

Translating passives in English and Swedish: a text linguistic perspective

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1 Introduction

The aim of this work-in-progress report is to study whether the textual and grammatical structure of passive clauses is retained or altered in translations between English and Swedish. The passive is interesting to study in this perspective since it is a multifunctional category closely linked to textual structure. It constitutes a useful text-structuring tool in that it makes it possible to 'thematize a Given element [...] whilst simultaneously focalizing a New actor by shifting it to the end of the clause [agentful passives]' (Granger 1983:299).¹ Moreover, it allows the verb to occur without an agent (agentless passives).

The study focuses on translation pairs in which passive clauses in English and Swedish original texts provide the starting-point. Four alternative situations are possible in the translated texts: a) no change in syntax – no change in thematic structure (1a-b), b) change in syntax – no change in thematic structure (2a-b), c) no change in syntax – change in thematic structure (3a-b), and d) change in syntax – change in thematic structure (4a-b):

- (1a) A wall of polythene sheeting *was nailed up* to screen the area from the rest of the house, and domestic catering operations *were transferred* to the barbecue in the courtyard.
- (1b) Ett plastsjok *spikades upp* för att skärma av byggplatsen från resten av huset, och hushållets matlagning *flyttades ut* till grillen på gården.² (PM1)
- (2a) He *was instructed* to be 'as conspiratorial as possible' in order to minimise the dangers of police penetration.
- (2b) Han *fick instruktioner* att vara "så konspiratorisk som möjligt" för att minimera riskerna för polisinfiltration. (CAOG1)
(Lit: He got instructions to be ...)
- (3a) Varje år *utdelas* cirka 300 Nordstjärneordnar och -medaljer till förtjänta utlänningar.
(Lit: Every year, are-given around 300 orders and medals ...)
- (3b) Every year, around 300 orders and medals of the Northern Pole Star *are given* to deserving foreigners. (GAPG1)
- (4a) Till och med ensamhetskänslan *försvagades* även om han aldrig blev helt fri från den.
(Lit: Even the-loneliness-feeling was-diminished even though he ...)
- (4b) Work even *diminished* his feelings of loneliness, although he could not make them disappear altogether. (KF1)

Textual structure and thematic patterning in translations is an area which is relatively unexplored, but interesting for a number of reasons. Ventola (1995:88) remarks that changes in thematic structure in translations 'may create somewhat different meanings. The readers are forced to focus on different

¹ For text linguistic discussions of the passive, see e.g. Dusková 1971, Granger 1983, Halliday 1994:126, Péry-Woodley 1991, Sundman 1987: 360f. Reference grammars also bring up textual functions of the passive, see Quirk et al 1985:1390f and Telemann et al 1999:4:380.

² All examples are taken from the ESPC (see p. 2). The original text is given first as (a) and the translation as (b). The source text passive and the corresponding expression in the translation have been italicised. The text code referring to each corpus text, here PM1, has been given after each translation (see the list of references). In cases where the Swedish text differs from the English, a word-for-word gloss is provided for the part of the clause under discussion.

things – orientation to ‘the starting-point’ in the forthcoming text is different’. Sometimes it may even be argued that original and translated texts ‘are not saying the same thing’ (ibid.).

Enkvist (1984:48f) draws attention to the importance of contrastive work combining text linguistics and grammar. Such work can focus on, for example, ‘the interplay between the syntactic structure and the information structure of the clause and sentence, that is, the way in which the syntactic structure is brought into harmony with the desired distribution of old and new information in the sentence and the text’. Contrastive studies in English and Swedish or Norwegian on thematic structure include for example Altenberg (1998) and Hasselgård (1998).

2 Definition of theme

As a point of departure for the thematic analysis I have chosen Halliday’s definition of theme according to which ‘[t]he Theme is the element which serves as the point of departure of the message; it is that with which the clause is concerned. The remainder of the message, the part in which the Theme is developed, is called [...] the Rheme’ (Halliday 1994:37). The theme comes in first position in the clause extending ‘up to (and including) the first element that has a function in transitivity. This element is called the ‘topical Theme’; so we can say that the Theme of the clause consists of the topical Theme together with anything else that comes before it’ (Halliday 1994:53).

