

A corpus study of impersonalisation strategies in newspaper discourse in English and Spanish¹

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1. Introduction

Strategies of impersonalisation in English and Spanish include the use of passives, resultatives, anticausatives, impersonal constructions, nominalizations, and various forms of lexical underspecification (Nedjalkov 1988, Shibatani 1988, Gómez Torrego 1992, Fox and Hopper 1994, Mendikoetxea 1999). The use of these strategies in newspaper discourse reporting political events reflect issues in language and ideology, such as the intentional mystification of agency and vagueness of responsibility in discourse (Fairclough 1989, Fowler 1991, Gruber 1993, Curran and Seaton 1997, van Dijk 1998).

This paper reports on on-going research as part of a major project on the use of these strategies in British and Spanish newspaper articles on political issues. In the collection of texts, we have established a gradient, from those news reports where neither Britain nor Spain is alluded to or implicated, to a situation where each country is both mentioned and implicated in the event.

The purpose of this study is twofold: (1) the identification of qualitative and quantitative differences in the use of impersonalisation strategies between the two languages², i.e. whether the same type of strategies are used in the two languages and the extent to which they are used; and (2) the correlation between the use of strategies and the degree of implication which the newspaper articles reflect in both languages.

2. Impersonalisation Strategies

2.1. Impersonalisation

We have used the term ‘impersonalisation strategies’ to refer to a variety of linguistic means which allow for mystification of the role of agency. In our study we have focused on the following: agentless passives, *ed*-participles, resultatives, impersonals, anticausatives, impersonal pronouns, infinitive clauses, nominalizations, existentials, and a set of miscellaneous occurrences of lexical underspecification, including metonymy and others.

In terms of recoverability of the identity of the agent, the examples chosen represent a gradient in implicitness of agency. In some cases, the underlying agent is recoverable from the preceding or following co-text. In others, it may be inferred on the basis of shared knowledge, or shared event or context models, which allows us to predict the type of agent characteristically involved in the event, though the identity of the agent is not recoverable to the point where unique reference can be established. Finally, there are cases where deagentivization is absolute.

The reasons for omission of the agent in the passive may be based on relevance criteria (Sperber and Wilson 1986). As Biber et al. (1999:477) note, in news reports the agent “may be easy to infer, uninteresting, or already mentioned”. But this exclusion may also be the result of “possible ideologically motivated obfuscation of agency, causality and responsibility”, as Fairclough (1989:124) puts it. In this way, the passive allows not only for mystification of agency but also for claiming ignorance about the identity of the agent, thus obscuring responsibility for negative action.

Impersonal constructions or impersonal use of pronouns such as *people*, *they*, *someone*, *no one* typically exclude both Speaker/Writer and Addressee/Reader from the action, exonerating them from responsibility and implication. The use of *we*, *you*, *one*, on the other hand, allows for the inclusion of the Speaker/Writer (and the Addressee/Reader), in this way creating an expectation of implication and responsibility in the action. Very often, however, they also reflect the distinction established between *ingroups* and *outgroups* of various kinds (van Dijk 1998).

In the inchoative or anticausative³ construction, intentional actions are presented as ‘events’

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² In this paper for the proceedings we only present and discuss the data for Spanish, due to limitations of space.

³ There is considerable variation with regard to the terminology used in the literature. The terms *ergative* and *pseudo-passive* have also been found.

occurring spontaneously. Spontaneous events are typically cases of autonomous or absolute construal. We may distinguish between ‘intrinsically spontaneous events’ (Kemmer 1993) or ‘internally-caused’ events (Levin and Rappaport 1995), that is, those viewed as occurring without the direct initiation of an external cause, and ‘non-intrinsically spontaneous events’, involving some abstract and schematic cause, the evocation of the notion of ‘external causation’ (Langacker 1991), which may be agent, instrument, natural force or circumstance. In the case of non-intrinsically spontaneous events, the expression of the causative event is realized by means of an unmarked lexical causative construction; the same verb form is used in both causative and inchoative in English, the so-called labile alternation. Spanish presents a far more complex situation, though, in general terms, non-intrinsically spontaneous events tend to be coded by means of the marked anticausative construction with *se*, while intrinsically spontaneous events are coded by an unmarked intransitive (unaccusative) construction (Marín-Arrese 2000).

