Teaching Spanish Three Passive Constructions versus English Passive Voice

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ABSTRACT---- *There are several differences when forming the passive in Spanish and English. Spanish has passive constructions and English passive voice. Firstly, there is only one main way of constructing the passive voice in English, which is by promotion. That means from an active sentence following the subject +verb +object (SVO) pattern, promotion takes the object and positions it as the subject. In other words, the one being discussed (subject in the active sentence) turns into the receiver of the action (patient). For such reasons, only transitive verbs (the ones that allow direct objects) may be used in the English passive voice. On another note, Spanish constructions are different from English and there are three ways of forming them: 'passive ser', 'passive estar' and 'passive se'. However, Spanish 'passive ser' is the closest form to the English passive voice. This study is based on secondary research that describes and compares Spanish passive constructions and English passive voic*e.

Key words--- passive constructions, passive voice, English passive voice, Spanish passive constructions, Spanish and English passive forms, Spanish and English passive forms

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1. INTRODUCTION

There are several differences in Spanish passive constructions and English passive voice. First, English has one main way of making the passive voice, by promotion. That means from an active sentence following the SVO pattern (subject +verb +object), promotion takes the object and positions it as the subject. That means from an active sentence following the subject +verb +object (SVO) pattern, promotion takes the object and positions it as the subject. In other words, the one being discussed (subject in the active sentence) turns into the receiver of the action (patient). For such clear reasons, only transitive verbs (the ones that allow direct objects) may be used in the English passive voice. However, Spanish passive constructions are different from English as there are three ways of forming it.

The three ways of making passive constructions in Spanish are called '*passive ser', 'passive estar'* and *'passive se'.* The closest Spanish structure to the English passive voice is the Spanish passive "ser". This study analyses how these two languages build passive structures. Besides, it will be discussed on the way both of them have some restrictions in forming passive constructions. Finally, the two languages are compared and contrasted in the uses of these passive forms.

2. METHODOLOGY

There are two types of research in second language studies. According to Brown, J.D, (1988), there is primary and secondary research. The former, describes information gathered from primary sources such as a group of students who are learning a language. On the other hand, the latter obtains the information from secondary sources such as books about students who are learning a language (p.1). This study is based on secondary research which aims to develop productive insights on a particular topic. In this case, the form in which passive structures are built in two languages: Spanish and English. It was explained that in English there is a single form called passive voice. On the contrary, Spanish has three

forms of building the so-called passive constructions. The aim of this study is to provide the necessary tools for those investigating and contrasting Spanish and English structures. Most of the insights of this secondary research are taken from Hill and Bradford, Bilingual grammar of Spanish-English Syntax (2000). This is a valuable source is for those interested in comparing and contrasting Spanish and English structures.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

 SPANISH PASSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS VERSUS ENGLISH PASSIVE VOICE

Descriptive and prescriptive scholars agree that there are three main elements that need to be present in the formation of English passive voice (Hill & Bradford, 2000 p. 244). First, the *subject* has to be followed by an auxiliary form of the copula 'be' in any tense along with a past participle. Then, the verb phrase composed of the auxiliary be and past participle. The third element is the agent, also called the doer or performer of the action. This last element is optional. Based on Hill (2000), the pattern will look like:

SUBJECT + VERB PHRASE + AGENT
(Receiver of the action) + (Aux-be + past participle) + (performer of the action)

This process will be better illustrated by considering the active sentence and the way promotion forms the passive voice. The sentences taken from Azar (1989) exemplify the process of promotion.

Active Sentence: Mary **helped** the boy
                                                                (S)   (VT)   (DO)

Passive Sentence: The boy **was helped** by Mary.
                                                             (Subject)   (Verb Phrase) (Agent)

In the active sentence *Mary helped the boy,* it is clearly shown how the direct object is promoted to work as subject of a passive sentence *The boy was helped by Mary*. As it is demonstrated in this example, the direct object has an essential role in this sort of construction. English forms the passive voice mostly in the described way above.

