

## 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.<sup>4</sup> 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).'  
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 fortépiano.' 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 dí 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.