Nominalizations represent a step further in impersonalisation. The examples chosen were those where the agent is not mentioned and the patient participant is defocused. The actional component is obscured, and the event is presented as ‘fact’.

Referential-underspecification is found in various forms of lexicalization used to identify the participants. Agents may be described in general or abstract terms, or may be referred to through the use of metonymic expressions. Other such devices include ethnonyms, role description, attribute description, etc. Choices in the level of specificity in describing the actions may also result in the use of abstract nouns denoting events, rather than intentional actions.

In view of the above mentioned strategies, we may posit a continuum in ‘agency’, ranging from implicit reference to the agent to some abstract and schematic notion of causation, and a parallel continuum in ‘actionality’, with actions at one polar end, and facts at the other (adapted from Marín-Arrese, in press).

IMPLICIT	<-----	NON-RECOVERABLE	----->	SCHEMATIC
<i>Passive</i>		<i>Nominalization</i>		<i>Anticausative Abstract nominals</i>
ACTION	<-----	EVENT	----->	FACT
<i>Passive</i>		<i>Anticausative</i>		<i>Nominalization Abstract nominals</i>

These notions are related to the more general conceptual dimension ‘*relative elaboration of event*’, which, as Kemmer (1994:211) suggests, “can be thought of as the degree to which different schematic aspects of a situation are separated out and viewed as distinct by the speaker”. This dimension subsumes the semantic parameter relative ‘*distinguishability of participants*’. In passive events, for example, the Initiator or Agent participant is defocused and thus the degree of distinguishability of participants is lower than in active causative events. Similarly, in spontaneous events, the single participant coded is construed as the Initiator and also as the Endpoint, since it undergoes some change of state as well.

Langacker (1991:372) observes that “since transitivity depends on the *conception* of distinct, well-differentiated participants, it is potentially influenced by the extent of their differentiation along not only the *objective* but also the *subjective* axis”. This participant distinctiveness thus involves not only more objective features, such as the conceptual distinction of entities into separate participants (agent vs. patient), or the relative salience of these entities with respect to each other and from their background, but also a subjective component, comprising parameters such as “the precision and detail of its type specification” (basic level vs. superordinate category), “the degree of definiteness, which pertains to whether the speaker and hearer have succeeded in making mental contact with a particular instance of the type in question”, and finally “the profile’s *extension*”, that is whether the entity is presented as compact (vs. extended/diffuse) in terms of the oppositions: “spatially compact vs. spatially extended; participant vs. setting; singular vs. plural; count vs. mass; concrete vs. abstract; and restricted portion of a reference mass vs. the mass as a whole”.

2.2. Towards a Taxonomy of Impersonalisation Strategies in Spanish

Impersonalisation strategies in Spanish include the periphrastic passive with *ser* and the resultative with *estar*, as well as the *ed*-participle and a variety of motion and result verbs in non-prototypical and resultative passives.

- (1) a. Una persona **fue** **detenida** por resistir a la autoridad (CSp01)
 one person BE.PAST.3SG arrested
 ‘One person was arrested for resisting ...’
 b. , una vez **vencido** el terrorismo, (CSp10)
 once defeat.ED the terrorism
 ‘Once terrorism is defeated’
 c. ¿Que por qué **estamos amenazados**? (CSp02)
 that why BE.1PL threatened
 You mean, why are we threatened?
 d. , la propuesta **va dirigida** contra ... (CSv04)
 the proposal GO.3SG directed against
 ‘the proposal is directed against ...’

Spanish makes use of a reflexive element *se* for both the foregrounding and backgrounding, or promotional and non-promotional, reflexive passive⁴ (Foley and van Valin 1984; Givon 1990), as well as for the impersonal reflexive. The expression of non-intrinsically spontaneous events in Spanish also involves the use of *se* in the anticausative construction (Marín-Arrese 1992, 2000).

