

An Empirical Perspective on Linguistic Classification: Unaccusatives Meet the Adjectival Passive

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The so-called “stative” or “adjectival passive” in German (e.g., *Das Fenster ist geschlossen*, ‘The window is closed’) is the source of much controversy in linguistics. Beside different variants of verbal analyses (Helbig 1987; Lenz 1994), the adjectival analysis of the stative passive as a copula-adjective construction that refers to a result state has become the dominant view in more recent work (Rapp, 1998; von Stechow, 1998, 2002; Kratzer, 2000; Maienborn, 2007).

Even though the adjectival analysis is nowadays widely accepted, the view that these constructions are nevertheless somehow linked to the passive voice still seems to persist; cf. the term “adjectival *passive*”. Thus only verbs that form passives are standardly taken as suitable candidates for building the adjectival passive. As a consequence, unaccusative verbs are not taken into consideration as potential candidates for adjectival passive formation. That means that the verbal treatment – although convincingly proven to be deficient – continues to have an impact on current classifications and analyses. According to this view, a sentence like (1) will only have a perfect reading (with a form of *sein* ‘to be’ as perfect auxiliary), but has no corresponding copula analysis.

- (1) *Die Familie ist umgezogen.*
The family is moved
‘The family has moved.’

The question of whether a sentence like (1) has a perfect reading only or whether it can be analyzed additionally as a copula-adjective construction cannot be answered a priori, but only on the basis of empirical data. In our talk we will present the combination of two different data types, corpus data and psycholinguistic data, which both provide evidence for the existence of an adjectival construction type formed on the basis of unaccusative verbs. Broadening the empirical data base thus leads to a new theoretical classification of *sein* plus participle II forms. This result demonstrates the importance of the empirical foundation of linguistic theory on the basis of different data types. In view of our findings the term “adjectival passive”

turns out to be a misnomer. Therefore, we will use the term “adjectival resultative” for combinations of the copula *sein* and an adjectivized participle II form instead.

First, we will present corpus data (TIGER, COSMAS) as evidence for the existence of an adjectival construction type with unaccusative verbs, by applying the standard diagnostics for adjectives: *un*-prefixation, comparative morphology, coordination with genuine adjectives, composition and modification by temporal adverbials (see example (2) for a predicative coordination of an unaccusative participle with a genuine adjective, suggesting that the unaccusative participle must have been adjectivized).

- (2) *Die Mehrzahl ist, so Holm, erwerbslos, abgewandert oder in Vorruhestand.*
 The majority is, [...] unemployed, emigrated or in early retirement.
 ‘According to Holm most of them are unemployed, emigrated or in early retirement.’ (TIGER s619)

Having established that unaccusatives are in fact subject to the adjectival resultative formation on the basis of corpus data, the next question is: what are the limits and restrictions to this operation? Corpora are of limited use here, because they provide only positive evidence.

In order to judge the potential markedness of adjectival resultatives with unaccusatives we conducted a rating study with an acceptability judgement task. Participants were asked to rate the acceptability of sentences with unaccusatives modified by *seit*-adverbials (indicator of an adjectival resultative reading) and with *vor*-adverbials (indicator of a perfect reading) on a 1-to-6 rating scale (1 = fully acceptable; 6 = not acceptable). Two groups of unaccusatives were distinguished, based on our corpus data: one with verbs that appeared in the corpora with *seit*-adverbials (e.g. 3a), and a second group for which the combination with *seit*-adverbials was not attested (e.g. 4a).

| | <i>Ratings (mean)</i> |
|---|-----------------------|
| (3) a. Meine Nachbarin ist seit zwei Wochen verreist. My neighbor is since two weeks left | 2.0 |
| b. Meine Nachbarin ist vor zwei Wochen verreist.’ My neighbor is before two weeks left ‘My neighbor left two weeks ago.’ | 1.9 |
| (4) a. #Die Skulptur ist seit zwei Monaten entstanden. The sculpture is since two months come-about | 4.3 |
| b. Die Skulptur ist vor zwei Monaten entstanden. The sculpture is before two months come-about ‘The sculpture came about two months ago.’ | 1.4 |

The results of our rating study showed significantly better ratings for sentences like (4b) in comparison to (4a) (4.3 vs. 1.4) suggesting that the unaccusative verb *entstehen* ('to come about') does not build adjectival resultatives. On the contrary, no rating difference was found for sentences like (3) (2.0 vs. 1.9) suggesting that the unaccusative *verreisen* besides the perfect also has an adjectival resultative reading. We interpret these results as evidence for the existence of two types of unaccusative verbs, one that forms the perfect only and is highly marked with *seit*-adverbials and a second type that additionally forms the adjectival resultative. We will further argue that the different behaviour of unaccusatives in adjectival resultative formation does not rely on a lexical split but is highly dependent on contextual factors.

In sum, the presented corpus data in combination with psycholinguistic data provide strong evidence for our claim that certain constructions of *sein* plus the participle II form of an unaccusative verb are ambiguous between a perfect reading and a resultative reading and call for a revision of the alleged passive nature of so-called "adjectival passives". Our results demonstrate that combining data from different sources helps clarify controversial topics in linguistics and may lead to a new assessment and classification of the relevant data as a prerequisite for an explanatory theory.

References

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