

Passive Constructions in Present-Day English*

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In English grammars, voice is often presented as a system opposing two formally defined members expressing two different ways of viewing the event denoted by a (transitive) verb: the active voice (e.g. *The chief manager fired the employee*) and the passive voice (e.g. *The employee was fired (by the chief manager)*). While maintaining that voice is a category of the English verb, analysts generally note that voice in English is a clause or sentence-level phenomenon which concerns the way the semantic arguments of a verb are mapped onto syntactic functions, with subject selection being the central issue.

The ‘BE + past participle’ construction is understandably the main focus of presentations of the passive voice in Present-Day English (PDE). Yet, the label ‘passive voice’ cannot be reduced to that single construction. A passive construction may involve a verb other than BE combined with a past participle, as in the case of the GET-passive, but it may also not involve any kind of ‘helping’ verb. In addition, there are reasonable grounds for arguing that a passive construction may not even contain a past participle.

In this paper, we argue that two main kinds of passive constructions may be recognized in PDE: first, standard or ‘central’ passive constructions, which all involve a passive past participle form; second, ‘marginal’ passive constructions, which do not involve such a form. The first part of this paper (§1) deals with central passives. It provides several arguments for distinguishing between passive past participles and active (or perfect) ones and suggests a distinction between two subtypes of central passives, namely, simple or bare central passives and periphrastic central passives. The second part (§2) focuses on two marginal passive constructions: the ‘V-ING passive construction’ (e.g. *This defect needs checking by a structural engineer*) and the ‘V-ABLE₁ passive construction’ (e.g. *Those tenements shall be recoverable by the donor or his heirs*). The general framework adopted in this paper is that of Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 1982, 1987, 1991, 1999) and Cognitive Linguistics more generally speaking, although some infidelities will be observed and ideas from other theories are occasionally exploited.

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1. Central passive constructions, or 'V-EN₂' passives

In this first part, it is argued that the passiveness of the 'BE + past participle' construction is essentially due to its passive past participle (noted 'V-EN₂') and more specifically to the passive variant of the past participle morpheme it involves ('-EN₂'). This approach makes it possible to give a general formal definition of a number of passive constructions, here labelled 'central passives', which all contain a passive past participle although they may not also contain the auxiliary BE, for instance.

1.1 Problems with formal definitions of the passive voice

The terms 'active' and 'passive' may be taken to denote either semantic or formal categories. Dictionary and school-grammar definitions tend to be at least partly meaning-based: in the active voice, the subject referent 'performs' the action or process denoted by the verb; in the passive voice, the subject referent 'undergoes' the process. However, a formally active sentence need not be semantically active (e.g. *I don't have a pen / He knows the answer*) and may well be deemed semantically passive (e.g. *He suffered a head injury / Gil doesn't scare easily*). Besides, a formally passive sentence need not express a 'passion' or 'suffering' of its subject referent (e.g. *She was loved by the public / He was seen walking away from the house*). Because of such mismatches between form and meaning, grammarians tend to privilege form-based definitions of voice. In formal approaches, the active voice, being unmarked, tends to be negatively defined as not being passive – when indeed it is defined at all. As for the passive voice, it tends to be assimilated to the 'BE + past participle' construction or, less strictly, to clauses or sentences which contain a combination of either BE, or GET, or some other verb 'commutable' with BE, and a past participle. For instance, Sweet (1892: 112) notes that '[i]n English the passive is formed by combining the finite forms of the auxiliary verb *to be* with the preterite participle of the verb'. Visser (1973: §1788) states that 'a 'passive' construction must necessarily consist of a form of *to be* + past participle'. In Quirk *et al.* (1985: 159 *sq.*), a 'true' passive clause is one whose VP contains a combination of BE or GET and a past participle. A more inclusive definition is proposed by Jespersen (1933: 85), for whom '[t]he English passive is formed with an auxiliary, generally *be*, but often also *get* or *become* [...], and the second [i.e. past] participle'. Finally, Svartvik (1966: 4) proposes using the term 'passive' for all sentences which 'have as verbs combinations of *be* (or auxiliaries commutable with *be*) and a past participle'.¹

While these definitions do account for sentences such as (1a, b) below, none accounts for passive clauses such as those contained in (1c, d):

- (1) (a) The employee was fired (by the chief-manager).
(b) The employee got fired (by the chief-manager).