- (2) a. Aunque el informe **se** elaborará más tarde, (CSv05)
 although the report SE prepare.FUT.3SG later
 ‘Although the report will be prepared later, ...’
 b. que **se** importaran harinas cárnicas, (CSa02)
 that SE import.SUBJ.3PL flour.PL meat.PL
 ‘that compound feed (made from meat) should be imported,
 c. no **se** ha detenido a nadie (CSp01)
 not SE have.3SG arrested to.ACC nobody
 ‘Nobody has been arrested’
 d. que **se** les equipare a los funcionarios
 (CSp04)
 that SE them.ACC put on a level.SUBJ.3SG to.DAT the civil servants
 ‘that they should be put on a level with civil servants’
 e. no **se** les reconoce derechos fundamentales de las personas
 (CSp09)
 not SE them.DAT recognize.3SG rights.PL fundamental of the persons
 ‘They do not recognize their fundamental rights as people/their fundamental rights
 are not recognized’
 f. **se** cree que podría ser decisivo ... (CSa04)
 SE believe.3SG that might.3SG be decisive
 ‘It is believed/They believe that it might be decisive ...’
 g. mientras no **se** avance. (CSp03)
 while not SE advance.SUBJ.3SG
 ‘while there is no advance’
 h. ‘sorprendentemente’ empezaron a producirse los reiterados incendios de
 ... (CSp07)
 surprisingly begin.PAST.3PL to produce.SE the repeated fires of
 ‘surprisingly, the repeated fires (of ...) started to take place’

Intentional actions may also be portrayed as intrinsically spontaneous events by means of an intransitive (unaccusative) construction (Martínez-Caro 1999).

- (3) a. porque la lucha **empieza** ahora. (CSp05)
 because the fight begin.3SG now
 ‘because the fight begins now’

⁴ We have established a distinction between the promotional reflexive passive, where the Endpoint nominal acquires features of subjecthood, and the non-promotional passive, where there is no verbal agreement. In both cases, the expression of the agent is typically not allowed. Finally, we have included within the impersonal category all those instances where there is no Endpoint nominal element (Marín-Arrese 1992)

- b. estas propuestas **han surgido** ...(CSp04)
 these proposals have.3PL arisen
 ‘these proposals have arisen ...’

As in the case of English, other impersonalization strategies in Spanish include impersonal use of pronouns, infinitive clauses, existentials, and nominalizations.

- (4) a. “En el sur nos **explotáis**, en el norte nos **expulsáis**”
 (CSv05)
 in the south us.ACC exploit.2PL, in the north us.ACC expel.2PL
 ‘In the South you exploit us, in the North you expel us’
- b. donde le **informaron** que ... (CSv03)
 where him inform.3PL that
 ‘where they informed him that ...’
- c. para **luchar** contra el terrorismo (CSa01)
 to fight.INF against the terrorism
 ‘to fight against terrorism’
- d. **hay que** acabar con el tabú de ... (CSp10)
 have.3SG that finish.INF with the taboo of
 ‘we have to put an end to the taboo of ...’
- e. **urge** poner en común una política de ... (BSv02)
 urge.3SG put.INF in common a policy of ...
 ‘it is urgent to negotiate an immigration policy...’
- f. No **hubo** torturas. (BSv03)
 not have.PAST.3SG torture.PL
 ‘There was no torture/He was not tortured’
- g. **la diseminación** de modelos culturales (ASa03)
 the dissemination of models cultural
 ‘the dissemination of cultural models’

Finally, we find miscellaneous occurrences of referential underspecification and lexical vagueness, where the actors are described at various levels of generality, or by means of metonymy, metaphor, etc., and the actions are presented as abstract nominals.

