
A Pattern of avoidance – A Pattern of distancing

Reframing the communicative function of the German *werden*-Passiv

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It is a well-established fact that the passive voice is commonly used in precarious contexts to avoid naming an explicit agent (cf. Ágel 1997; Ferreira 2021). By omitting the subject, it functions as the grammatical means of avoidance *par excellence*. However, this communicative function falls short in explaining the increasingly noted passivization of so-called unaccusative (*sein*-perfect) verbs in German.

(1) **Gewachsen wird** nachts.¹

In (1), the verb *wachsen* does not inherently select an agent that could be omitted. This raises the question of how such uses of the *werden*-passive can be motivated and how its communicative function may be reconceptualized in light of passivized unaccusatives.

To address this question, a corpus-based study examined 70 unaccusative verbs—claimed to lack passive forms or considered borderline cases—using the DWDS corpus *Gegenwartskorpora mit freiem Zugang* (3 billion words) to identify evidence of passive constructions. Verbs attested in the passive are analyzed for recurring patterns in aspectual features and semantic roles, forming the basis for explaining their usage and deriving a communicative function.

The findings first show that passive constructions like (1) undergo an interpretive shift, described by Primus (2011) as a ‘pluralization’ of the verbal event, which can be attributed to the structural feature of subject omission. In a second step, their communicative function is captured under the concept of a *distance effect*, thereby specifying the passive as a grammatical means of avoidance, more precisely understood as a strategy for expressing communicative distance. This sheds new light on how meaning is generated precisely through patterns of avoidance – here, the passive – in terms of both semantics and communicative function.

References: • Ágel, V. (1997). Reflexiv-Passiv, das (im Deutschen) keines ist. In C. Dürscheid et al. (eds.), *Sprache im Fokus. Festschrift für Heinz Vater zum 65. Geburtstag*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 147–187. • Ferreira, F. (2021). In defense of the passive voice. *American Psychologist* 76(1), 145–153. • Primus, B. (2011). Das unpersönliche Passiv – ein Fall für die Konstruktionsgrammatik? In K. Proost et al. (eds.), *Sprachliches Wissen zwischen Lexikon und Grammatik*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 265–313.

¹ <https://www.spiegel.de/wissenschaft/gewachsen-wird-nachts-a-10db47c7-0002-0001-0000-000039613464>, abgerufen am 5.8.2025.