

Some aspects of passive voice in English

by Juan Andrés Larrinaga

The passive voice structure in English should not be very problematic for Spanish speakers, but it is. Specially when we think about the acquisition of certain kinds of passive voice, that come very late in the process of learning English as a foreign language.

Let's consider a prototypical example of passive voice in English:

America was discovered in 1492.

If we think of a Spanish counterpart for this sentence, we will get something very similar

America fue descubierta en 1492

Both with the same structure basically:

Subject + verb "be" in the past + past participle "ser"

Even though there is this great degree of transparency between these structures in both languages, we have often heard and said that it is much more common in English than in Spanish. So, it must be in this difference that the problems begin, and I propose to explore this difference now, in order to be conscious of why we teachers always say this difference exists.

The fact that this structure is more common in English should be taken just as an impression. So as to have more grounds to sustain such assertion I have often done the following. I have taken a text published both in English and in Spanish (one of them is always a translation), so they could be said to be the closest to "the same text". I have then counted and compared this structure in both languages and I've always found that it is much more common in English than in Spanish (more than double in general). Of course, this is not enough to make a generalization, the study should be much more extensive and include types of texts in English and in Spanish, not only translations. Anyway it gives us more grounds for the assertion.

But the really interesting thing when we compare these translations is to see the variety of structures in Spanish that translate the "be + past participle" in English (you will find it really interesting if you do it with an article), the most common ones being, besides the "ser + participio", the omitted subject, and a variety of structures with "se" (like in *las preguntas se hacen al final*). This should be no surprise. The passive is a means, a form, to make appear verbs that would "normally" demand an agent (the doer of the action), as agentless (or, in the few cases where the agent is present, it appears in a less relevant position: a "by" phrase). And these two structures in Spanish, do exactly this, they make the agent disappear.

It is even more interesting to see how all these possibilities in Spanish concentrate on the structure "be + past participle" in English, giving to it the chance of getting into more structures than the Spanish "ser + participle". The passive transformation has been traditionally described as a transitive verb whose direct object becomes subject in the passive ("a scientist described a new bacterium" vs "a new bacterium was described"), and this is the only possibility it has in Spanish. But in English, the "be + past participle" structure enlarges its scope.

Let's take for example the "verbs with two objects". For the active sentence *they gave the children toys, as well as the special surprise for Christmas*

we can get two possible sentences with the "be + past participle" structure:

1. *the children were given toys as well as the special surprise for Christmas* and
2. *toys, as well as the special surprise, were given for Christmas*

Only this second sentence has a possible counterpart in Spanish. For the first one, since in Spanish only the direct object can become the subject in the passive transformation, as soon as we start a sentence with :

los niños fueron dados (o regalados) juguetes.....

we are tempted to think that the children were the thing given away (...maybe to a neighbor, by their parents), because we will tend to interpret that element as the direct object of the active counterpart.

On top of this, in English it is also possible to use as subject of the "be + past participle" structure an element that in the active voice was a prepositional object, like in the following examples (from **A comprehensive grammar of the English Language** by Randolph Quirk)

1" These caves have been lived in.

2" This field has been played on.

The sentence 1" maybe from "primitive men have lived in these caves" and sentence 2" maybe from "someone has played on this field", sentences that if we translate them into Spanish, would never accept a "ser + participle" structure.

Then, to answer the question "why is this structure more common in English than in Spanish?"

On the one hand, the structure "be + past participle" has more possibilities in English than in Spanish, and seems to be more flexible and "expanding " (when we look at it from our native tongue) to other structures than the traditional transitive verbs.

On the other hand, while Spanish has many restrictions in the use of the "ser + participle" structure in the passive transformation, it has many other tools to serve its functions.

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