- (5) a. si **la gente** altera el balance de la creación (ASa03)
 if the people alter.3SG the balance of the creation ...
 ‘if people alter the balance of creation ...’
- b. **Los extranjeros** desconfían de la buena voluntad de ... (CSa05)
 the foreigners mistrust.3PL of the good will of
 ‘Foreigners mistrust the good will of ...’
- c. **mataderos** que incumplen la ley. (CSp01)
 slaughterhouses that break.3PL the law
 ‘slaughterhouses that break the law’
- d. **esta reliquia criminal** le ha arrancado a compañeros como ... (CSp02)
 this relic criminal him.DAT have.3SG torn off to.ACC comrades like ...
 ‘this criminal relic has taken away from him comrades such as...’
- e. **los sucesos** en la comarca de Almería (CSv05)
 the events in the region of Almería
 ‘the events in the region of Almería’
- f. que **las responsabilidades** puedan llegar al Ministerio de Agricultura (CSp07)
 that the responsibilities may.3PL arrive at.the Ministry of Agriculture
 ‘that the responsibilities may reach the Ministry of Agriculture’

3. Text Collection and Data

3.1. The Texts

The corpus used for this paper consists of a total of 60 texts extracted from three Spanish newspapers: 30 from *El País*, 15 from *ABC* and 15 from *La Vanguardia* (approx. 45.000 words). *ABC* and *La Vanguardia* are rather conservative, and therefore represent ideologies that are close to the present Government in Spain. *El País* is more radical, and thus more critical with the present governmental policy. *ABC* and *El País* are national newspapers, while *La Vanguardia* is issued in Cataluña, though there is also an edition printed in Madrid.

The texts collected are news reports of a political nature, chosen from the National and International sections in the papers. The texts vary in degree of ‘potential’ implication: Type A includes international news reports, with no national implication, i.e. the news do not affect Spain in an immediate and direct way, and the country is not even mentioned (e.g. the recent U.S. presidential election); Type B is a selection of international news reports which affect Spain in a direct way (e.g. the conflict concerning the presence of the nuclear submarine *Tireless* in Gibraltar); Type C includes national news reports, which obviously affect the country in a direct way.

The codification system that has been used for examples of each text is the following:

AS: International [- implication], SPANISH

BS: International [+ implication], SPANISH

CS: National, SPANISH.

p: *El País*,

a: *ABC*,

v: *La Vanguardia*

01, 02...: text number.

For example, CSp01 refers to a National item of news taken from the Spanish newspaper *El País*, text number 1.

3.2. Categories of Impersonalisation Strategies

The types of impersonalisation strategies found in the Spanish texts have been organized and numbered in the following way:

- (i) Agentless Passive
- (ii) –*Ed* participle (-agent)
- (iii) Resultative *estar*
- (iv) Non-prototypical passive/resultative (-agent)
- (v) Passive *se* (foregrounding or promotional)
- (vi) Passive *se* (backgrounding or non-promotional)
- (vii) Impersonal *se*
- (viii) Anticausative *se*, Unmarked intransitive (spontaneous events)
- (ix) Impersonal use of pronouns (*they, you, one, we, ...*)
- (x) Infinitive clauses (-agent)
- (xi) Modalised impersonal expressions (*hay que, urge, ...*)
- (xii) Existential
- (xiii) Nominalisations
- (xiv) Miscellaneous lexical strategies

4. Discussion of results

The following table (Table 1) shows the number of instances of each strategy found in the three groups of texts: international without implication (A); international with implication (B); and national (C). Within each type, differences between conservative (*ABC* and *La Vanguardia*) and liberal newspapers (*El País*) are shown. The third column of each group of texts contains the global percentages of use for each strategy in comparison to the other groups of texts. For example, we have found a total amount of 58 cases of strategy I (*Agentless periphrastic passive*); of this amount, 23.3% represent instances found in A texts (both conservative and liberal), 34.4% in B texts and 36.2% in C texts. The last line contains the total number of examples of all the strategies in each type of text and the percentages that these represent. The bottom line contains the total number of cases for the three groups of texts analysed, adding up to a total of 859 instances.

The last column of the table includes the total amount of instances of each strategy followed by the percentages each category represents with regard to the overall number of cases. These figures give us an idea of the relative distribution of impersonalisation strategies in discourse.

