A contrastive study of impersonal passives in Swedish and Dutch.

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Background

Although a lot of research has been conducted on impersonal passives in Germanic languages, the scope has mostly been limited to theoretical accounts or studies of one language only (e.g. Barðdal 2004, Sansò 2006). The present study intends to widen the perspective by taking a contrastive approach concentrating on Swedish and Dutch.

Impersonal passives constitute one type of impersonal construction (i.e. constructions with non-canonical subjects) as described in Siewierska (2008:116). Formally, they consist of an overt expletive subject combined with a passive. Semantically, passive constructions encode actions with a general reference, i.e. where no agent is specified (cf Viberg 2010).

In Swedish, impersonal passives mainly contain the expletive subject ‘det’ followed by a morphological passive, as in (1). In Dutch, basically two expletive subjects can occur followed by a periphrastic passive, to wit ‘er’ ‘there’ (as in (2)) and ‘het’ ‘it’. 

(1) Det hördes ingenting (Ekms1)
‘Nothing could be heard’

(2) (...) er werden niet langer koolstoflagen gevormd. (NilsN2)
‘(...) carbon layers were no longer formed.’

In Swedish (Viberg 2010, 147-48), there is a tension between the use of a restricted number of more or less lexicalized impersonal passive verbs with high frequency (in particular certain verbal communication and perception verbs) and a productive use of low-frequency impersonal passive verbs (often including neologisms) to achieve special stylistic effects.

Data and aims

The account is usage-based and draws on the SALT-DU-SWE-corpus, a bidirectional translation corpus of Swedish and Dutch (Rawoens 2010).

The aim of this study is to provide a description of the impersonal passive constructions in the Swedish and Dutch data and to arrive at a classification of the impersonal passives used in the translations.

Relying on the first results from a pilot study, the hypothesis is that there is no one-to-one relationship between the impersonal passive constructions in Swedish and Dutch in the translations.

Results

The corpus analysis confirms that the majority of the impersonal passives in the Swedish originals contain perception verbs and verbs of communication. However, only a minority is translated into Dutch impersonal passives, in particular examples containing perception verbs, as illustrated in (3).

(3) Jo, det känns oerhört svårt. (GuiS1)
‘Ja, het is ongelooflijk zwaar. (GuiN2)

The Dutch translations reveal that Dutch impersonal passives are restricted to verbal communication verbs such as afspreken ‘agree’. In particular, the material shows a strong tendency for the use of the expletive subject ‘er’ ‘there’ in Dutch.

The Swedish translations reveal that Dutch communication verbs in impersonal passive constructions — somewhat unexpectedly — are most frequently translated into active constructions
with a human pronoun or impersonal human pronoun in Swedish, although Swedish communication verbs in impersonal passives would be an option.

Moreover, the Dutch corpus reveals a tendency for verbs of physical activity in impersonal passive constructions, such as *drinken* ‘drink’, *eten* ‘eat’, *zwaaien* ‘wave’ etc. Some occurrences regarding impersonal passives in lexicalized constructions verb + noun have also been observed.

References