¹ All such sentences, however, are not placed on an equal footing. Svartvik (1966) proposes a six-class passive 'scale' which is reduced to a three-class passive 'gradient' in Quirk *et al.* (1985) going from 'true' or 'central' passives (verbal) to 'pseudo-passives' (adjectival) via 'semi-passives' (semi-verbal, semi-adjectival).

- (c) The employee fired by the chief-manager was Susan's brother.
(d) She had him fired (by the chief-manager).

Sentences (1a–d) all contain the phrase [*fired (by the chief-manager)*]. In (1a), which is an instance of the BE-passive construction, it may be argued that this phrase complements the auxiliary BE and more specifically the passive variant of the auxiliary BE (hereafter 'BE_{AUX2}' when necessary).² In (1b), which is an instance of the GET-passive construction, the same phrase complements the linking or copular verb GET ('GET_{COP}'), which does not possess the formal properties that are usually taken to define the auxiliary subclass (e.g. negation *He [was / *got] not fired*; inversion in *yes-no* questions [*Was / *Got*] *he fired?*). In sentences (1c, d), however, the phrase [*fired (by the chief-manager)*] is not combined with any 'helping' verb such as BE_{AUX} or GET_{COP}.³ In (1c), it modifies the noun *employee* and is usually called a subordinate past participial clause. In (1d), it is the predicate of the subordinate clause [*him fired (by the chief manager)*]. Of course, the subordinate clauses in (1c, d) are recognised as 'passive'. The problem, however, is that they do not match any of the formal definitions of the passive voice mentioned above.

From a semantic point of view, the passiveness of a sentence such as (1a) is essentially due to its past participle *fired* and is characterized by two main properties:

- (2) a. The relation denoted by the past participle is not viewed from the perspective of its primary core participant (P₁) but instead from that of its second core participant (P₂), i.e. the participant that would be taken as object (or first oblique complement) in a basic, active use of the corresponding verb.⁴ Consequently, the past participle in question cannot be predicated of P₁ but only of P₂ – in (1a), for instance, the firing event is predicated of the 'free'/Patient (P₂), not the 'firer'/Agent (P₁);
b. P₁ is nonetheless present in the conceptualisation of the relation denoted by the past participle. Although generally unexpressed, it may be mentioned by

² The passive variant 'BE_{AUX2}' and the progressive variant 'BE_{AUX1}' of BE_{AUX} have different distributions and different meanings (cf. Langacker 1991: 207). In particular, the progressive variant BE_{AUX1} is complemented by the -ING form of a verb which, by and large, must be perfective (e.g. **He is knowing/liking you*) but may be transitive or intransitive (e.g. *They're studying the problem / Sue was sleeping*). By contrast, the passive variant BE_{AUX2} is complemented by the (passive) past participle form of a verb which may be either perfective (e.g. *The report was sent to the manager*) or imperfective (e.g. *She was loved by the public*) but cannot be intransitive in the sense of involving a single participant or role (e.g. **It was being slept (by Sue)*).

³ In this paper, the label 'helping verb' is used to refer both to auxiliary verbs as formally identified by the so-called 'NICE' properties (negation, inversion, etc.) and to auxiliary-like verbs such as GET in (1b). The label might be applied to other verbs whose status is 'intermediate' between that of auxiliaries and 'full', lexical verbs such as KEEP in *John keeps asking questions* or HAVE in *I have to go*.

⁴ By specifying 'object or first oblique complement', we intend to include prepositional passives such as *David Hartridge [...] was looked upon as a hero* (BNC) / *As Hirsch (1977) points out, sexual relationships that are bought tend to be looked down on in our society [...]* (BNC).

means of a grammaticalised variant of the preposition BY, in a so-called ‘agent’ BY phrase (e.g. *by the chief-manager*).⁵

Given this characterisation, a possible alternative to the traditional definitions of passiveness might be to focus instead on structures involving a past participle which is or can be complemented by an agent BY-phrase, and thus more specifically on what might be called a *passive* past participle.

1.2 Active v. passive past participles

Several variants of the past participle or ‘-EN’ morpheme may be recognised in English, each having its own particular semantic and grammatical properties (cf. Langacker 1982, 1991). For instance, it is usual to distinguish between the -EN morpheme involved in the formation of past participles (3a, b), the -EN involved in the formation of past participial adjectives (3c), and the -EN suffixed to nouns to derive adjectives which may have to be part of a larger compound adjective (3d):⁶

- (3) (a) Johnny has **broken** the window.
(b) The window was **broken** (by Johnny).
(c) **broken** glass, a **written** report, a **surprised** expression
(d) **bearded**, blue-**eyed**, ill-**mannered**, short-**sleeved**

However, finer distinctions may be drawn. In particular, although English verbs are generally considered to have only one kind of past participle form, there are grounds for recognizing two, and thus for recognising two variants of the inflectional -EN morpheme: first, the active variant (hereafter noted ‘-EN₁’), which produces active (or perfect) past participles (‘V-EN₁’ forms); second, the passive variant (‘-EN₂’), which produces passive past participles (‘V-EN₂’ forms).