Linguistic strategies	A texts (15,696 words)			B texts (15,234 words)			C texts (14,088 words)			TOTAL	
	Cons.	Liberal	%	Cons.	Liberal	%	Cons.	Liberal	%		
I	7	10	23.3	12	8	34.4	2	19	36.2	58	6.7%
II	6	14	25.3	6	5	13.9	21	27	60.7	79	9.1%
III	1	1	13.3	2	4	40	5	2	46.6	15	1.7%
IV	2	3	27.7	1	4	27.7	5	3	44.4	18	2%
V	14	18	19.8	16	26	26	38	49	54	161	18.7%
VI	0	1	12.5	1	3	50	0	3	37.5	8	0.9%
VII	8	5	30.9	6	5	26.1	6	12	42.8	42	4.8%
VIII	4	2	11.7	2	11	25.4	16	16	62.7	51	5.9%
IX	6	8	36.8	2	5	18.4	13	4	44.7	38	4.4%
X	7	3	18.8	7	4	20.7	18	14	60.3	53	6.1%
XI	2	3	21.7	8	2	43.4	5	3	34.7	23	2.6%
XII	0	1	10	0	3	30	2	4	60	10	1.1%
XIII	25	23	27.7	20	13	19	43	49	53.1	173	20.1%
XIV	10	22	24.6	7	10	13	31	50	62.3	130	15.1%
TOTAL	92	114	23.9	90	103	22.4	205	255	53.5	859	

Table 1: Number of instances of impersonalisation strategies and percentages within the three groups of texts, A, B and C and total

In this table we may observe a number of interesting features. Going from the more general to the more specific, one striking aspect is that both the A and the B texts have similar total figures and percentages, while the total figures for the C texts are more than double those of A and B. This, we think, may reflect the higher degree of implication of the writers in the national news reports (C texts), who also resort to a higher number of impersonalisation strategies than the writers of international news. Although the B texts represent news in which Spain is also implicated, the data seem to evince that the degree of implication is always more reduced, and writers appear to use impersonalisation strategies in a similar way to writers of international news with no implication (A texts).

Among the more specific results, we would like to highlight the following aspects:

- (a) With respect to the differences in the use of the various strategies, the impersonalisation device most used in Spanish seems to be nominalisation (strategy XIII), followed by the use of the *se* passive (V), and somehow less frequently, *-ed* participles (II). The miscellaneous category (XIV) also shows high figures, but the results are not as significant since it is a mixed category comprising various lexical forms of underspecification.
- (b) The figure for the ordinary or periphrastic passive (strategy I) is remarkably low, especially if compared with the use of the passive in English. Biber et al. (1999:476) find that passives are quite common in news, “occurring about 12,000 times per million words”. The ratio in English would thus be 0.012, while the ratio of use of the agentless passive in the Spanish texts is 0.0012, that is, one tenth of the frequency in English (of both agented and agentless passives). It is also interesting to compare this figure to that of the *se* passive (V), which shows that Spanish writers tend to use *se* passive constructions twice as often as the ordinary passive construction. Nonetheless, if we add up the results for passive in Spanish (strategies I, IV, V, VI), the ratio of use, 0.005, is comparable to that found for agentless passives in English, 0.006, (Marín-Arrese 1997).
- (c) If we now compare the percentages for texts A, B and C, as we already mentioned, the figures are in general much higher in the C texts. This is especially the case with respect to the use of the *-ed* participle (II), the *se* passive (V), anticausatives and intransitives (VIII), impersonal infinitive clauses (X), existential *haber, existir* (XII) and nominalisations (XIII).

With respect to the use of each strategy, it is worth considering the following:

