How different is the passive from the copular construction really in a constructionist framework?
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It is commonly assumed that the English passive, as a periphrastic verbal construction, developed out of copular [BE AdjectivalParticiple]. Most attention in timing this change has gone to the formally innovative prepositional and recipient passives, both becoming firmly established during the late fourteenth century, as well as the slightly later fixation of by for the expression of the agent, which completes the passive’s equivalence with an active transitive construction.

Toyota (2008: 124) suggests the first function of the passive, already present in Old English, was that of backgrounding the actor, as in quasi-impersonal passives whose actor is completely indefinite:

(1) þara geleafan & gehwyrfrednesse is sægd þæt se cyning swa wære efnblissende.
‘In their faith and conversion (it) is said that the king was equally rejoicing.’ (c925(a900), Bede)

As an extension to this function, the primarily foregrounding function of topicalizing the undergoer developed in the course of Middle English. This development is associated with the fixation of SVO, which led to topics increasingly becoming subjects to maintain interclausal topic-continuity (e.g. Los 2009). The passive provided a straightforward way of making undergoers or recipients into subject-topics and started to extend its range with formal innovation as a result.

From a constructionist perspective, the complex functionality of [BE Participle], and its history, raises important questions. How different are the periphrastic (topicalizing or backgrounding) and the copular constructions really? The formal difference between prepositional passives and copular constructions (he is highly thought of versus *he is afraid of ‘X is afraid of him’) suggests that at least two somewhat independent constructions are at play.

In this paper, I draw attention to the role of relative frequencies in the transition from an extension (in a semantic network around a prototype) to a separate construction, by examining long passives (containing an explicit agent) in the LEON 0.3 corpus (Petré 2013). Those few studies that provide frequency data, such as Seoane (2006) or Toyota (2008), do not really address this issue in detail. I provide evidence that already in early Middle English there is a significant shift in the relative weight of the various functions of [BE Participle], involving an increase of both backgrounding and topicalizing functions. This may have led to a more distinct (formally or co-textually determined) opposition between them, facilitating the eventual emancipation of the topicalizing passive. Generally, this paper wishes to contribute to the issue of operationalizibility of frequency in (grammatical) constructionalization (Traugott & Trousdale 2013).

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References