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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

The Good, the Bad, and the In-Between: in Search of a Finnish Personal Passive

Satu Manninen
University of Lund

Finnish is a language which is often thought to have just impersonal passives. In (1), the auxiliary *olla* ‘be’ is in the default (third person singular) form, while the lexical verb *maalata* ‘paint’ is in the passive participle form:

1. *Talo-t o-n maala-ttu.*
house-pl.nom be-pres.3sg paint-pcp.pass
‘The houses have been painted’

But impersonal passives like (1) often contrast with other constructions. In (2), the auxiliary agrees in person and number with the preverbal DP, and the lexical verb is in the passive participle form. In (3), even the passive participle agrees in number with the preverbal DP:

2. *Talo-t ovat maala-ttu.*
house-pl.nom be-pres.3pl paint-pcp.pass
‘The houses have been painted’
3. *Talot ovat maala-tu-t.*
house-pl.nom be-pres.3pl paint-pcp.pass-pl / paint-pcp.pass.pl.nom
‘The houses have been painted / are painted’

Although sentences like (2) are not particularly difficult to find, most Finnish grammar books ignore them altogether. If they *are* mentioned, they are treated as either “transfer from other languages” or as “mistakes” when the speaker has intended to use an “adjectival construction,” such as the one in (3).

Sentences like (1)-(3) provide an interesting testing ground, as grammar books’ judgments are clearly in conflict with how well-formed native speakers judge the sentences to be. The results of a recent experiment (Heinat & Manninen, February 2010) using the methodology of Magnitude Estimation show that native speakers do not really distinguish between sentences like (2)-(3); both are degraded in relation to both impersonal passives and the well-formed filler sentences, but yet at the same time, both are equally well-formed in relation to all the ill-formed filler sentences. These results are puzzling: if (2) either does not exist at all or is a mistake, then why is it not judged to be more ill-formed by native speakers? And if (3) exists and is frequently discussed in grammar books, then why is it not judged to be more well-formed by native speakers?

In this talk, I begin by outlining the relevant data from Finnish, and by providing a brief overview of the actual experiment. I then move on to discuss and interpret the results; the main focus will be on what it means to fall in the middle ground, and what it means for a sentence to be half as well-formed or ill-formed as another sentence.