- (a) The cases of agentless periphrastic passive can be divided into two groups, from the point of view of the writer's intention to hide the identity of the agent. On the one hand, as mentioned above, there are many examples where the agent is not mentioned simply because it is unimportant or unknown. On the other hand, and less frequently, there are also examples which seem to show that the writer is using this syntactic device to intentionally make the agent disappear. Compare, in this respect, examples 6 and 7, which respectively show the two tendencies mentioned:
- (6) (*Pinochet instructs the military auditor to hide the fact that Mr. Eugenio Ruiz-Tagle was tortured in the following way:*) “El señor Eugenio Ruiz-Tagle O. **fue ejecutado** en razón a los graves cargos que existían contra él. No hubo torturas.” (BSv03) (‘Mr. Eugenio Ruiz-Tagle was executed due to the grave accusations that existed against him. There was no torture/He was not tortured’)
- (7) ... miembros de la mafia que residen en España y que están pendientes de **ser juzgados o han sido condenados** por graves delitos en su país. (BSv01) (‘... members of the mafia living in Spain and who still have to be tried or have been sentenced for serious crimes in their country’).
- (b) In some of the strategies it is interesting to note that there is a tendency for most examples to come from direct quotations. This is typically the case of the impersonal use of pronouns (IX) and the impersonal *se* (VII), and is also found in strategies such as the non-prototypical passive (IV). See the following :
- (8) “En este país **todos sabemos** qué es lo que tenemos que hacer para ...” (CSp02) (‘In this country we all know what we have to do to ... ‘)
- (c) Most examples of impersonal *se* occur with verbal processes of the type of *decir*, *asegurar*, *confirmar*:
- (9) En medios diplomáticos y políticos **se aseguraba** ayer que si fracasa la operación Peres... (ASp08) (‘In diplomatic and political circles they assured that ...’)
- (d) It often happens that writers use more than one category, or the same category more than once, in the same stretch of text, thus creating a cumulative effect of mystification of agency. See for example:
- (10) “**Nosotros** (los jueces) no **criticamos**, sólo **observamos** y **se resuelve** sobre lo que **se observa**. Y mientras **aquí se siga creyendo** que **un juez** toma partido, **seremos subdesarrollados** mentalmente”, remarcó el magistrado chileno. (BSa01) (‘We (the judges) do not criticize, we only observe, and rule according to what is observed. And while people here continue to believe that a judge takes sides, we will be mentally underdeveloped’)
- (11) Los querellantes aseguran que **se ha permitido** al *Tireless* navegar por aguas españolas, **no ha sido inspeccionado** por técnicos españoles, **no se ha adecuado** plan de emergencia alguno en previsión de incidentes en la reparación del submarino, **se han ocultado** datos relevantes, **se ha mentado por el presidente del Gobierno** (sic) respecto a la existencia de dictámenes del Consejo de Seguridad Nuclear y **se ha puesto en riesgo** a los habitantes del Campo de Gibraltar. (BSp04) (‘...the submarine *Tireless* has been permitted ..., it has not been inspected by ..., no emergency plan has been adopted ..., relevant facts have been concealed ..., the President of the Government has lied with respect to ... and the inhabitants of Gibraltar have been endangered ...’)

Example (11) is particularly interesting, because the cumulative effect of mystification of agency (the various members of the Government) is suddenly broken by the ‘allegedly ungrammatical’ inclusion of the adjunct “por el presidente del Gobierno”, expressing the identity of the agent of the action denoted by an impersonal passive clause. The effect is such that this agent is

immediately attributed direct responsibility for all the previous events denoted.

- (e) It has been observed that many cases of mystification of agency may have to do with the use of linguistic politeness, that is, writers use impersonalisation strategies to avoid direct face-threatening acts. Brown and Levinson (1987) include the phenomenon of impersonalisation as negative politeness strategy number 7 (see also Pérez de Ayala 2001). In our corpus we have found the following:

- (12) “**H**ay actitudes y comportamientos que sobrepasan los límites más elementales del sentido común”, comentó (Josep Piqué) (BSp04) (‘There are attitudes and behaviours that exceeds the most elemental limits of common sense.’)

It should be taken into account that the results here presented are rather tentative, since the corpus used is relatively limited.

5. Conclusion

The present paper has investigated the use of impersonalisation strategies in Spanish in a corpus of newspaper articles on political issues. The texts represent various degrees of ‘potential’ implication on the part of the writer with regard to the topic of the news item.

The results found seem to point to a direct relationship between degree of implication and more frequent use of the various strategies of impersonalisation. As regards the relative use of each of the strategies, Spanish newspaper discourse seems to favour the use of passive *se* and that of nominalisations.

Although the factor of relevance is undoubtedly crucial in the omission of the agent, we may also surmise that the varied use of all these strategies cognitively contributes to construct, in van Dijk’s (1998) words, ‘preferred models’ of a situation, and, socio-politically, to hide institutional or elite group responsibility.

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