



DOI: 10.1515/rjes-2018-0011

CONSIDERATIONS UPON GRAMMATICAL SYNONYMY WITH PASSIVE VOICE STRUCTURES IN ENGLISH AND ROMANIAN

ANCA FLORINA LIPAN

University “Dunărea De Jos”, Galați

Abstract: *If synonymy implies both a degree of similarity as well as difference between synonymous terms, the present paper will give a brief account of the similarities and differences between the meanings of active and passive voice corresponding constructions in both English and Romanian with a view to highlight the contrast as well as the similarity between language systems.*

Keywords: *causative, contrast, passive structures, similarity, synonymy*

1. Introduction

The present paper focuses on the correspondence between Active and Passive voice structures, considered from the point of view of grammatical synonymy. These correspondences, despite preserving the same truth conditions, mark yet a change in their perspective as well as in their focus. The present study is divided into three subsections, each dealing with a different aspect.

The first subsection will analyse the correspondences between Active and Passive voice constructions. Mention will be made of be-passive, get-passive, medio passive and pseudo-passive constructions and the correspondences between them and their active counterparts.

In the second section of the present paper, causative constructions will be studied and analysed from the point of view of the grammatical synonymy.

In the last section, Romanian active and passive voice structures will be considered also with a view to provide the theoretical background for the further translation correspondences.

2. Active and Passive voice correspondence

According to Quirk et al (1985:162)

Voice is a grammatical category which makes it possible to view the action of a sentence in either of the two ways, without change in the facts reported.

Changing voice involves “the rearrangement of two clause elements and one addition” (ibid. 162) and although the corresponding active and passive constructions may seem different, the relations of meaning between their elements remain the same. In such sentences like (1) and (2) below:

- (1) John helped Mary.
- (2) Mary was helped by John.

John is the performer of the action, even though structurally, John has a very different position and function in each. Following the same line of thought, Leon Levitchi (1994:60) opinionated that the main difference between an active and a passive construction is a matter of emphasis, either on the doer or the bearer of the action with no further implications.

Cruse (2006:187) shares the same point of view about the transformation of an active sentence into a passive one. This transformation does not affect “the truth condition”, but it “changes what the sentence is ‘about’”, since in the active sentence, the emphasis is on the subject as the most active participant, whereas, in the passive one it becomes the least active. He also refers to the “‘middle voice’, as in sentence (3) below, where an event involving a patient or theme is construed in such a way that the **agent** is ignored.” (Cruse,2006:187)

- (3) The vase broke.

However, active and their corresponding passive constructions do not always have the same meaning. For example in the pair of sentences (4) and (5) the difference would be that in the first sentence, (4), the meaning implies that each actor knows at least one story or another, whereas sentence (5) accounts for a particular story that is known to every actor.

- (4) Every actor knows one story at least.
(5) One story at least is known by every actor

Furthermore, modal auxiliaries used in passive sentences can have different meanings as well, which means that the difference between sentences like (6) and (7) below is that in the first sentence, (6), the modal expresses ability, whereas in the second, (7), the concept of possibility is implied. There is also the difference of focus of the sentence. Whereas passive utterances, (7), concentrate on the action/process, the active ones, (6), concentrate on who/what causes the action/process, but the meaning is mainly the same.

- (6) John cannot do it.
(7) It cannot be done by John.

There is also a difference of formality between active and their passive correspondent structures, since passive voice is more frequent in academic, formal language maybe because it is considered specific to a rather informative type of writing.

Linguists have identified similarities of meaning between active and passive constructions and even if they have not named them synonymous they have mentioned them as being either paraphrases (Swan, 1991:330, Cornilescu, 2000:13) or equivalents such as the infinitives in the following sentences:

- (8) There is a lot of reading to do for this project.
(9) There is a lot of reading to be done for this project.

There is the case of those active sentences containing a transitive verb with two objects which can have two different passive correspondents. The two passive correspondents may be in a relation of grammatical synonymy since they preserve the same meaning. Let us consider sentences (10) and (11) below:

- (10) The students in year one were given a test.
(11) A test was given to the students in year one.

The main difference between them is that of the “communicative dynamism” according to M. Ulrych (1992:160), which seems to be very important at the level of the translation process and not only.

Quirk et al. (1990:169) also mentions semi-passives which include those verbs that have both verbal and adjectival properties and which can lead to different structures with similar meaning, such as examples (12) and (13):

- (12) I am interested in Linguistics.
(13) Linguistics interests me.

