-imposition* enabling the permittee (S) to pass

In Figure 7 a barrier is removed, enabling the permittee to move unhindered on his or her way. In Figure 8, 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 8 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 8 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 9, which illustrates *non-imposition* encoded by a passive matrix verb and a *to*-infinitive complement, incorporates the element of a latent alternative.

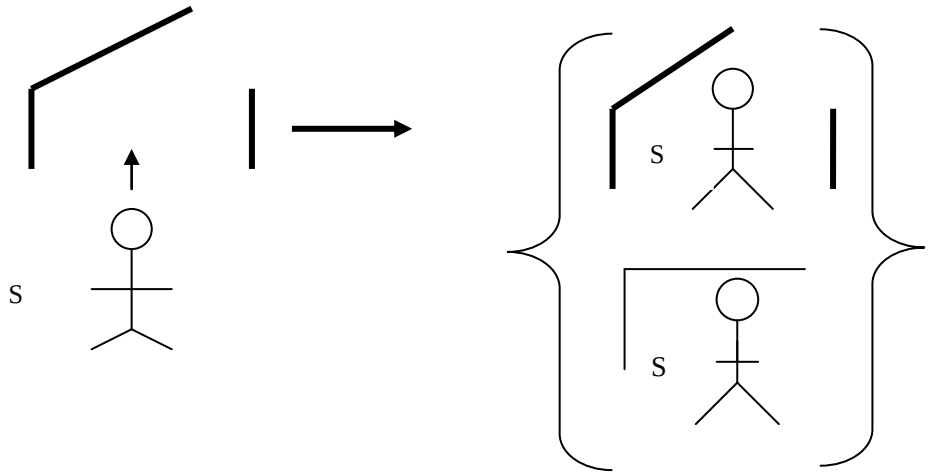

Figure 9: *Non-imposition* enabling the permittee (S) to pass, with an implied latent alternative of *barrier-imposition*

Is there any evidence of the implication of such latent alternatives among the tokens of 'allow *to*-infinitive' in the corpus? 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 infinitive'. Among the 11 tokens of *barrier-removal* 'be let 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 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 10, may be encoded by both *let* as in (32) and *allow* as in (33).

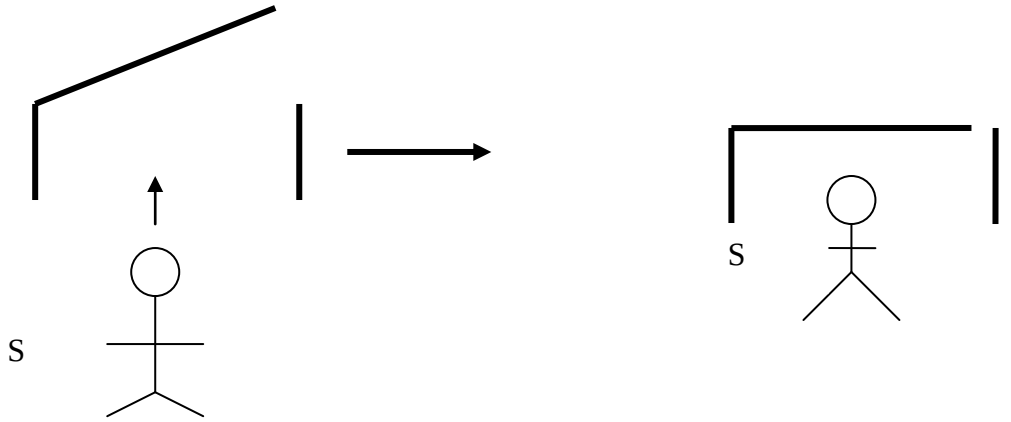

Figure 10: Imposition of barrier hinders S from passing.

(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 11.

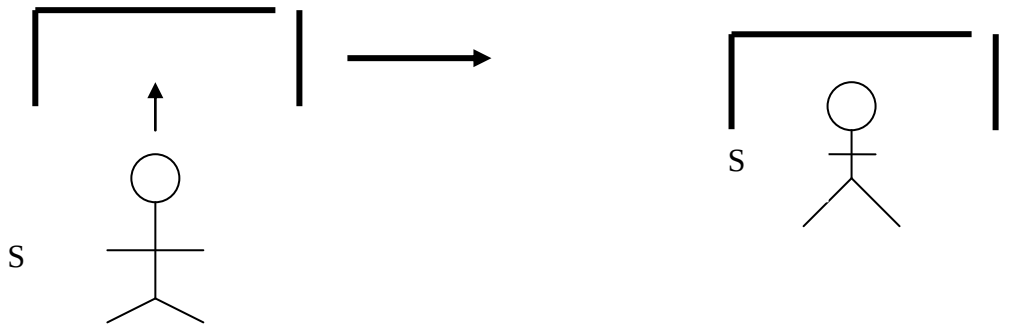

Figure 11: Retention of barrier hinders S from passing.

The situation in Figure 11 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 12, which may be compared to Figure 9.

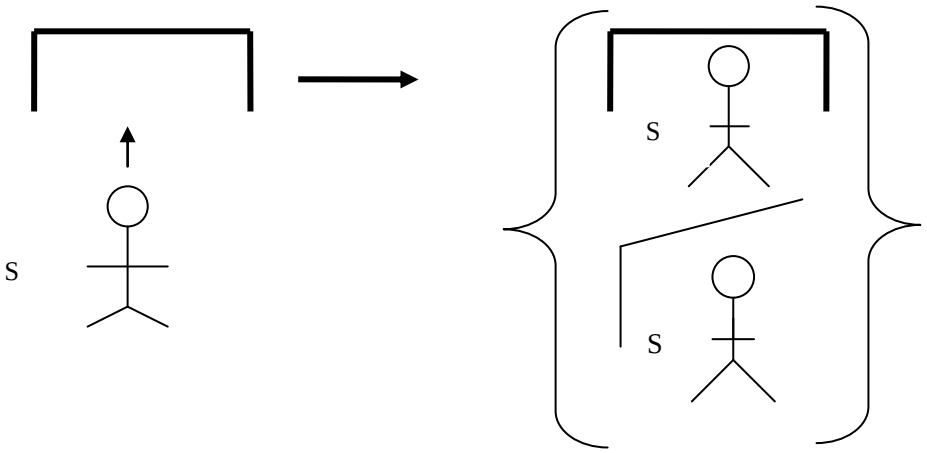

Figure 12: *Barrier-retention* hindering the permittee (S) from passing, with an implied latent alternative of *barrier-removal*

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

(34) During that time **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 normally 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 before clearing immigration 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 until that training has been completed. (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 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. 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.

Situations involving *non-imposition* may however be encoded by passive *allow*. I have argued that the difference between the two passive constructions 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*. 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*, a form of prohibition apparently never encoded by passive *let*.

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