While there are languages in which active/perfect and passive past participles are formally distinct (e.g. Modern Greek, Bulgarian, Russian, Finnish), such a contrast is seemingly not found in PDE.⁷ The (active) past participle *broken*₁ used in (3a) is

⁵ The traditional label ‘agent’ BY-phrase is convenient since BY has other uses (e.g. *She stood by the window / They travelled by plane*) but we do not take it to imply that P₁ is systematically an Agent in the sense of the participant that controls and/or performs the action denoted by V. The semantic role of P₁ is variable since it necessarily depends upon the verb that is used and the meaning in which it is used: e.g. *She was loved by the public* (P₁ Experiencer) / *The building is owned by an Australian businessman* (P₁ Possessor/Theme).

⁶ The use of ‘-EN’ is a mere notational convention, which is meant to include the different kinds of formal realisations or exponents of the past participle morpheme. Whether a particular past participle is formed by adding the suffix *-ed* or *-en* to a verb stem and/or by a phonological modification of that stem is a secondary issue. In addition, the label ‘V-EN’ is not taken to be a category label: a V-EN form may just as well be a participle or an adjective, while a V-EN₁ form is more specifically an active past participle.

⁷ Trask (1993: 202) claims that some English speakers distinguish between perfect and passive past participles for a few verbs such as PROVE (*proved, proven*) and SHOW (*showed, shown*), with the *-ed* form being supposedly active/perfect and the *-en* form passive. However, a brief search of the participle uses of *showed* and *shown* in the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) – both accessed 2008-10-31 – in fact revealed an

formally identical to the (passive) past participle *broken*₂ used in (3b) but these two participles may nonetheless be shown to have different distributions. *Broken*₁ licences a direct object NP (*the window*) referring to the breakee (P₂); it cannot be complemented by a BY-phrase referring to the breaker (P₁); and it may complement HAVE_{AUX} but not BE_{AUX} (e.g. *Johnny [has / *is / *has been] broken the window*). By contrast, *broken*₂ cannot take an NP complement referring to the breakee; it may take a BY-phrase referring to the breaker – an essential property of passive constructions – and it may complement BE_{AUX} but not HAVE_{AUX} (e.g. *The window [was / *had] broken by Johnny*). More generally, active/perfect and passive participles may co-occur in a complex VP but they always do so in the same order, i.e. perfect (HAVE + V-EN₁) > progressive (BE₁ + V-ING) > passive (BE₂ + V-EN₂), as in *has been broken* (HAVE+S - BE₂+EN₁ - BREAK+EN₂) or *has been being discussed* (HAVE+S - BE₁+EN₁ - BE₂+ING - DISCUSS+EN₂). As noted by Palmer (1965: 60):

The participle associated with the perfect is always second while that associated with the passive is always last [...], with in each case the relevant form of the auxiliary preceding it. Structurally, then, the two are quite different.

It might be added that passive past participles seem to be far more frequently used as noun modifiers than active ones. For instance, the V-EN₂ form of a transitive verb may be used as (the head of) a noun modifier as in (4b) below, but not its V-EN₁ form as in (4d):

- (4) (a) [The employee [who was fired by the chief-manager]] was Susan's brother.
(b) [The employee [fired by the chief-manager]] was Susan's brother.
(c) [The manager [who has fired Susan's brother]] is an idiot.
(d) *[The manager [fired Susan's brother]] is an idiot.

A possible way of accounting for the distributional differences between *broken*₁ and *broken*₂ is to postulate that these participles involve two different variants of the inflectional -EN morpheme – the active variant -EN₁ and the passive variant -EN₂ –, which themselves differ both grammatically and semantically.