In declarative clauses, the theme typically conflates with the subject, which is then referred to as an unmarked theme. Marked themes are realised by adjuncts or complements. Furthermore, the information structure often coincides with the thematic structure, so that the theme conveys given information and the rheme new information.

The fact that the topical theme can consist of an adverbial or a prepositional phrase only (forming a marked theme) complicates the analysis of the thematic structure of passive clauses since such elements occur quite frequently in thematic position in the material analysed. Therefore, I have chosen to use a somewhat altered definition and disregard the presence of such adjuncts in order to see the passive subject as part of the theme. Referring to work by Ravelli and Matthiesen, Altenberg (1998:116) points out that there have been suggestions within systemic linguistics to allow the theme to include everything in the clause up to the finite verb. Such a definition might be useful for further analysis of this type of data.

A further problem and a difference from English is that Swedish is a verb-second language. According to the V2 constraint, Swedish normally accepts only one clause element before the finite verb in declarative clauses, which results in inversion of the subject and the verb when the initial element is a non-subject (cf. Telemann et al:1999:4:4ff. and Altenberg 1998). In such cases the subject becomes part of the rheme, while it is a thematic element in English. Apart from the V2 constraint, the order of thematic elements is generally similar in Swedish and English (cf. Telemann et al. 1999:4:25, 380, 390).

Theme-rheme patterns are important in guiding the reader through the text. Daneš has proposed a model of three main text-structuring patterns (here taken from Fries 1995:7f). The first is called ‘linear thematic progression’. Here, ‘the content of the Theme of a second sentence (Theme 2) derives from the content of the previous Rheme (Rheme 1), the content of Theme 3 derives from Rheme 2, etc’ (Fries 1995:7). In the second pattern called ‘Theme iteration’, ‘the same Theme enters into relation with a number of different Rhemes. The result of this type of thematic progression is that the Themes in the text constitute a chain of (typically) co-referential items which extends through a sequence of sentences or clauses’ (ibid.). Thirdly, in ‘progression with derived Themes’ different themes are derived from a hypertheme, a superordinate notion.

3 Material

The data used is derived from the combined parallel/translation corpus English-Swedish Parallel Corpus (ESPC).³ Six non-fiction texts were analysed: three Swedish original text samples and three English original text samples with their respective translations. Each text contains 10-15.000 words, resulting in a total of approximately 75.000 words in source texts and about the same number of words in translations. Although this is a fairly small sample, a total of 795 instances of passive constructions were retrieved and analysed.

³ For a description of the corpus, see Altenberg, Aijmer & Svensson 1999.

It may be argued that material consisting of text samples instead of complete texts is not ideal for a textlinguistic study (Johansson 1998:11). However, since the present study does not analyse textual structure across whole texts, but is restricted to the thematic and information structure in the context of the sentence containing a passive construction, the size of each text sample does not seem to be of major importance.

The types of passives analysed are English (agentful and agentless) passives formed with the auxiliary *be* and the past participle, and the three types Swedish (agentful and agentless) passives: the *s*-passive formed by adding the inflection *-s* to the active form of the verb, and the periphrastic passive formed with *bli* or *vara* as auxiliaries together with the past participle of the main verb, analogous with the English *be*-passive.

4 Translation equivalents

In a previous study (Fredriksson forthcoming) I found that there is a wide range of possible translation equivalents when an English passive is translated into Swedish, or a Swedish passive into English. The results of the present study also show a wide variety of translation possibilities.

Table 1. Translation equivalents in Swedish translations (EO → ST)⁴

ST category	no	%
<i>s</i> -passive	149	49
paraphrase	45	15
<i>bli/vara</i> -passive	44	14
direct active	25	8
active + <i>man</i>	13	4
omission	9	3
adjectival construction	9	3
nominalisation	8	3
other	3	1
Total	305	100

Frequency per 1000 words of 305 EO passives: 8.13

In translations from English into Swedish (Table 1), the great majority of English original passives are rendered as passives in the Swedish translations; they follow what we may call a ‘passive-to-passive principle’. If the two passive categories are grouped together, they make up as much as 63%. Paraphrasing is an alternative rather commonly used. This group contains for example active renderings that are not the closest possible translation of the passive verbs, but are contextually suitable choices with similar meanings. Direct active counterparts of passive constructions are used in 8% of all occurrences, which indicates that this is not a preferred translation strategy. A difference between this and many of the other translation equivalents is that it entails changes in thematic structure since the clause elements are re-arranged (agent – subject, etc). Finally, it is interesting to note that the translation alternative called ‘active + *man*’ which consists of combinations of the generic *man* (cf. French *on*, German *man*, English *one*) and the active form of the verb occurs with only 4% frequency. This choice is often mentioned as a potential competitor to the agentless passive. Here, however, it is only one among several active alternatives.

