

# Use of English passive constructions by bilingual and monolingual students in Yugoslavia

AGNES SZABO

*Junior Engineering College in Subotica, Yugoslavia*

This paper attempts to illustrate the degrees of influences of L1 and L2 in the process of third language acquisition (English) among monolingual high school students in Yugoslavia and Hungary and bilingual (Hungarian-Serbian speaking) students in a predominantly multilingual area situated along the Yugoslav-Hungarian border.

The use of the passive in English appeared to serve the purposes of this investigation best since passive constructions exist and are quite frequently used in Serbian but much less in Hungarian. The first hypothesis was that Serbian-speaking students would use passive constructions more often than Hungarian monolinguals. The second supposition was that bilinguals would use passive forms more often than Hungarian monolinguals in Hungary.

The difference between the English passive constructions on one hand, and their equivalents in Hungarian and Serbian on the other, stem from the different syntactic rules between English and Serbian / Hungarian, respectively. The strict word order in English has a grammatical function that permits the object to precede the verb only if the passivization process takes place, while such a transformation is not required if one intends to initialize the object in Serbian and Hungarian. Owing to the developed morphology of nouns in Serbian and Hungarian, the position of the subject and object is not strictly determined and their initialization depends on the context. The various morphological verb-forms in Serbian and Hungarian imply that there is a subject in the sentence, therefore, it does not have to be explicitly mentioned. In English, however, the subject must always be expressed and related to the one previously spoken about in the text. The fact that an indirect object or a prepositional phrase can also take the subject position in the sentence contributes to the abundant use of passive forms in English. Since in Serbian and Hungarian neither the indirect object nor the prepositional phrase can play the subject-role, passive constructions appear less frequently than in English.

Serbian and Hungarian often use the so-called medial or reflexive verbs instead of the passive construction. «In sentences having this verb-type action is regarded as if it took place by itself. The impersonal meaning expressed by these verbs is becoming very productive» (Korponay 1980, 208).

Compared to English, the use of passive constructions is less frequent in Serbian but «it is an accepted and quite often used form in cases when the doer of the action is considered unimportant or need not be explicitly mentioned.» (Papp 1980, 47) The use of the «be+ adverbial» construction in Hungarian, however, which resembles to English passive forms the most is very limited and allowed only in cases when the verb expresses a permanent state or condition (Papp 1980, 56 / Klaudy 1980, 70).

Since in Hungarian the use of the passive is quite rare, most of the English passive sentences are translated with active constructions. The translation equivalents include the use of: 1) a general subject with the verb in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular or plural; 2) an intransitive (medial or reflexive) verb; 3) a subject taken from the previous sentence or 4) a subject obtained as a

result of a grammatical change – that part of speech in the sentence that is logically acceptable to become the subject (Heltai 1983, 147).

This current linguistic experiment involved 200 high school monolingual (Serbian / Hungarian) and bilingual (Hungarian-Serbian) students aged between 16-19. All tested students have been learning English from primary school with the same number of lessons a week. During the analysis all students were grouped into four different categories. Monolingual Hungarian students from Hungary (Group 1); bilingual (Hungarian-Serbian speaking) students in a Serbian speaking language environment in Yugoslavia who attend classes in Hungarian (Group 2); Serbian monolinguals (Group 3), and Hungarian-Serbian bilinguals attending classes in Hungarian – (Group 4) – both of these two groups living in a mainly Serbian-Hungarian bilingual environment.

The test that the students were asked to complete consisted of a dialogue between two men in English. The sentences followed one another in a logical order, but for certain sentences (that were not typed in bold) multiple choice answers were offered. The given sentence variants were not always corresponding active-passive sentence pairs, but possible active or passive sentences that could logically be connected to the previous as well as the following statement. The students were asked to underline those sentences they thought best fitted in the context, so that in the end the sentence variants chosen by the students merged into a continuous dialogue with those in bold type. The students were given a list of English words from the test with the translation equivalents in their mother tongue. All instructions regarding the completion of the test were given in the students' mother tongue.

The passive sentences in the test were grouped into two main categories: those whose surface construction corresponded only in English and Serbian – hereinafter referred to as SE – and those whose surface structures were similar only in Serbian and Hungarian – hereinafter: SM. The test contained twenty sentences but only thirteen were subjected to analysis because the others were either active constructions (whose analysis was not the aim of this investigation) or had similar surface constructions in all three languages.

