

Analyzing participant inclusion in Spanish, French and English passive-like structures: the influence of pragmatic-discursive factors

Emeline Pierre
Université catholique de Louvain
emeline.pierre@uclouvain.be

This paper aims to analyze the use of different structures that allow for expressing the passive voice in Spanish, French and English in formal and informal registers. Besides taking into account intrinsic characteristics of the structures, the study examines in detail pragmatic features and register variation. While comparative work on (some of) these passive structures has been carried out from a typological perspective (Siewierska 1984, Rousseau 2000, Siewierska & Papastathi 2011, Gast & van der Auwera 2013) or contrasting specific constructions in two languages (e.g. Espinoza 1997, Haverkate 2004), a contrastive study of the panorama of passives in different languages and registers is lacking. More precisely, this paper focuses on passive constructions based on a reflexive pronoun (*se* in Spanish and French), man-impersonals (*on* in French) and numeral-based indefinite pronouns (*uno* in Spanish and *one* in English). To conduct my study, I use both written and oral data from extracted from comparable informal corpora (Yahoo Questions & Answers for written data and ESLORA2 for Spanish oral data, CORALROM for French oral data and BNC for English oral data) and comparable formal corpora (Wikipedia for written data and Europarl for oral data). Analyzing corpus-based data, I aim to evaluate the potential impact of the inclusion/exclusion of participants on the selection of passive-like structures and to determine to which extent formally similar structures function differently across the languages under study.

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 and interest of establishing and

examining a selection of passive related structures. Our two research questions will thus be: (1) how may the linguistic environment affect the inclusion/exclusion of participants and what is the impact on the selection of passive-like structures in Spanish, French and English? and (2) is there a possible influence of the genre on the inclusion/exclusion of participants in the expression of passive voice?

Taking into account the linguistic environment, it is expected that linguistic factors such as person references (1), adverbial constructions (2) or prepositional phrases (3) in the nearby context have a crucial importance in determining which participants are included in the interpretation of the passive-like structure.

- (1) (...) do you want us to confirm your desire is possible or do you want the real answer from real aviators? {S} Part of maturity is being able to recognize that **one's** desires may not be obtainable.
- (2) Generalmente se acepta que el fruto se desarrolla posteriormente a la fertilización, sin embargo, esto no es necesariamente cierto siempre, (...).
'Usually it is accepted that fruits grow after fertilization, however, this is not always necessarily sure.
- (3) Comment ***fait-on*** dans les pays nordiques ou au Canada ou les températures sont bien plus basses et la neige plus abondante ?
'How **do they** do in Nordic countries or in Canada where temperatures are far lower and snow heavier.'

Preliminary results show that when there is a person reference in the nearby context the constructions under study display various similarities and differences both across languages and across registers. The Spanish *se* is more productive than its French counterpart is and functions slightly differently. The pilot analysis reveals that, in the Corpus Yahoo Questions & Answers, the Spanish *se* occurs more frequently with a person reference in its nearby context than the French construction with *se*. In addition, both constructions display variations in participant inclusion. This may suggest that

these formally similar structures occupy a different position on the continuum of passive-like structures.

My first findings also suggest that the feature 'person reference in the context' show a similar behavior in informal written data and a different one in formal written data. For example, in Spanish informal data, constructions with *se* and *uno* both tend to include a person reference in their context and to have the possibility to include a different range of participants. In formal data, the Spanish *se* tends to refer to a person outside the communicational situation while *uno* is often interpreted as maximally inclusive. The pilot analysis reveals that 'person reference in the context' is not the only factor accounting for participant inclusion. The presence of an adverbial construction may also have an impact when determining which participant is included in the passive-like structure. When the latter has a generic interpretation, the *se* construction (both in French and in Spanish), accompanied by a generalizing adverb, tends to be favored. The use of an adverb would be more specific of the Spanish language.

These first analyses furthermore suggest that the phenomenon of participant inclusion in passive voice constructions will be more specific of informal registers. I expect the oral data to have a similar behavior, the presence of a person reference in the context of the passive-like structures being strengthened. Ultimately, this investigation suggests that the studied structures have different positions on the panorama of passive voice constructions, some receiving a more impersonal interpretation than others. Such a large panorama of passive-like structures may help linguistic experts evolving in a global environment to have a better understanding of the subtleties and differences between the languages under study.

References

- Espinoza, Ana María. (1997). Contrastive analysis of the Spanish and English passive voice in scientific prose. *English for specific purposes* 16(3): 229-43.
- Gast, Volker & van der Auwera, Johan. (2013). Towards a distributional typology of human impersonal pronouns, based on data from European languages. In: D. Bakker & M. Haspelmath (eds.), *Languages across boundaries. Studies in memory of Anna Siewierska*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton. 119-158.
- Haverkate, Henk. (2004). Gramática y pragmática: categorías desfocalizadores en español. *Spanish in Context* 1(1): 21-40.

- Rousseau, André. (2000). Formation et statut du passif. Comparaison typologique entre langues romanes et langues germaniques. In : L. Schøsler (ed.) *Le Passif. Actes du colloque international Institut d'Etudes Romanes Université de Copenhague du 5 au 7 mars 1998*. Etudes Romanes 45. Copenhagen : Museum Tusculanum Press. 117-133.
- Siewierska, Anna. (1984). *The passive. A comparative linguistic analysis*. London: Croom Helm.
- Siewierska, Anna & Papastathi, Maria. (2011). Towards a typology of third personal plural impersonals. *Linguistics* 49(3):575-610.