Table 2 shows the frequency of translation equivalents in English translations of Swedish passive constructions. The passive-to-passive principle is strong in this direction as well. The group ‘omission’ is surprisingly large. It contains two types of omissions; those where the passive construction has been left out in the translation, and those where the translator has chosen not to leave out the whole clause or sentence(s).

An interesting point about the frequency of source text passives is that the Swedish passive is more frequent than the English passive in this material. The English passive is usually regarded as a strong category used with high frequency, especially in non-fiction genres (see e.g. Baker 1992:102, Biber 1988:250f), whereas the Swedish passive has been considered weaker. A commonly suggested reason

⁴ English original text is referred to as EO, Swedish original text as SO, English translations as ET, and Swedish translations as ST.

is the use of the generic *man* combined with an active verb. In Fredriksson (forthcoming) based on fiction texts passives are more frequent in English texts than in Swedish. The present study shows reversed results.

Table 2. Translation equivalents in English translations (SO → ET)

ET category	no	%
be-passive	285	58
omission	70	14
paraphrase	45	9
non-finite construction	38	8
direct active	27	6
nominalisation	21	4
other	5	1
Total	491	100

Frequency per 1000 words of 491 SO passives: 13.09

5 Thematic and grammatical structure in translations

The default case would be retaining both the grammatical and textual structures of the source text in the target text. However, the translator can choose to change either the thematic structure or the syntactic structure, or both.

Table 3. Distribution of grammatical and thematic structure in ST.

Grammatical structure	Thematic structure		Total
	+ change	- change	
+ passive	43 (48%)	149 (69%)	192
- passive	47 (52%)	66 (31%)	113
Total	90 (100%)	215 (100%)	305

Table 3 shows that the default case, i.e. no textual, no syntactic change (showed as -change, +passive in the table), occurs in a majority of cases (149 instances) in translations from English into Swedish. In 31% of all cases has the translator used a non-passive structure (-passive) in order to retain the textual structure. The total number of unchanged thematic structures is 215, whereas that of changed structures is 90. In the column showing changed textual structure (+change), we find that the distribution of passives and non-passives is nearly equal. We note that in 52% of the occurrences the textual change is accompanied by a syntactic change as well. The latter would probably produce a translation that differs from the source text to a considerable extent.

Table 4. Distribution of grammatical and thematic structure in ET.

Grammatical structure	Thematic structure		Total
	+ change	- change	
+ passive	57 (32%)	228 (73%)	285
- passive	120 (68%)	86 (27%)	206
Total	177 (100%)	314 (100%)	491

Table 4 shows the distribution in English translations. Here too, the default case, with unchanged thematic and syntactic structure is most frequent with 228 instances. The textual structure is preserved but not the passive in 27% of the cases. The total number of preserved thematic structures is 314 as compared with 177 instances of changed thematic structure. A difference from the other direction of translation is that the distribution within the group of changed thematic structure is uneven. The translators have changed both the thematic and syntactic structure in 68% of the total number of changed occurrences.

6 Preserved thematic structure

The tendencies presented in the previous sections will now be illustrated with a few examples in order to look into the various translation strategies in more detail. We start by looking at a default case, i.e. one in which the grammatical as well as the thematic structure is retained in the translation (5a and b). The English agentful passive is rendered as a Swedish *s*-passive, the most frequent type of Swedish passive.

- (5a) It was a life with all the cheerful violence of a cartoon film. Boys brawl with each other, get involved in territorial gang fights, *are chased* down the street with razor blades by drunken uncles, whack each other over the head with Christmas trees, have rock fights and snowball fights.
- (5b) Det var en värld som var lika uppsluppet våldsam som en tecknad film. Pojkar bråkar, blir indragna i gängslagsmål, *jagas* längs gatan av fulla farbröder med rakblad, slår varandra i huvudet med julgranar, kastar sten och är invecklade i snöbollskrig. (RF1)

The translation neatly follows the textual structure of the original text. The theme *boys/pojkar* is the theme of the whole sentence. In the model of thematic progression outlined by Daneš (see section 2), this pattern is called theme iteration. The theme is constant but the rhemes are different.