Spanish offers more variety in passive constructions. Actually, there are three ways of building them. There are two ways using the copula 'be' and one with 'se'. Despite the fact that syntax is the point of discussion of this article, it is necessary to explain how semantics is involved with the verb 'to be' in order to understand Spanish passive system. Semantically speaking the called copula 'be' has two meanings in Spanish: 'ser' and 'estar'. English does not make any distinction between these two verbs, but in Spanish their difference and functions are fundamental in forming the passive. Certainly, there are exclusive uses for each of them. That is why their usages will be explained before actually moving into the passive voice.

Hill lists about eight different uses for **'ser'**. The first use is to express what something is made of, as in "el vaso **es** de plástico" (the glass is made of plastic). It also expresses possession, as in "el carro **es** mío" (the car is mine). Furthermore, in predicate nouns it identifies the subject role, for instance, "Pedro **es** un estudiante" (Peter is a student). Next, it expresses the time of the day: "**son** las 11 en punto" ([it] is 11 o'clock). As noticed, literal translation does not sound acceptable in English since English requires a subject in the sentence. In addition, 'ser' states some impersonal expressions, as in "**es** triste lo que le sucedió a tu tía" ([it] is sad what happened to your aunt). It also denotes the origin of a person or thing, for instance "Sandra **es** de Costa Rica" (Sandra is from Costa Rica). The copula 'ser' also expresses the occurrence of events, as in the sentence "las vacaciones **son** en verano" (the vacations are during summer). In this particular use the focus is given on the taking place rather than the precise location. Finally, descriptive grammarians explicitly say that 'ser' is also used to form the actional passive; for example, "el cuadro **fue terminado** por otro pintor" (the painting was finished by another artist). The latter form of passive construction is the closest to the English passive voice. In Spanish this form is known as *true passive.*

The copula **"estar"** has more restrictive uses. It is used to express the location of people, places, or things. This can be illustrated in the sentence "Muncie **está** cerca de Anderson" (Muncie is near Anderson). It also serves as an indicator of impersonal expressions (without subject) as in "**Está** claro que nadie sabe quién es", literally "[it] is clear that nobody knows who [he/she] is". This form of the copula also works as the auxiliary to form the progressive of some tenses, as in "ellos **estaban peleando**" (they were arguing). Finally, this form of the copula is also used in Spanish to form the passive construction e.g. "la comida ya **está preparada**" (the food is already prepared).

How do the semantic roles of 'ser' and 'estar' help with understanding the Spanish passive constructions? First and foremost, since English and Spanish passives are being contrasted, it is relevant to mention that the Spanish passive

constructions have no one-to-one correspondence to the English passive voice. This is basically because of the semantic differences of the copula 'be'. DeMello (1979) stated that "ser" losses its semantic value when working as an auxiliary in passive constructions. Therefore, its presence becomes more physical and figurative than semantic. For these reasons and because of the neutral features oft 'ser', researchers consider passive 'ser' to be the closest correspondent to the English passive voice (out of the three forms in Spanish). The other scholars cited here also describe the *passive ser* as the *true passive*. It has the following pattern:

SUBJECT + VERB PHRASE + por*/de + AGENT
(Receiver of the action) + (Aux-be + past participle) + (Prep.) + (performer of the action)

The next sentences will show how the *passive ser* resembles to the English passive voice.

Active Sentence: Un perro **atacó** a mi padre
(S) (VT) (DO)

Passive Sentence: Mi padre **fue atacado** por un perro
(Subject) (Verb Phrase) (por*) (Agent)

Note that the examples are marked with an asterisk (*) to indicate that the preposition *por* is preferred over *de*. *(Hill p.244)*.

As noticed above, the *passive ser* is almost identical to the English passive voice. The same process of promotion took place as in English. Likewise, both Spanish and English leave the agent to be optionally included. Despite their similarities these passive forms have some remarkable differences. Their contrasts are mainly found in the verb phrase. At first, some academics confirm that due to the unique properties of 'ser', it is more specific and leads to less confusion and ambiguity than in English. Also, even though both languages need a form of the auxiliary 'be' followed by a past participle, in the Spanish passive form the whole verb phrase must agree in gender and number with the subject. Nevertheless, these features are irrelevant to English since gender agreement properties work differently in this language. So, consider the following examples to make it clear, "Mi madre <u>fue atacada</u> por un perro" and "Mi padre <u>fue atacado</u> por un perro". In English, only the subjects will be changed, but the verb phrase remains the same when translated, for example "My father/mother <u>was attacked</u> by a dog".

