Central European Conference in Linguistics for Graduate Students
Piliscsaba, 30-31 August 2011

Enikő Tankó
University of Bucharest

Empirical Evidence on the Acquisition of the English Passive Construction by L1 Speakers of Hungarian

1. Aims

- investigate the acquisition problems of the English passive voice by native speakers of Hungarian
- compare L2 or L3 English passive acquisition (L2 Romanian influence)
- investigate parameter setting[1] in L2 English by speakers of Hungarian as L1

2. The problem

- there is no generalized syntactic passive construction in Hungarian
- several equivalents of the English passive which (partly) capture certain syntactic or discourse function properties of the English passive (e.g., active sentence with the direct object in topic position)
- the predicative verbal adverbial construction (PVAC) is closest to representing a syntactic equivalent of the passive (it disposes of a special verbal phrase, it selects the internal argument as subject, it implies an auxiliary and it may or may not overtly express the agent)
- PVAC: formed with the auxiliary *van* 'to be' or *lett/lesz* 'become' and the adverbial participle form of the verb (ending in *-vA*[2]):

(1)

Az	*asztal*	*le*	***van***	*fest-ve.*
the	table$_{Nom}$	PRT$_{down}$	is	paint-vA

'The table has been painted.'

(2)

Az	*asztal*	*le*	***lett***	*fest-ve.*
the	table$_{Nom}$	PRT$_{down}$	became	paint-VA

'The table got painted.' (Laczkó, 1995, p. 190)

- three types of constraints on the PVAC:

1 When we refer to the parameters connected to the passive voice, we think of the following properties of the passive:
(1) the external argument is internalized, becoming a focused VP adjunct;
(2) the internal argument is externalized;
(3) the passive construction uses a special verb form (the proper Tense / Aspect form of the auxiliary + past participle);
(4) the passive is (almost) fully grammaticalized in English.

2 The capital letters of the vowels signal that they have variable forms according to the vowel harmony: *-va/-ve* and *-ván/ -vén*, the choice depends on the phonological properties of the vowels of the stem (Bartos, 2009: 75).

(a) lexical constraints – the class of verbs which can appear in the construction (transitives and unaccusatives, but not unergatives);
(b) aspectual constraints (telicity);
(c) syntactic constraints (presence / absence of an overtly expressed agent-phrase).

(3)

*A fal	le	van	fest-ve	a fiú	által.
the wall	PRT$_{down}$	is	paint-VA	the boy	by

'The wall is painted by the boy.'

(4)

A fal	a fiú által	lett	lefestve.
the wall.Nom	the boy by	become:3.sg.past	PRT$_{down}$.paint.vA

'The wall has been painted by the boy.'

(5)

*A levél	gyorsan	van	meg-ír-va.
the letter	quickly	is	PRT -write-VA

'The letter is written quickly.'

(6)

A levél	gyorsan	lett	meg-ír-va.	
the letter	quickly	become	PRT -write-VA	

'The letter got written in a hurry.' (Tóth, 2000: 241-242)

- descriptive grammars omit to mention the PVAC (Keszler, 1999; Kálmán, 2001); others barely mention it (A. Jászó, 2000; Kiefer 1992)
- L1 speakers of Hungarian have very limited knowledge of the PVAC (no explicit instruction)
- however, the PVAC is used quite frequently in everyday speech

- no positive/negative evidence for considering the PVAC the Hungarian counterpart of the English or Romanian passive (direct method in teaching ESL)
- some innate device (i.e., UG) suggests them that the English passive and the Hungarian PVAC have similarities in structure and function

- more or less developed knowledge of Romanian might facilitate the access to learning and using the English passive

(7)

Biletele	au fost	cumpărate	(de Ana).
tickets$_{Nom}$-the	were	bought	(by Ana).

'The tickets were bought (by Ana).'

(8)

Biletele	s-	au cumpărat	(de către Ana).	
tickets$_{Nom}$-the	SE	bought	(by Ana)	

'The tickets have been bought by Ana.'