The second most frequent group of translation equivalents in translations in both languages is called 'paraphrase' and contains a mixture of constructions. A large amount of them are expressions in which the translator has used an active form of a verb that is not the closest translation of the passive verb, but still conveys similar meaning:

- (6a) Our initial excitement had turned into anti-climax as the plans became more and more dog-eared and, for one reason or another, the kitchen remained untouched. Delays *had been caused* by the weather, by the plasterer going skiing, by the chief breaking his arm playing football on a motor-bike, by the winter torpor of local suppliers.
- (6b) Den första ivern hade förvandlats till antiklimax när ritningarna blev allt skrynkligare medan köket av någon anledning förblev orört. Förseningarna *berodde på* vädret, på att stukatören var borta och åkte skidor, på att murarbasen hade brutit armen medan han spelade fotboll på motorcykel, på leverantörernas vintertröghet. (PM1)
(Lit: The-delays depended on the-weather, ...)

A passive translation corresponding to the source text would have been possible – *förseningarna hade orsakats av vädret ...* - but the chosen alternative is less formal. The thematic structure with theme iteration is retained in the translation.

- (7a) Tre kockar finns redan på plats. Hovtraktören och Erich Schaumburger, hans köksmästare även till vardags. Och en extrakock som kan behöva *läras upp*.
(Lit: ... who might need be-taught up.)
- (7b) Three cooks are already at work. The Restaurateur and Erich Schaumburger, who is also his regular Chief Cook. Plus an extra cook, who might need *the training*. (GAPG1)

In (7b) the translator has used a nominalisation instead of a passive, although a passive could have worked just as well. It is difficult to explain why this choice has been made, since both texts have the same thematic structure. Another type of syntactic change is illustrated in (8b) where we find an adjectival construction instead of a verb:

- (8a) Till bondeståndet utsåg varje härad en riksdagsman. Valbara var bara de självägande bönderna och kronans åbor. Adelns bönder *var uteslutna* liksom de stora obesuttna samhällsgrupperna på landsbygden.
(Lit: The-nobility's peasants were excluded ...)
- (8b) For the Estate of the Peasants every rural district known as a 'härad', or hundred, elected one member of the Riksdag. Only peasant proprietors and crown tenants were eligible. The nobility's peasants *were ineligible* as were the large tenantless social groups of the countryside. [AA1]

The closest English equivalent of the Swedish verb phrase *var uteslutna* is *were excluded/expelled*. However, the author expresses a contrast between the preceding sentence with the adjective *valbara* ['eligible'] and *var uteslutna* ['were excluded']. By using an antonym of the preceding adjective - *eligible/ineligible* - instead of, for example, *exclude* or *expel* the translator makes the contrast even more marked.

7 Altered thematic structure

We will now look at a few examples in which the translators have chosen to deviate from the thematic structure of the original text. Thus, the following examples are all non-default cases. Many of the instances of retained syntactic structure despite thematic re-structuring are due to the fact that Swedish is a verb-second (V2) language whereas English is not. Temporal and spatial adverbials are highly frequent in initial position in the Swedish texts which causes frequent alterations, one of which is found in (9a and b)

- (9a) Åbo blev den nya maktens säte och handelsplats. Här byggdes också den första domkyrkan för biskopen i Finland.
(Lit:
- (9b) Åbo became the seat of the new power and a centre of trade. Here, too, the earliest cathedral for the Bishop of Finland *was erected*. (AA1)

Here we find a marked theme, *här/here* and the remainder of the clause forms the rheme, which is where we find differences between the original and the translated texts. The subject is rather long and the differences in the rhematic structure create a different perspective for the reader. In the ET *was erected* is focalised in end position and is hence the most rhematic, whereas in the SO *den första domkyrkan för biskopen i Finland/the earliest cathedral for the Bishop in Finland* is most focalised. This difference is due to the V2 constraint. Ventola (1995:87) discusses a parallel situation in German and says that '[t]he further the subject is pushed from the first verbal element the less likely it is any longer encoding 'Given' information, but instead its ability as a [sic] encoder for 'New' information increases'.