In this case, the analogue structures, (12) and (13), involve verb-like actives, but there are agent like phrases which can be introduced by prepositions such as about, at, over, to, with, as in examples (14) and (15) below:

- (14) We are all worried about the exam.
(15) The exam worried us all.

The passive infinitive as in sentence (16) as well as the active infinitive in sentence (17) can occur after certain constructions with no difference in meaning:

- (16) There is no time to be wasted.
(17) There is no time to waste.

There are, however examples where the difference in meaning is obvious:

- (18) There is nothing to do.(it's boring)
(19) There is nothing to be done. (It's hopeless)

Infinitive constructions can be discussed here, considered from the point of view of their following verbs which, according to Cornilescu (2000:38), can be passivized:

- (20) They consider him to be the best swimmer.
(21) He is considered to be the best swimmer.

Therefore such Accusative+Infinitive constructions in example (20) can turn into Nominative+infinitive ones, as in (21), when passivizing the verb with no change of meaning. Mention should be made, however, to the impersonal tone of the latter. The Romanian author also mentions the “equivalence” between the construction with the Acusative+Infinitive and the “THAT clause” such as the following:

- (22) I believe that he is honest.
(23) I believe him to be honest.
(24) He is believed to be honest.
(25) I consider that he is honest.
(26) I consider this to be a honest.

this is a mistake. mistake.
(27) This is considered to be
a mistake.

Note that the impersonal passive constructions in examples (24) and (27) convey the same meaning as examples (23) and (26) in a more formal, impersonal tone.

Moreover, the same author (Cornilescu, 2000:46) mentions the so called impersonal constructions, involving verbs which are followed only by a Nominative+Infinitive construction (say, rumour, repute, etc) and which can be paraphrased by That clauses:

(27) He is said to be honest. (28) It is said that he
is honest.

As shown, a sentence like (28) is called a paraphrase by the above mentioned author. According to the Oxford Advanced English Learner's Dictionary (2010:1065) a paraphrase is

a statement that expresses something that somebody has written or said using different words especially in order to make it easier to understand.

Therefore, the different structures above, that convey mainly the same meaning, can be considered grammatical synonyms.

Leech and Hundt make the distinction between three types of constructions connected with the passive: be-passive, the get-passive and "middles or mediopassive constructions" exemplified in the following contexts:

(30) "The book was sold. The book got sold. The book sold". (Leech and Hundt,2009:144)

The three are quite different in that the get passive and the mediopassive constructions are not specific passive constructions, because they are grammatically and semantically different from the regular be-passive. There is not only another auxiliary verb used (be vs. get), but there is also a shift between the subject and the agent in as far as the responsibility of the action is concerned. As for the mediopassive, there is no marking for voice and according to Leech and Hundt:

even more responsibility for the action is assigned to the subject" than in get-passive, therefore there is a cline of responsibility ranging from the be-passive (with practically no responsibility for the process in the VP attributed to the subject NP) to the mediopassive (with even more responsibility attributed to the NP in subject position than in the get-passive). (Leech and Hundt ,2009:145)

The conclusion drawn from this state of the facts is that the mediopassive structures usually have modal meaning. Having studied the variation across registers, the already mentioned linguist states:

We expect be-passives to occur particularly frequently in scientific texts and mediopassives in advertisements; get-passives are informal variants of the be-passives and therefore expected to occur more frequently in informal genres and spoken texts. (Leech and Hundt, 2009:148)

However, active voice is still expected to be more frequent than the passive voice in any type of context due to its main focus on action, even if the presence of passives has the linguistic role of

“rearranging the linear order of constituents” (Leech and Hundt, 2009:150) and despite its usefulness within objective academic writing.

Another construction that can display synonymic relations is the causative construction which will be detailed in the next section of the present chapter. *Get* can be used as a passive auxiliary in constructions which are less frequent in informal British English and avoidable in formal language. However there are sentences where *get* is a copular verb although they seem passive. Known as pseudo-passive sentences, they can imply unfavourable attitude towards an action such as in example (31) below:

(31) How did the window get opened? It should have been left shut.

Get can be used in order to eliminate the ambiguity between stative and dynamic meaning of the regular passive voice as exemplified in sentences (32) and (33):

(32) The chair was broken.

(33) The chair got broken.

In the analysis of the *get*-passive constructions, mention is made of their three fold occurrences including “passive constructions, relational constructions with participle adjective and ambiguous cases” (Leech and Hundt, 2009:154). Therefore, sentences such as (34) and (35) below are judged as either participle functioning as an adjective in (34) or as a passive construction with *block* as a lexical verb in (35):

(34) He got so confused that he no longer knew what to do.