First, it could be argued that -EN₁ and -EN₂ have different morphological ('input') domains. Leaving aside a few exceptions such as modal auxiliaries, -EN₁ may combine with almost any verb stem while -EN₂ chiefly combines with (semantically) transitive verbs. For a verb to be used in the BE-passive construction, for instance, the corresponding event must in any case be conceived as involving at least two roles (e.g. **It was danced (by Susan)*).⁸

overwhelming numerical predominance of *shown* over *showed* in *both* the perfect and the (BE-)passive constructions and thus did not support Trask's claim. Crystal (1995: 204) notes that pairs such as *burned/burnt*, *learned/learnt*, *smelled/smelt*, etc., might instead reflect an aspectual distinction, *viz.* durative (*burned*) *v.* non-durative or resultative (*burnt*), though perhaps not in American English where the -*t* ending is simply much less frequent.

⁸ Passives of intransitive verbs are found in some languages (e.g. Germ. *Es wurde getanzt*, lit. 'it was danced'), although scholars tend to treat them separately from passives of transitive verbs. Besides, while it makes sense to say, for instance, that English modal auxiliaries 'do not' have non-finite forms,

Secondly, it could be argued that $-EN_1$ and $-EN_2$ have different meanings, i.e. that they express different ways of conceptualising the event denoted by the verb stem they are combined with, so that $V-EN_1$ and $V-EN_2$ have different meanings, too. Aspectually, *broken₁* and *broken₂* may both be considered to express a ‘retrospective and resultative’ viewpoint on the process denoted by V (Joly & O’Kelly 1990): the latter is seen from its final (notional) instant. However, only *broken₂* expresses a view of the breaking event from the perspective of the breakee. Thus, more generally, while a $V-EN_1$ form is to be predicated of P_1 and displays an ‘active’ orientation, a $V-EN_2$ form is to be predicated of P_2 and displays a ‘passive’ orientation. An additional property of *broken₂* is that the breaker (P_1), though backgrounded, is nonetheless involved in the corresponding conceptualisation. This property also distinguishes passive past participles from passive past participial adjectives such as (3c) and thus, ‘verbal’ (‘actional’) from ‘adjectival’ (‘statal’) passives, in traditional terms. Passives are predominantly ‘short’ (‘agentless’) rather than ‘long’ (‘agentful’) but it may be argued that a sentence such as *The window was broken* is semantically passive only if some ‘breaker’ is implicitly involved. Otherwise, the sentence is not interpreted as denoting a breaking event but instead the state resulting from such an event, as observed in the ‘breakee’. As for the fact that P_1 may only be mentioned by means of a BY-phrase in PDE (rather than an OF-phrase, for instance), it may be regarded as a formal property of $V-EN_2$, although it is not unique to this form (cf. §2).⁹

Thus, it appears that properties (2a, b) are essentially the effect that $-EN_2$ imposes on the verb stem it is combined with: the relation denoted by V is viewed from the perspective of P_2 so that $V-EN_2$ may only be predicated of P_2 but P_1 is nonetheless notionally involved and potentially expressed by means of a BY-phrase.

1.3 Central passives formally defined

While it is usual to speak of passive clauses or sentences, it appears that the term ‘passive’ might primarily be applied to a particular kind of past participle and more specifically to a particular variant of the $-EN$ morpheme. As will be discussed in §2, however, there are reasons for applying the term ‘passive’ to constructions which do not involve such a form and might be termed ‘marginal’ passive constructions. So as

one would rather avoid the claim that such and such a verb ‘does not’ have a $V-EN_2$ form. *Been*, *remained*, *happened*, *occurred* could very hardly be passive past participles, but most verbs can be combined with $-EN_2$ in at least one meaning or use: e.g. HAVE in *A great time was had by all* (but not **A great car was had by John*); WEIGH in *The potatoes were weighed by the greengrocer* (but not **Two kilos were weighed by the potatoes*); ARRIVE in *A conclusion was arrived at* (but not **The station was arrived at*, nor **It was arrived by the guests*).

⁹ Passive participles seem to allow only BY for introducing P_1 in PDE. Prepositions other than BY are found in agent-like phrases, but mainly after past participial adjectives derived from ‘psychological’ verbs (e.g. *satisfied with the service*; *surprised at the announcement*; *worried about the news*). With such verbs, the semantic distinction between the passive participle and the corresponding past participial adjective is tenuous, so that *satisfied by the service* is very similar to *satisfied with the service*. However, with strongly transitive verbs such as BREAK, the semantic difference is clearer and only BY is allowed (e.g. *The window was broken [by / *with / *at / *about / *of] one of the kids*).

to maintain a terminological distinction, constructions involving a V-EN₂ form are hereafter referred to as ‘central’ passive constructions.