- a special group of Hungarian speakers (L1 Hungarian, L2 Romanian and L3 English) - bilinguals?
- in some regions: limited contact with Romanian, e.g. Miercurea Ciuc (Csíkszereda in Hungarian, Seklerburg in German)[3] - learn and use Romanian exclusively at school (3-5 classes per week)

3 According to the last census (2002), the population of Miercurea Ciuc was of 42029 inhabitants: 81,75% Hungarian, 17,3% Romanian, 0,62% Romani, etc. (http://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cs%C3%ADkszereda).

3. The hypotheses

- in the first phase of the acquisition: L1 speakers of Hungarian apply the parameters of L1 for the use of the English passive (*Full Access Full Transfer Hypothesis* (Schwartz and Sprouse, 1994, 1996; White, 2003)[4], *Parameter Resetting Hypothesis* (Finer and Broselow, 1986; Finer, 1990; MacLaughlin 1996, 1998)[5])
- subjects from Romania will have better results in the tests involving the English passive voice, as we believe there is transfer from L2 Romanian
- subjects will use the Hungarian PVAC when establishing a correspondent for an English passive sentence, even without being aware of the similarities between the two mentioned structures
- questions to be investigated:

a) Which parameters of the passive are activated / determine the selection of an equivalent?
b) To what extent preference is given to the closest syntactic equivalent (i.e., PVAC) rather than an equivalent which reflects only the discourse parameters of the passive?

4. Research methodology

4.1. The subjects

- 90 subjects grouped according to three types of linguistic backgrounds: (i) Hungarian speakers from Budapest, with no knowledge of a third language with a generalized passive construction; (ii) Hungarian speakers living in Harghita county, Romania, with limited knowledge of Romanian and (iii) bilingual Hungarian-Romanian speakers living in Braşov[6] (*Kronstadt* / *Brassó*)
- 50 eleventh-grader respondents from Miercurea Ciuc (**IM**), aged 17-18 (mean age: 17,8)
- 22 eleventh-grader subjects from Braşov (**IB**), aged 17-19 (mean age: 18,1)
- 18 twelfth-grader students from Budapest, Hungary (**IH**) aged 17-18 (mean age: 18,8)
- all subjects native speakers of Hungarian

4.2. The test

- originally a larger number of tasks, including comprehension- and grammaticality judgement tasks, rephrase- and translation tasks
- in this paper: results of the translation tasks
- English passive sentences with/without an overtly expressed agent in the *by*-phrase, progressive and non-progressive forms
- Hungarian sentences containing the PVAC, but also active sentences with the DO in topic position

4.3. Results

4.3.1. Translation from English into Hungarian

- respondents from Romania resorted to the PVAC, while the majority of the students from Budapest chose active sentences with the direct object in topic position

4 Full Access Full Transfer Hypothesis (Schwartz and Sprouse, 1994, 1996): there is full transfer from L1. However when the L1 grammar is '*unable to accommodate properties of the L2 input, the learner has to recourse to UG options not instantiated in the L1, including new parameter settings, functional categories and feature values in order to arrive at an analysis more appropriate to the L2 input*' (White, 2003: 61).

5 *Parameter Resetting Hypothesis* (Finer and Broselow, 1986; Finer, 1990; MacLaughlin 1996, 1998): in the initial stages of SLA interlanguage grammars are impregnated by L1 parameters; in later stages, L2 learners adopt parameter values distinct from those found in their L1 (i.e., reset parameters).

6 The population of Braşov is of approximately 285,000 inhabitants: 90.66% Romanian, 8.54% Hungarian, 0.6%German, 0.26%Romani, etc. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bra%C5%9Fov).

- different translation equivalents in case of progressive forms

Table 1. Results of the first translation task (E-H)

