

Transitivity in passive-like structures in Spanish, French and English

This paper aims to investigate the use of different structures that allow for expressing the passive voice. I will focus more concretely on constructions with a transitive verb where a patient undergoes an action performed by a defocused agent, in Spanish, French and English in formal and informal written and oral registers. Taking into account syntactic features and register variation, I will concentrate on passive constructions based on a reflexive pronoun (*se* in Spanish and French), man-impersonals (*on* in French), numeral-based indefinite pronouns (*uno* in Spanish and *one* in English), non-anaphoric third person plurals and periphrastic passives. Analyzing corpus-based data, I aim to evaluate the potential impact of transitivity on the selection of passive-like structures across the languages under study and to determine to which extent transitivity is a key element in register variation.

Various researchers (Halliday 1996, Hopper & Thompson 1980, Quesada 1998, Naess 2007) have already studied the notion of transitivity and have demonstrated its primordial role in syntactic studies. In their pioneering research, Hopper and Thompson (1980) decomposed transitivity into ten parameters. In the present investigation, it is expected that these syntactic components affect the degree of transitivity of the clause and play a crucial role in selecting the passive-like structure. A particular attention will be given to the type of verb process. In order to carry out the analysis, I will also resort to the cognitive grammar approach to transitivity developed in Maldonado's work (2000, 2008).

The languages selected for the present study pertain to the Indo-European language group and may share some grammatical properties. However, it is hypothesized that these languages do not always resort to the same structures and apparently similar constructions may convey slightly different meanings, hence the importance of establishing and examining a selection of passive related structures. My two research questions will thus be: (1) how may the degree of transitivity affect the selection of passive-like structures in Spanish, French and English? (2) is there a possible influence of the genre on the degree of transitivity in the expression of passive voice?

Preliminary results show that formally identical structures function differently according to the language. For example, in written data, the Spanish periphrastic passive, compared to its French counterpart, seems to prefer kinetic verbs. Similarly, the non-anaphoric third person plural tends to appear with a punctual verb in Spanish and a non-punctual verb in French. According to Hopper and Thompson (1980), the more components a clause has, the more transitive it is. Following this postulate, the structures under analysis in the present study display a different degree of transitivity. For instance, results suggest that, in French, a clause with a non-anaphoric third person plural would have a higher transitivity than a clause with the man-impersonal device *on*. The first analyses already suggest register variation. A look at the parameter *mode* reveals that, both in the Spanish and French formal corpora, all structures resort to the mode *realis* while structures in the informal corpora display a wider variation. I also expect differences between written and oral registers, transitivity being specific of written genres. In summary, this investigation reveals that both transitivity and its components as well as register variation may influence the selection of the passive-like structures.

Keywords : Passive voice, impersonal constructions, transitivity, syntactic factors, register