(35) The channel got blocked.

(36) The channel became blocked.

Let us consider sentences such as (36), where *became* is a copular verb, followed by a past participle functioning as an adjective. Examples (35) and (36) have similar meanings, the result of the proposition being the same, i.e. the channel being blocked.

Leech and Hundt (2009:156) consider the construction “get married” as being an adjectival one despite of the fact that in most grammar books it is considered a passive one.

The mediopassives have been acknowledged as situating at the border between grammar and lexis and their meaning seems to be very much related to the “focus on inherent properties of the patient subject that facilitate or hinder the process expressed by the verb” (Leech&Hundt, 2009:158-9). Thus the following examples, provided by the mentioned linguists, would explain that the meaning of (37) implies that it is the very construction of the car which highlights the design features:

(37) “This car reverses easily.” (Leech and Hundt, 2009:159)

(38) This was a revolution which could not easily be reversed. Is not the same with - This was a revolution which could not reverse easily.” (Leech and Hundt, 2009:159)

This does not confirm in the case of the opposing pair *sell-buy*, where “mediopassive is an option for *sell* but not for *buy*” (Leech and Hundt, 2009:159) due to the lexical implicatures of *buy*, which imply that the responsibility of the action lies with the agent, whereas in the case of *sell* it is not only the responsibility of the seller to sell but also of the buyer to buy. However, the passive of *buy* can be replaced by the mediopassive *sell* in such occurrences when the “property of the merchandise is highlighted in the second part of the sentence”:

(39) "Wax dolls could be bought cheaply a few years ago, but are now fetching higher prices.

(40) Wax dolls sold quite cheaply a few years ago, but are now fetching higher prices." (Leech and Hundt, 2009:159)

Further on, specialists reveal the strong relation between mediopassives and modal adjectives ending in –able such as adjustable, convertible, reversible, removable. For example, the sentences below, (41), (42) and (43), are synonymous and can be used interchangeably with no change in meaning:

(41) Husking pin can adjust to any size hand. (42) Husking pin adjust to any size hand. (43) Husking pin is adjustable to any size hand.

Leech and Hundt (2009:163) point to the fact that mediopassive constructions frequently replace be-passives in certain contexts, such as the ones below:

(44) "This moisturising lotion is easily absorbed and offers both UVA and UVB protection." (Leech and Hundt, 2009:163) (44) "This moisturising lotion easily absorbs and offers both UVA and UVB protection." (Leech and Hundt, 2009:163)

The conclusion reached by the mentioned authors would be the following:

While get-passive remains a marked alternative to the neutral and prototypical be-passive, this holds even more for the mediopassive. It is a highly specialized construction, both with respect to its meaning and text type specific usage. (Leech and Hundt ,2009:165)

What is to be noted in as far as the correspondence between active and passive voice constructions is concerned is the fact that only some of these can be considered grammatical synonymous. It is nonetheless true that even if active and passive voice utterances preserve the same truth conditions, it is the perspective and focus of the sentence that change. Infinitives, verbs with double objects seem to provide the richest material for grammatical synonymy, although semi-passives, as well as medio passives followed by modal adjectives ending in –able, should not be disregarded either.

3. Grammatical synonymy with Causatives

There is a rich variety of causative constructions in English based on main verbs such as *make* / *let* / *have*. It seems that in the English language more attention is given to strategies of human causation maybe due to the social-historical changes within the English society which focused on personal autonomy and on a new set of interpersonal interactions meant to change perspective from order and command to direct and instruct. Starting from the assumption that the same principle can be applied to both cross-linguistic as well as intralinguistic comparison of different causative constructions, the English "interpersonal causation" can be described by means of several different causative constructions such as:

(44) Mary had John return the money.

(45) Mary made John return the money.

(46) Mary got John to return the money.

(47) Mary forced John to return the money.

(48) Mary talked John into returning the money.

Each of these sentences means something different, and no labels such as “direct, indirect, strong, weak, coercive, or manipulative can clarify the nature of these differences” (Wiersbicka, 2006:p183). The main difference noticed between *have* and *make someone do something* is the attitude of the actant – willingly performing the action in the case of *have* constructions and unwillingly/ forcefully performing it in the case of *make* constructions. This also explains why human subject is usually associated with *have* – causative constructions. In the case of *get*-causative constructions, the willingness is somehow external to the performer of the action, that is the performer does not really want to do the action, but it is someone else who does and therefore, he performs. Slight manipulation is involved in this case, but the real manipulation takes place in the constructions with the preposition *into*, which imply *tricking* someone; inducing someone into something, etc.