Sent. / Group		No transl.	Active transl., DO in topic	Transl. with the PVAC	Transl., regular active sent.	Transl. with generic	Transl. with middle	'Under construct.' transl.
A	**IM**	---	16,0%	50,0%	34,0%	---	---	---
	IH	---	38,9%	---	61,1%	---	---	---
	IB	---	9,0%	90,9%	---	---	---	---
B	**IM**	---	12,0%	44,0%	38,0%	2,0%	4,0%	---
	IH	---	27,8%	---	55,6%	---	---	---
	IB	4,54%	9,0%	81,8%	4,54%	---	---	---
C	**IM**	2,0%	30,0%	42,0%	20,0%	---	6,0%	---
	IH	---	44,4%	---	55,6%	---	---	---
	IB	---	9,0%	86,3%	4,54%	---	---	---
D	**IM**	4,0%	4,0%	44,0%	44,0%	4,0%	---	---
	IH	5,6%	11,1%	5,6%	72,2%	---	---	5,6%
	IB	4,54%	9,0%	77,2%	9,0%	---	---	---
E	**IM**	---	36,0%	30,0%	---	---	20,0%	14,0%
	IH	---	88,9%	---	---	---	---	11,1%
	IB	---	18,1%	54,5%	---	---	9,0%	18,1%
F	**IM**	---	34,0%	46,0%	16,0%	---	4,0%	---
	IH	---	33,3%	---	55,6%	11,1%	---	---
	IB	---	13,6%	81,8%	4,54%	---	---	---
G	**IM**	2,0%	30,0%	40,0%	18,0%	2,0%	8,0%	---
	IH	---	66,7%	---	33,3%	---	---	---
	IB	---	18,1%	77,2%	4,54%	---	---	---
H	**IM**	---	30,0%	38,0%	---	---	10,0%	22,0%
	IH	---	77,8%	11,1%	---	11,1%	---	---
	IB	---	31,8%	54,5%	---	---	13,6%	---
Total	**IM**	**1,0%**	**15,75%**	**41,75%**	**21,25%**	**9,25%**	**6,5%**	**4,5%**
	IH	**0,69%**	**48,61%**	**2,08%**	**43,75%**	**4,16%**	---	**0.69%**
	IB	**1,13%**	**8,52%**	**75,56%**	**3,4%**	**6,25%**	**2,84%**	**2,27%**

(9)

The boy was visited by the doctor (A).

a. Az orvos meglátogatta a fiút. (neutral active sentence)

the doctor.Nom prt$_{meg}$.visit.past.3.sg the boy.Acc

b. A fiút meglátogatta az orvos. (active sentence with the DO in topic)
the boy.Acc prt$_{meg}$.visit.past.3.sg the doctor.Nom

*c. *A fiú meg volt látogatva az orvos által.* (PVAC)
the boy.Nom prt$_{meg}$ be/become.past.3.sg visit.vA the doctor by

(10)
The cat is called out by the little girl (B).

a. A kislány kihívta a macskát. (neutral active sentence)
the little.girl.Nom prt$_{OUT}$.call.past.3.sg the cat.Acc

b. A macskát hívta ki a kislány. (active sentence with the DO in focus)
the cat.Acc call.past.3.sg prt$_{OUT}$ the little.girl.Nom

c. %A macska a kislány által lett/?van kihívva. (PVAC)
the cat.Nom the little.girl by become/be.past.3.sg prt$_{OUT}$.call.vA

(11)
The computer is being repaired (E).

a. A számítógépet javítják. (active sentence with the DO in topic)
the computer.Acc repair.pres.3.pl

b. A számítógép meg lett/van javítva. (PVAC)
the computer.Nom prt$_{meg}$ become/be.past.3.sg repair.vA

c. A számítógép javítás alatt van/áll. (‘under construction’ translation)
the computer.Nom repairing under be/stand.pres.3.sg

(12)
The room is being washed up (H).

a. *A szobát éppen felmossák.* (active sentence with the DO in topic position)
the room.Nom just prt$_{UP}$.wash.pres.3.pl

b. A szoba fel van/lett mosva. (PVAC)
the room.Nom prt$_{UP}$ be/become.past.3.sg wash.vA

c. A szoba felmosás alatt van. (‘under construction’ translation)
the room.Nom prt$_{UP}$.washing under be.pres.3.sg

4.3.1. Translation from Hungarian into English

- most common mistake: with the passive morphology

(13)
Az ablak be van törve.(A) (PVAC)
the window.Nom prt$_{IN}$ be:3sg.present break.adv.part
‘The window has been broken.’

a. The window is broken.
*b. *The window is broked.*

*c. *The window was broke.*

Table 2. Results of the second translation task (H-E)