After the average number of answers (expressed in percents) in the SE and the SM categories had been calculated for each group of students, the following results were obtained:

Group Number	SE constructions in %	SM constructions in %	Difference between SE and SM
Group 1	61	65	-4
Group 2	76	63	13
Group 3	68	54	14
Group 4	64	58	6

The figures seemed to suggest that in all groups, except in the case of Hungarian native speakers from Hungary (Group 1), all students preferred SE constructions more than SM sentence types. Based on the results it might be concluded that the more the students were familiar with Serbian language the more they preferred the use of passive constructions in English as well. It is interesting to note that the percental difference between the choice of SE and SM sentences in Group 2 (Hungarian-Serbian bilinguals living in a Serbian language environment) shows a close resemblance to that of Serbian monolinguals. Due to the high level of proficiency in Serbian language the members of this Hungarian-speaking ethnic minority appeared

to use English passive constructions the most out of the two examined bilingual groups. The same SE – SM difference in Group 4 is much less because these bilinguals study in their mother tongue and live in a different language environment where they can use Hungarian not only during classes (like the members of Group 2) but outside school as well. The use of SE constructions was the least frequent in the case of Group 1 (from Hungary) who are purely Hungarian-speaking monolinguals and do not know any other second language except their mother tongue where passive constructions are very rarely used. Since these students could rely only on their mother tongue and were not familiar with any other language system where passive constructions are frequently used, their choice of SE sentence types was rarer compared to that of the Hungarian-Serbian bilinguals and Serbian monolinguals.

In Group 4 there were 15 students (Group 4a) who were Hungarian-Serbian bilinguals, like the rest of the tested students in this group, but they have been studying English from the beginning of their secondary education in a class together with 17 other Serbian monolinguals with a teacher who does not speak Hungarian, so in the process of their foreign language learning these students have been listening to grammatical explanations and translation equivalents from their teacher mainly in Serbian instead of their mother tongue. After their results had been singled out from the rest in Group 4 and compared with the others in the SE category the figures showed that these Hungarian-Serbian bilingual students had the tendency to choose English passive constructions when those sentences were similar to Serbian surface structures a little more frequently than bilingual students learning English in a Hungarian class.

Finally, the actual SE sentences were analysed in order to determine the types of constructions that seemed to be the least frequently chosen by bilingual students. It appeared that there were three SE sentence-types in the test where all students preferred to use active constructions in English (instead of the passive). In all three sentences the passive subject was an object-pronoun in the English active variant. The tested students were quite hesitant to choose sentence variants where an object-pronoun was the subject of the English passive sentence. This might be taken into consideration and given more attention during the acquisition of the English passive in Serbian, Hungarian monolingual and Hungarian-Serbian bilingual classes besides the fact that the knowledge of a second language of some of these students may be of great use during the teaching process of this particular language unit.

Based on the above experiment the two hypotheses, namely that 1) Serbian monolinguals use passive constructions more frequently than Hungarian monolinguals and the supposition that 2) bilinguals use passive forms more often than Hungarian monolinguals in Hungary seem to have grounds. For the time being, however, it can be only concluded that there is an indication that the knowledge of a second language (in this case Serbian) may have an influence on the acquisition process of the third language (English). A larger number of tested students and / or other similar researches could bring some further details to light with regard to this topic.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to find out the degree of influence of Serbian language as the language of environment on the usage of the passive constructions in English as a foreign language in case of bilingual (Hungarian-Serbian) students in Yugoslavia. The research included 200 16 and 19-year-old secondary school students: bilingual Hungarian-Serbian speakers in a mainly bilingual and monolingual language environments in Yugoslavia, Hungarian speakers in Hungary and Serbian speakers in Yugoslavia. The students were asked

to complete a test that consisted of a dialogue between two people in English. The sentences followed one another in a logical order but for some of them multiple choice answers were offered. The given sentence variants were not always corresponding active-passive sentence pairs, but possible active or passive sentences that could logically be connected to the previous as well as the following sentence. The students were asked to underline those sentences they thought best fitted in the context, so that in the end the chosen sentence variants merged into a continuous dialogue with the rest of the sentences. The results analysed with the help of the computer have shown that Hungarian-Serbian bilinguals have the tendency to use English passive constructions more frequently when passive constructions in Serbian are their contextual equivalents than when both in Serbian and Hungarian active constructions are required. Thus, the assumption that the second language may have an impact on the acquisition of the third language appears to be supported by these findings.

### **REFERENCES**

- Heltai, P. 1983. *Angol-magyar fordítástechnika*. Gödöllő, Agártudományi Egyetem.
- Klaudy, K. 1980. *Orosz-magyar fordítástechnika*. Budapest, Tankönyvkiadó
- Korponay, B. 1980. Middle, and Causative Constructions in English and Hungarian. In L. Dezső, W. Nemser eds. *Studies in English and Hungarian Contrastive Linguistics*. Budapest, 207-231.
- Papp, Gy. 1980. A jogi társadalmi-politikai szövegek szenvedő ígés szerkezeteinek fordítási problémái. *Hungarológiai Közlemények 44*, Novi Sad, 47-58.