payne: a brief grammatical sketch of english

10. Passives

Nearly any semantically transitive verb in English can be passivized. The passive is formed on the predicate nominal/adjective template (see section 6) with the auxiliary verb be, 'ser/estar', and the past participle of the main verb. Regular past participles are formed with the suffix -ed, though there are numerous variations. The A of the active transitive verb can appear following the main verb preceded by the preposition by. Example 87b is a passive of the transitive clause illustrated in 87a:

(87) a. I greet Mary. 'Saludo a María.'

1SG:NOM saludar:NOPAS María

b. Mary is greet-ed (by me). 'María es saludada (por mí).'</n María ser:3SG:NOPAS saludar-PPAS por 1SG:NN

That 87b is a passive clause is evidenced by the following facts:

The A argument is omitted, or assigned to an oblique role. In example 87b, the A argument is referred to in the oblique phrase by me. That this phrase may be omitted is indicated by the parentheses.

The P argument (Mary in 87) is promoted to subject status. This is evident in that the auxiliary verb agrees with the P, and the P occurs in preverbal position.

Apart from expression of the A argument in a prepositional phrase headed by by, passives cannot be distinguished structurally from predicate adjective constructions with past participles as the main predicator. In fact, structural ambiguity of this sort is common:

(88) The vase was broke-n. 'El vaso fué/estaba quebrado.'

DEF vaso ser:PAS quebrar-PPART

This construction could be a passive in a context in which it refers to an event in an event sequence, e.g., The vase was broken when the workers moved the piano, 'El vaso fué quebrado cuando los trabajadores movieron el fortepiano.' Or it could refer to a simple state: When I entered the room, I noticed that the vase was broken, 'Cuando entré en la sala, me di cuenta que el vaso estaba quebrado.' The only concrete test for whether such a construction is a passive or not is whether the A argument may be expressed in a prepositional phrase without significantly changing the meaning.

In general, passives are relatively common in English discourse, particularly in written varieties. They seem to function in situations where a P argument outranks an A argument in a topicality hierarchy. A full discourse study would be needed to confirm, disconfirm or elaborate this hypothesis.