English passive voice and Spanish *passive ser* have some restrictions. Both constructions agree that indirect objects cannot be moved to subject position unless certain conditions are present in the active sentence. Furthermore, in English the forms called co-reference cannot be changed into passive voice. Hill (2000) cited three co-reference forms which include reflexive, reciprocal and possessive. For instance, it is not possible to make a passive sentence with a reflexive like "She could see herself in the mirror"; therefore, it would be grammatically incorrect to say "herself could be seen in the mirror". Furthermore, reciprocal actions have limitations in forming the passive voice. Consider the active sentence "we saw each other faintly in the rain" and its ungrammatical passive "each other was seen faintly in the rain". The third case is that of possessives. So, the first example "the student shook his head" is valid, whereas the second "his head was shaken by the student" is not.

The Spanish also has a series of restrictions for the *passive ser*. For instance, because of the nature of some subjects and verbs in Spanish, they cannot be involved in the action of the verb in passive constructions. For instance, in a sentence where there is a human subject inherently involved in the action expressed by the verb "sus consejos <u>nos agradaron</u>", may not be turned into passive, "fuimos agradados por sus consejos". On the other hand, inanimate subjects do not have this problem, "un alma espiritual busca lugares solitarios" or "lugares solitarios son buscados por un alma espiritual". Perception verbs are rarely passivized. Besides, Spanish accepts all perfect tenses to be transformed to *passive ser*.

The other type of passive form found in Spanish is the *passive estar* which as it will be seen differs from the form *ser* and consequently from the English passive voice. This kind of passive is never found with perfect tenses, only with present, imperfect, and preterite. For each of these cases Hill (2000) provided the following examples: "el libro está impreso ya", "la estructura estaba hecha", el edificio estuvo situado junto a la carretera". Besides, he states that "**estar** cannot be used with the perfect tenses in the passive since the mere choice of **estar** over **ser** indicates prior perfectivety of the action being alluded to" (p. 246). So, it is ungrammatical to say "el libro ha estado impreso ya".

The third and last form of passive in Spanish is formed with *se*. This form is far from any English form and can be complex to Spanish second language learners. It works with animate as well inanimate recipients in particular ways to be described shortly. To begin, none of these forms mention the agent in the sentence. It is not as with the passive *ser* and *estar* that the agent was optional. With this third type of passive the agent simply should not be mentioned. According to Hill, this is true when dealing with the syntactical analysis. Semantic issues might change the properties of this form, but for the purposes of this work they are not relevant here. Semantic matters were relevant only for *ser and estar*.

Se passive is called the passive reflexive by the Royal Spanish Academy (Hill, 2000, p. 244). Actually, s*e* behaves by some means differently from the other passives. It was noticed that *ser* and *estar* limit the promotion of indirect objects; however, *se* has more free variation in this sense. On the other hand, it only allows third person subjects in either singular or plural forms. Hill adds that this limitation of subjects is because of 'se' impersonal character. This feature can be seen in the sentence, "se apagó el fuego" (the fire went out) where *se* is working as an impersonal reflexive. It also functions as an indefinite subject in sentences like "se perdóna y se olvida" (one forgives and forgets). *Se* can be really confusing for non-native speakers, especially when dealing with both syntax and semantics. Thus, in order to illustrate the lack of correspondence of *se* and English passive voice some sentences taken from Hill (2000) will be considered.

Spanish *se passive*. Note that 'se passive' is working as an impersonal pronoun and not as a reflexive pronoun.

Table 1. Equivalent English Passive for the sentence: *"Aquí se alquila**n** habitaciones"*

Literal and Ambiguous interpretations into English	*Syntactically and Semantically Adapted to English*
a. Here rooms rent themselves	*b.* Rooms are rented here

Table 2. Equivalent English Passive for the sentence: "Aquí se alquila habitaciones" (impersonal/ indefinite subject)

Literal and Ambiguous interpretations into English	*Syntactically and Semantically Adapted to English*
a. Here one rents rooms or one rents rooms	*b.* Rooms are rented here/ Rooms for rent

In table 1, for the sentence *"Aquí se alquila**n** habitaciones"* there is no English syntactic equivalent. Literally it means that "here rooms rent themselves". In such a controversy for translation, what English does is to re-build the sentence and "fix" it to its closest structure, "rooms are rented here". Hence, it is in this way that English tries to solve the grammatical and the semantic conflicts.

