

The nature of English 'unpassives'

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In studies on passives it has been noted that many languages display two kinds of passives: an eventive, or verbal, passive and a stative, or adjectival, passive (cf Emonds 2006). For English, it is usually assumed that this difference is not marked overtly – both verbal and adjectival passives are expressed by a form of the verb *be* and the past participle of the verb denoting the underlying event. However, on a more specific level, the participle instantiations have been discussed to be either adjectival or verbal (passive participle) constituents. Distinctions are made between adjectival uses and passive participles (cf Israel et al. 2000), adjectival and verbal participles (McIntyre (in press), verbal and adjectival passives (cf. Wasow 1977, Emonds 2006, for example). Hence, for an investigation into the nature of passives, it is required that it be usage-based, ie start out from the instantiations that can be observed in authentic language. Against this backdrop, the paper at hand presents an analysis of a particular English passive construction, the 'unpassive' (in which the participle is prefixed by *un-*), as illustrated by (1) and (2)

- (1) *He pretended to **be unsurprised**.* (A0N)
- (2) *Only 14 per cent of the Philippines tropical forest **remains untouched**...* (J3B)

The English unpassive represents a seemingly uncontroversial adjectival passive, since the negated participial forms do not relate to a verbal base (*unsurprise, *untouch) (for such an argument, see Hust 1977, for example), and was hence chosen as a pattern from which characteristics of adjectival passives can be learned.

The analysis is based on unpassives extracted from the BNC. The methods employed for processing and interpreting the data are taken from the family of collocation analysis developed by Gries and Stefanowitsch, namely simple and multiple distinctive collexeme analysis (cf. Stefanowitsch & Gries 2009, for example). The results of the collexeme analyses attest particular associations between finite verb (which is not always *be*) and the attracted participial collexemes, and make it obvious that the verb-specific uses have conventionalised for the expression of different scenarios, ie they do not really represent 'open choices'. That is, in order to do justice to the multifaceted phenomenon of the 'unpassive', we must give careful consideration to the finite verbs found to occur in the pattern and the participial collexemes in particular. The latter are classified semantically, drawing on such established categories as Vendler's aspectual classes and Levin's (1993) verb classes, and they are tested for their semantic relatedness in and across the verb-specific uses. Considering all this, we find that the corpus data matching the 'unpassive' pattern present us with a quite diverse picture. The more than 11,000 instances of the pattern extracted from the BNC allow for the abstraction of a number of verb-specific constructions (such as *be/remain/seem/go* plus *un-* participle), as well as for the abstraction of two more schematic constructions. Therefore, the 'unpassive' must be considered to label a whole array of constructions rather than just one, which also exhibit different degrees of 'passivity'. We conclude by reviewing our data for the generalizations that can be derived for distinguishing (English) verbal and adjectival passives in general.

References

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