There are some clear similarities, as well as some clear differences, between the *into* construction and the *get*-construction. The main differences are: first, in the case of the *into*-construction, the causee originally didn't want to do what he or she did, whereas in the case of the *get*-construction there is no such assumption; second, in the *into*-construction the causee's action is “triggered” by the causer's will, not by the causee's own will, whereas in the *get*-construction the causee is acting in accordance with his or her own will, as well as the causer's will; and third, in the *into* construction, the causee is unaware of what is happening (namely, that his or her action is triggered” by the causer's will), whereas in the *get*-construction, there is no such assumption. (Wierzbicka, 2006:180).

The *Make*-construction has a variety of meanings including interpersonal relationships involving different human subjects and they can imply unwillingness from the part of the doer in performing the action as in the sentence ‘She made James confess.’

Unlike any other language English displays both in its grammar as well as in its lexicon a wide range of causative constructions used to talk about “one person wanting another person to do something” (Wierzbicka, 2006:183). Having mentioned the grammatical ones above, some considerations need to be made on the lexical ones involving the verb “to force”, which unlike the auxiliaries *get*, *have* and *make* can be passivised:

- (49) Mother forced Mary to write it again.
- (50) Mary was forced by mum to write it again.
- (51) Mother got Mary to write it again.
- (52) *Mary was got by mother to write it again.
- (53) Mother had Mary to write it again.
- (54) *Mary was had by mother to write it again.
- (55) Mother made Mary to write it again.
- (56) Mary was made by mother to write it again

These auxiliaries seem to imply not only the relationship between the doer and the bearer but also the pressure of the action involved (applied by the doer on the bearer). The same conditions are implied by the causative constructions with the verb “let” with the difference that this one seems to be the most loose as far as the volitional implicature of the doer is concerned. On the whole the causative constructions analysed so far have in common the fact that the person who is performing the action is doing it willingly or not. The amount of freedom and autonomy the person has, differentiate them. The construction with *let* implies that the person, who performs the action, does it out of his /her own will without any interference from the other person involved, whereas the *get*-

construction implies that the person who performs the action does it voluntarily and in the case of *have*-construction, the person does it voluntarily also, but without thinking he/she has to do it. What is different between these and the *make*-construction is that the person performing the action is aware of the obligation imposed by the other. On the whole, it is obvious that the *let*-construction is the only one that is characterised by non-interference. From a cultural point of view, these constructions reflect the English specific preoccupation towards individual autonomy. Anna Wierzbicka that:

[...] *let*, has been described as the central causative verb of Middle English, is also the central causative verb of Modern English. But the meaning of this central causative verb has changed—roughly speaking, from ‘causing someone to do something’ to ‘not causing someone not to do something.’ This shift is symptomatic, as it suggests the same concern that (as discussed in Wierzbicka 1997) is reflected in the changes in the meaning of the word *freedom* itself—roughly, from ‘freedom to’ to ‘freedom from. (Wierzbicka, 2006:203)

Roland Carter and Michael McCarthy, (2013:797), mention the similarity between *get*-passive and *have*-passive illustrated in the following examples:

- | | |
|---|---|
| (57) I got my suitcase
searched when I went
in Germany. | (58) I had my suitcase
searched when I went to
Germany. |
|---|---|

However, the difference between these utterances is a matter of formality, the *get*-construction being more formal.

4. Considerations upon English and Romanian Active and Passive Voice structures

According to Pană Dindelegan (2014:157), Romanian displays two passive constructions, one built with the verb *a fi* / to be and the past participle of the main verb as in examples (59) and the other one built with “the passive reflexive marker *se*, as in sentence (61), this latter being more impersonal.

- (59) Școli noi sunt contruite.
(60) New schools are built / are being built.
(61) Se construiesc școli noi.
(62) New schools are built / are being built.

These two passive constructions have only one possible translation into English, neutral from the point of view of the formality implied. Only in comparison with an active structure, such a passive one would be marked for formality.

Some verbs can accept only the passivisation with the reflexive marker *se*, such as:

- (63) Se dorește adoptarea unei legi noi.
(64) One wishes to vote a new law.
(65) Se mănâncă bine aici.
(66) People eat well here. / One eats well here.”(Pana Dindelegan, 2014:158)

Such constructions are usually translated into English by active impersonal constructions with the pronoun *one* as in sentences (64) and (66) above.