In table 2, the second sentence *"Aquí se alquila habitaciones"*, *se* behaves as an impersonal, indefinite subject also called passive particle. In a one-to-one translation, it would say "here one rents rooms". Once more, since this does not sound right to English the most accepted translation will be, "rooms are rented here" or "rooms for rent" (Hill, 2000, p.249).

It was noticed that *se* leads to ambiguity and misinterpretation in English if considering inanimate subjects. However, *se* with animate recipients allows disambiguation of some sentences with no correspondence between these two languages. Now, it will be taken into consideration English passives without apparent Spanish equivalent. For instance, in cases where *ser* and *estar* objects do not allow possible English equivalents, the *animate se,* works well enough to solve that problem. For instance, *se* allows constructions where promotion of indirect objects is not permitted with the other Spanish passive forms. So, Hill includes the example "she was given a book" which will be literally translated as "ella fue dada un libro". This example would definitely sound awkward to a native speaker. It is then that *animate-se* is helpful. Thus, Spanish uses the passive particle *se* to try to 'fix' the sentence and find a pattern syntactically and semantically appropriate. So, the sentence will look like "se le dió un libro".

4. FINDINGS

Most of the claims and examples given were taken from the detailed information provided by Hill and Bradford (2000). It is important to mention that other sources spread their views to other linguistic dimensions such as semantics, pragmatics, and morphology which in this case were not functional at all. However, it is also significant to say that other scholars such as Quesada (1997) and Babcock (1970) and Golding, consider all these passive *forms* differently, namely as: the middle voice, anti-passive, impersonal passive, uno-subject, medio-passive and many more. That is basically because of the many linguistic aspects they included in their analyses.

Regardless the emphasis given in their studies, the authors cited in this study agreed with the following claims, Spanish uses more frequently the active construction while English the passive voice. This situation was explained above. First, English has only one way to make the passive whereas Spanish has three ways. This possibly implies that speakers with multiple choices might get more confused in the usages and therefore they end up rejecting or avoiding it. The opposite situation happens to English speakers, since they have only one passive form, there seems to not have trouble using it. However, it is important to say that there are also some fields which reject this form. To add, if compared carefully the number of rules and restrictions cited for the Spanish passive constructions and English, one will realize that Spanish is more complex than English. For these reasons, one might understand why the tendency to choose one form over the other by Spanish and English speakers.

In the study carried by Quesada (1997) he arrived at similar conclusion. He analyzed poetry, literature and real speech and concluded that "the passive voice in Spanish is at the threshold of disappearance and that its pragmatics has been overtaken by a number of construction types whose use in the spoken language is increasing" (p.62). In other words, people use structures that are less complicated and more accessible to them. Hills (2000) has the same opinion and states that this preference of active over passive by Spanish speakers is because of the more dynamic, animated verbal structure of the active sentence.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In this descriptive, secondary type of research it is important to point out that Spanish and English differ in the way the build passives. On the one hand, Spanish has three forms, while English has only one. In terms of construction, Spanish syntax and distribution of passive forms seemed to be more complex than English. When it comes to semantics in these constructions, it was demonstrated that is was hard to reconcile meanings. Thus, translations must be fully elaborated in order to get to the authentic significance of words and phrases.

Another separate, but important aspect, to be considered in this descriptive-comparative work is the implications of these findings in teaching. How are teachers supposed to deal with these situations when explaining to second language learners the passive voice in either of the languages compared? Students normally like to have one-to-one translations, but it was demonstrated here that with these structures such claim is not possible. Therefore, as teachers we have to find the ways to make this statement clear to our students without dealing with too much terminology that might be confusing for them. Finally, to deal partially with this and satisfy our students, it will also be helpful to point out the frequency of usage of each form described above. So, that they are free to choose the most appropriate and convenient form to get the message across. In this work, it is demonstrated that structures vary from one language to the other. Thus, my recommendation for teachers is to find the most appropriate way of explaining this topic; as well, to use a variety of techniques that allow learners to get the message across in a simple and moderate sort.

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