Two main types of central passives may be recognised, *viz.* simple or ‘bare’ central passives on the one hand, and periphrastic or ‘expanded’ central passives on the other.¹⁰ A bare central passive is a construction headed by a V-EN₂ form and potentially reduced to its head. Its typical structure is [V-EN₂ () (BY NP_{AGT})]: the V-EN₂ head is or can be complemented by an agent BY-phrase and the empty brackets indicate the possibility of additional complements (not to mention modifiers), which depends upon the valency of V and the particular use that is considered (e.g. *the money [spent on education (by the government)] / a part of the brain [called the hypothalamus]*). A full notation, however, would have to include a position for P₂, of which the V-EN₂ form or phrase is to be predicated, and might take the form of a valency grid. A periphrastic central passive is a construction in which a bare passive – thus primarily a V-EN₂ form – is combined with some helping verb such as the passive variant of the auxiliary BE or the copular verb GET. Thus, while sentences (1a, b) contain periphrastic central passives, sentences (1c, d) contain bare central passives.

Periphrastic passives raise a number of complex syntactic and semantic issues, as do auxiliary verb constructions more generally, although GET is not ‘technically’ an auxiliary. In a phrase such as *was fired*, for instance, it is the passive participle *fired* that conveys the essential part of the semantic content denoted by the phrase – *fired* is semantically the main word or ‘primary information-bearing unit’ (Croft 2001) of the phrase – and *was fired* is interpreted as referring to an instance of the kind of event denoted by the verb FIRE. Yet, *was fired* is a finite verb phrase, while *fired* is non-finite and indeed possibly not a verb form at all. Many scholars consider that only finite verb forms are properly called verbs and that participles, as well as infinitives, should be classified differently – as a kind of (verbal) adjective, for instance –, partly because they lack morphological properties of finite verb forms – they are not marked for tense, in particular – and partly because they cannot function as predicate in a simple, independent clause (e.g. *The employee [was / got / * __] fired (by the chief-manager)*).¹¹ In other words, there are reasons to think that the head of the finite VP *was fired* is in fact the auxiliary verb *was* and not the passive past participle *fired* – not to mention the fact that the traditional analysis of auxiliaries as modifiers is demonstrably erroneous (cf. Langacker 1991, Taylor 2002). Analysing auxiliaries as heads may seem counterintuitive in the case of *was fired*

¹⁰ The terms ‘bare’ and ‘expanded’ are borrowed from Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 1430). The latter, however, do not distinguish between active/perfect and passive past participles.

¹¹ In the Western grammatical tradition, participles were long considered as a primary ‘part of speech’. Even in English grammars, their recognition as a kind of verb form has never been fully consensual. For instance, in Sweet (1892: 115), participles and infinitives are called *verbals* rather than *verbs* and regarded as ‘intermediate between finite verbs on the one hand and nouns and adjectives on the other.’ Similarly, Jespersen (*MEG* II: 6–7) considers that only finite verb forms are ‘real verb forms’ with a ‘sentence building-power’; participles and infinitives are distinguished from verbs and called *verbids*. For Langacker (1982, 1987, 1991), verbs denote ‘temporal relations’, whereas participles and infinitives denote ‘atemporal relations’ and are therefore not verbs but ‘non-verbal relational expressions’, alongside adjectives and prepositions, notably.

because the semantic content of *was* is extremely schematic compared with that of *fired*. Indeed, it is precisely because primary auxiliaries (HAVE, BE, DO) are verbs that have been almost totally emptied of their semantic content that they are ‘function’ verbs that may be used to structure the conceptual content provided by forms derived from ‘full’, lexical verbs. However, analysing auxiliaries as heads (instead of dependents) is clearly preferable in the case of modal auxiliaries, whose content is less schematic than that of primary auxiliaries: e.g. *He could be fired* does not express an instance of the event denoted by FIRE but a possibility.¹² Therefore, it appears that what is usually called a ‘passive sentence’ may not be a sentence headed by a passive past participle but a sentence whose VP *contains* a periphrastic (central) passive, which is indeed how passives are traditionally defined (cf. §1.1). Less vaguely, perhaps, a passive sentence could be defined as a sentence whose subject phrase refers to the second core participant in the relation denoted by the passive participle contained in its VP.