Even if the Romanian *se*-passive is more frequently used in everyday colloquial language maybe because it implies lack of responsibility, when the agent needs to be identified the *fi* / *be* passive is used. Even so, due to the fact that both sentences can have impersonal value, they can be considered synonymous:

- (67) "Este știut că nu putem trai fără cultură.
(68) Se știe că nu putem trăi fără cultură.
(69) It is known we cannot live without culture." (Pana Dindelegan, 2014:160)

The above mentioned author mentions the existence of two ways of expressing impersonal meaning: the passivisation of unergative verbs and the *se*-impersonalisation occurring with intransitive and non-reflexive verbs, such as:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| (70) Oamenii mănâncă
sănătos. | (71) Se mănâncă
sănătos. |
| (72) People eat
healthily. | (73) One eats healthily. |
| (74) "Oamenii mor din
ignoranță. | (75) "Se moare din
ignoranță. |
| (76) People die out of
ignorance." | (77) One dies out of
ignorance." (Pana
Dindelegan, 2014:161) |

The meaning of the structures is the same, even the degree of formality is the same. There might be a slight semantic difference between them regarding the familiarity of the tone. While, active structures are more familiar, the *se*-passive constructions imply a higher degree of generalisation and detachment. The English active impersonal correspondents in sentences (72), (73) and (76), (77) have similar implied meanings of detachment and generalisation, being one-to-one equivalents to the Romanian impersonal constructions .

Romanian active and passive voice structures display both similarities and differences. These will be best highlighted in the analysis of translations to and from English.

5. Conclusions

This paper aimed at analysing the correspondence between the meaning of active and passive voice structures with a view to prove the existence of grammatical synonymy between such constructions. The endeavour started from the assumption that synonymy involves both similarity as well as a degree of contrastiveness of meaning. Therefore the paper focused on those correspondences that involved at the same time both semantic similarity and difference.

Since active structures and their passive voice correspondents preserve the truth conditions but involve a different perspective and a different focus in each, there is grammatical synonymy between such structures. Be-passive, get-passive, medio passive and pseudo-passive constructions may display correspondences between them and their active counterparts. What is to be noted, as far as this correspondence is concerned, is the fact that only some of these can be considered grammatically synonymous. Infinitives, verbs with double objects seem to provide the richest material for grammatical synonymy, although semi-passives, as well as medio passives followed by modal adjectives ending in -able should not be disregarded either.

Causative constructions prove to be another source for grammatical synonymy since such grammatical structures may have similar meaning. The variety of English causative constructions is a result of the attention given to the strategies of human causation. This is explainable by the social-historical changes within the English society which revolved around the development of personal autonomy and freedom from the perspective of order and command to direct and instruct.

Romanian active and passive voice structures display similarities with their English counterparts which provide a variation of possible alternatives available for the translation process.

References

- Carter, Ronald, McCarthy, Michael. 2013 (2006). *Cambridge Grammar of English. A comprehensive guide*, CUP, 7th printing, India.
- Cornilescu, Alexandra, Iclezian-Dimitriu, I.2000. *The Infinitive*. Iasi: Institutul European.
- Cruse, Alan. 2006. *A glossary of semantics*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Hornby, Albert, Sdney. 2010 (1948). *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. Hong Kong: OUP.
- Leech, Geoffrey., Hundt, Marianne. 2009. *Change in contemporary English. A Grammatical study*. Cambridge: CUP:The Edinburgh Building,.
- Levitchi, Leon. 1994. *Sinonime in gramatica limbii engleze*. Bucuresti: Teora.
- Pana Dindelegan, Gabriela, et all. 2012. *Grammar of Romanian*. Oxford:OUP.
- Quirk, Randolph, Greenbaum, Sidney, Leech, Geooffrey, Svartvick, Ian. 1985. *A Comprehensive grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman.
- Swan, Michael. 1991(1980). *Practical English Usage*. Oxford: OUP, 22nd impression.
- Ulrych, Margherita.1992. *Translating Texts, From Theory to Practice*. Genoa: Litoprint,.
- Wierzbicka, Anna.2006. *English Meaning and Culture*. Oxford: Litoprint.

Note on the author

Anca Florina LIPAN is a teacher of English at the “Gh.M.Murgoci” College in Brăila and also a Phd student at “Dunărea de Jos” University of Galați, interested in studying synonymy at grammatical level with a view to highlight the great variety of linguistic means English displays.