- (10a) The Bolsheviks saw the Civil War from the beginning as part of a great Allied plot. In reality, the revolt of the Czechoslovak Legion *had been prompted* not by the Allies but by fears for its own survival after attempts by Leon Trotsky, now Commissar for War, to disarm it.
- (10b) Redan från början betraktade bolsjevikerna inbördeskriget som en del av en stor allierad komplott. I själva verket var det inte de allierade som *hade framkallat* den tjeckiska legionens revolt, utan dess oro för den egna överlevnaden sedan Lev Trotskij, nu folkkommissarie för krigsären, försökt avvärja legionen. (CAOG1)
(Lit: In reality, was it not the allied who had prompted the Czechoslovak Legion's revolt, but ...)

Example (10b) illustrates the use of what I have called a 'direct active', which is meant to be the closest active alternative to the passive. The clause elements have been re-arranged in accordance with 'the traditional active-passive correspondence', i.e. the passive agent corresponds to the active subject, and the passive subject to the active object. Consequently, the translation has a changed thematic structure; the theme/subject connects to the rheme of the previous sentence (*a great Allied plot*). The pattern called linear thematic progression (see section 2) means that an idea expressed in the rheme of the preceding clause or sentence is picked up and forms a new theme.

- (11a) Gjorde han det skulle han bli presenterad för de rätta personerna. Immanuel, som *var omgiven* av otåliga fordringsägare och *hotats* med gäldstugan, tyckte sig ha litet att förlora på att resa. Han ansåg sig dock inte ha råd att ta med familjen.
(Lit: Immanuel, who was surrounded by impatient creditors ...)
- (11b) He urged Immanuel to come to Turku, where he could introduce him to the right people. *Surrounded* by impatient creditors and *threatened* by debtor's prison, Immanuel felt he had little to lose by going. He told his family they would follow as soon as circumstances allowed. (KF1)

The original text contains a passive in an embedded relative clause which has been turned into a fronted non-finite clause in the translation. The Swedish alternative appears to be relatively unmarked, whereas the same elements in the English text are given greater prominence. In the original, the theme

and subject, *Immanuel*, is the same theme as occurs in the preceding sentence, there is hence theme iteration, which facilitates the progression of discourse. In contrast, the re-organisation of the translated text with a postponed subject breaks this progression.

- (12a) These were not the kind of gentlemen farmers who spent their winters on the ski slopes or yachting in the Caribbean. Holidays here *were taken* at home during August, eating too much, enjoying siestas and resting up before the long days of the vendange.
- (12b) Det här var inga godsägare som tillbragte vintrarna i skidbacken eller på en lustjakt i Karibiska havet.
Semester *hade* man hemma i augusti: då åt man för mycket, njöt långa siestor och vilade upp sig inför den långa skördesäsongen. (PM1)
(Lit: Vacation had one at-home in August: ...)

The combination of an active verb-form and the generic pronoun *man* as subject (12b) is often described as a useful alternative to agentless passives in Swedish. This translation possibility is however not among the most frequent in the data. The reason for employing it in this example might be that the Swedish verb *ta* ['take'] is unlikely to be used in the passive in collocation with *semester* ['holidays']. The thematic element is the same in both texts and provides a cohesive link with the preceding sentence according to the principle of linear thematic progression. An idea expressed in the rheme of the preceding clause or sentence is picked up and forms a new theme (*holidays*). In accordance with the Swedish V2 constraint, the subject is placed after the verb. The addition of a subject in non-initial position and the fronting of the complement in the translation mean that the theme of this clause is marked whereas the one in the English source text is unmarked.

8 Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to study how textual and grammatical structure is retained or altered in translations. It is interesting to see that a range of syntactic alternatives are used in translations in both directions. Some are less frequent than others, but can still indicate certain tendencies. Some syntactic changes appear to have been made for keeping the thematic structure intact, while in other cases both structures have been changed. However, the main tendency is that the default case with no changes is the most common. This suggests that a variety of translation strategies are in use and further studies will describe such strategies and in more detail.

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