Sent. / Group		No transl.	Active transl.	Passive transl.	Passive, probl. with part.	Passive, probl. with tense/aspect	Passive, missing auxiliary	Passive, multiple probl.
A	**IM**	---	---	60,0	18,0%	18,0%	---	4,0%
	IH	---	---	100,0%	27,8%	---	---	---
	IB	---	---	54,5%	18,1%	22,7%	---	---
B	**IM**	8,0%	2,0%	38,0%	6,0%	2,0%	36,0%	8,0%
	IH	---	---	72,2%	27,8%	---	---	---
	IB	---	---	63,6%	13,6%	22,7%	---	---
C	**IM**	6,0%	62,0%	4,0%	20,0%	---	---	8,0%
	IH	---	33,3%	33,3%	33,3%	---	---	---
	IB	---	63,6%	4,54%	18,1%	9,0%	---	4,54%
D	**IM**	10,0%	46,0%	16,0%	6,0%	---	---	22,0%
	IH	---	66,7%	33,3%	---	---	---	---
	IB	---	40,9%	22,7%	9,0%	18,1%	---	9,0%
E	**IM**	4,0%	---	72,0%	4,0%	8,0%	6,0%	6,0%
	IH	---	11,1%	88,9%	---	---	---	---
	IB	---	4,54%	68,1%	4,54%	22,7%	---	---
F	**IM**	4,0%	4,0%	68,0%	14,0%	---	2,0%	8,0%
	IH	---	---	100,0%	---	---	---	---
	IB	---	18,1%	50,0%	13,6%	18,1%	---	---
G	**IM**	8,0%	12,0%	66,0%	2,0%	---	10,0%	2,0%
	IH	---	16,7%	72,2%	11,1%	---	---	---
	IB	---	9,0%	68,1%	4,54%	13,6%	4,54%	---
H	**IM**	4,0%	---	84,0%	8,0%	---	4,0%	---
	IH	---	---	100,0%	---	---	---	---
	IB	---	---	77,2%	18,1%	4,54%	---	---
Total	**IM**	**5,5%**	**15,75%**	**51,0%**	**9,75%**	**3,5%**	**7,25%**	**7,25%**
	IH	---	**15,97%**	**75,0%**	**9,02%**	---	---	---
	IB	---	**17,04%**	**51,13%**	**12,5%**	**17,04%**	**0,56%**	**1,7%**

(14)

A fal a fiú által lett lefestve. (E) (PVAC with *lesz* ‘become’)
the wall.Nom the boy by become:3sg.past prt_{DOWN}.paint.adv.part

‘The wall got painted by the boy.’

a. *The wall was/has been painted by the boy.*

*b. *The wall is painted by the boy.*

c. *The wall had been painting by the boy.

(15)

Az ajándékot megvásárolták. (F) (active sentence with DO in topic)

the gift.Acc prt_{meg}.buy:3pl.past

‘The gift has been bought.’

a. The gift/present has been/was bought.

b. They bought the present.

*c. *The gift was buyed.*

*d. *The present was buy.*

*e. *The present was boughted.*

(16)

Az inget anyám mosta ki. (active sentence with the DO in topic and the subject in focus) (G)

the shirt.Acc mother.my.Nom wash.3sg.past prt_{OUT}

‘The shirt was washed by my mother.’

a. *The shirt was washed by my mother.*

b. My mother washed the shirt.

*c. *The shirt is washed.*

*d. *The shirt was wash by mother.*

5. Conclusions

- aspectual properties seem to play an important role in the choice of translation equivalents (perfectivize the progressive verb forms vs. the ‘under construction’ solution)
- the presence of an overtly expressed agent: an important operator (active sentences with the direct object for long passives, the PVAC for short passives)
- our data is consistent with the Full Access Full Transfer Hypothesis
- Romanian influence: a facilitating factor in the acquisition of the English passive voice by native speakers of Hungarian from Romania
- differences between standard Hungarian and the Székely dialect spoken in Miercurea Ciuc (on differences between the PVAC in contemporary standard Hungarian vs. in the Csángó dialect[7], Kádár and Németh, 2009, 2010)

7 The Csángó people (Romanian: Ceangăi, Hungarian: Csángók) are a Hungarian ethnographic group of Roman Catholic faith living mostly in the Romanian region of Moldavia, especially in Bacău county. Their traditional language, Csángó, an old Hungarian dialect is still in use, though the larger part of them speak Romanian (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Csangos).

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