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Evidence for a Finnish Personal Passive

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Finnish is often cited as a language that has only impersonal passives. This means that the preverbal DP (if there is one) does not trigger (person, number) agreement on the finite verb. In the present and past tense, the verb has the passive morpheme *-taan* or *-tiin* (1a), while in the present and past perfect, the auxiliary *olla* ‘be’ is in the default form (for 3rd person singular) and is followed by a past participle (1b):

1a. Huivit ostettiin useampi vuosi sitten Sokokselta.
Scarves.nom bought.pass.past more year.nom ago Sokos.ablat
‘The scarves were bought some years ago in Sokos’ (a chain of department stores)

1b. Huivit on ostettu useampi vuosi sitten Sokokselta.
Scarves.nom be.3sg buy.pcp more year.nom ago Sokos.ablat
‘The scarves have been bought some years ago in Sokos’

In this talk, we provide arguments for the existence of even a *personal passive* in Finnish. In contrast to (1b), the auxiliary *olla* ‘be’ in the personal passive in (1c) shows (person, number) agreement with the finite verb, and is followed by a past participle:

1c. Valkoinen huivi ja harmaa huivi ovat ostettu Sokokselta.
white.nom scarf.nom and grey.nom scarf.nom be.3pl buy.pcp Sokos.ablat
‘Both the white scarf and the grey scarf have been bought in Sokos’

The existence of a personal passive is usually not even mentioned in the literature on Finnish; if it *is* mentioned, it is often explained as a “mistake” or a “mix” between an impersonal passive and a predicative adjective construction. As shown by (1d), the participle in a predicative construction shows number agreement with the preverbal DP:

1d. Kaikki lukot korvakoruissani ovat ostetut Sokokselta.
all clasps.nom earrings.iness be.3pl buy.pcp.pl Sokos.ablat
‘All the clasps in my earrings are bought in Sokos’

If sentences like (1c) are results of a “mistake” as the literature often claims, we would expect native-speaker informants to judge them as being somehow degraded in relation to either (1b) or (1d). The results from a Magnitude Estimation experiment with 100 native-speaker informants show, however, that (1c) and (1d) are judged to be equally well-formed. Both sentence types are slightly degraded in relation to (1b), but they are still significantly better than all of the ill-formed filler sentences. We begin by presenting the relevant data and by outlining the results from the Magnitude Estimation experiment. In view of the fact that (1c) is a “real” construction (rather than a “mistake”) in native speakers’ minds, we then move on to discuss the way in which the personal passive is formed in Finnish; unlike the impersonal passive, we show that the personal passive is formed of prototypical agent-patient verbs, and the preverbal DP is an underlying object which has raised to the grammatical subject position. The DP also inflects for nominative case. Finally, we address the question of whether (1c) is really a variation of (1d), i.e. whether (1c) is really an example of the predicative adjective construction. This question is real even in a number of other languages: out of context, how do we know if e.g. the English *John is murdered* is a passive, or a non-passive? For Finnish data like (1c)-(1d), we show that there are clear indicators of the passive status of sentences like (1c), and of the non-passive status of sentences like (1d). This means that the sentences cannot be analyzed as having been formed in the same way, or as having the same structure.