Finally, placing the descriptive focus on passive participles is in no way incompatible with recognising the BE-passive and the GET-passive constructions as fully-fledged symbolic units. A claim to the contrary would obviously not make much sense. The various types of periphrastic central passives differ in terms of semantic import – *He was fired* does not mean the same as *He got fired* – but also in terms of their degree of grammaticalisation. The BE-passive is the most grammaticalised type of passive construction; it involves a specialised variant of the auxiliary BE (BE_{AUX2}) and is fully integrated in the English verb system. The GET-passive, though itself largely grammaticalised, seems to be slightly less so. Significantly, while many grammarians might describe *was fired* as a passive ‘form’ of the verb FIRE, few would presumably describe *got fired* in similar terms – both are in any case more appropriately called verb phrases (or verb ‘groups’) than verb forms. GET-passives are far less frequent than BE-passives; they are regarded as ‘informal’ and generally limited to a spoken, conversational register (Biber *et al.* 1999: 476, 481). In addition, GET_{COP} is not an auxiliary and its meaning is not as ‘dematerialised’ as that of BE_{AUX2}, hence the oft-mentioned ‘special connotations’ of the GET-passive and the fact that there are more restrictions on the formation of GET-passives than on BE-passives.¹³ As for other kinds of copular constructions such as (5a–c), their status is more uncertain:

- (5) (a) Little by little the boy **became accepted by the family**. (BNC)

¹² More generally, the semantic interpretation of such chain-like structures depends upon the relative contentfulness of the forms involved: for instance, while *is smiling* or *has been smiling* is interpreted as expressing an instance of the kind of event denoted by SMILE, *keeps smiling* may seem more uncertain and *likes smiling* is instead taken to express a liking.

¹³ The subject referent of a GET-passive is typically personal while that of a BE-passive is typically inanimate and GET-passives, unlike BE-passives, often suggest an idea of active participation, effort or responsibility, etc., of the subject referent in ‘obtaining’ what is denoted by V-EN₂. They also tend to express situations that are detrimental (or, less frequently, beneficial) to the subject referent while BE-passives are again neuter in this respect. As for restrictions, BE may generally be substituted for GET, but GET cannot as easily be substituted for BE (e.g. *She [was / ?*got] admired by French critics / Their house [was / ?*got] built last year*).

- (b) It is very important that teenagers should never **feel rejected by their parents** [...]. (BNC)
- (c) Leitzig **looked surprised by the question**. (BNC)
- (d) The employee [was / got / *became / *seemed / *remained / *looked] fired.
- (e) The burglar [was / got / *became / *seemed / *remained / *looked] arrested.
- (f) The albatross [was / got / *became / *seemed / *remained / *looked] killed.

As shown by (5d–f), linking or copular verbs other than GET (e.g. BECOME, SEEM, REMAIN, LOOK, FEEL, etc.) generally cannot be complemented by a (passive) past participle: when they are followed by a V-EN form, the latter is usually a past participle adjective. However, (5a–c) seem to show that such a complementation is occasionally found, with some verb types at least. It seems that GET_{COP}, though less grammaticalised than BE_{AUX2}, is more grammaticalised than other copular verbs. Thus, while [BE + V-EN₂] and [GET + V-EN₂] are to be recognised as established units or constructions, combinations such as [FEEL + V-EN₂] may not present the same degree of entrenchment.

2. Marginal passive constructions

Applying the label ‘passive’ only to clauses or sentences whose main verb is a passive past participle fails to account for the passive character of sentences such as the following:

- (6) (a) Again, this is a serious defect and [it] needs **checking** by a structural engineer. (BNC)
- (b) Those tenements shall be **recoverable** by the donor or his heirs. (BNC)

The forms *checking* in (6a) and *recoverable* in (6b) are not passive past participles but they are semantically and formally comparable to passive past participles. In particular, they display the same passive orientation and may both be complemented by an agent BY-phrase. Sentences (6a, b) are examples of what might be called ‘marginal’ passive constructions, as opposed to ‘central’ passive constructions such as (1a–d), which all involve a V-EN₂ form. More specifically, sentences (6a, b) illustrate two different kinds of constructions whose main properties are discussed hereafter: respectively, the ‘V-ING passive construction’ (§2.1) and the ‘V-ABLE₁ passive construction’ (§2.2).

2.1 The V-ING passive construction

In PDE, the -ING form of a verb (e.g. *cleaning*, *replacing*) is not neutral with respect to the category of voice and normally has an active orientation: e.g. *cleaning* may be predicated of an NP referring to the ‘cleaner’ role, not to the ‘cleanee’. Nonetheless, there is a special construction, which may be called the ‘V-ING passive construction’, in which a V-ING form may be semantically and syntactically passive:

- (7) (a) If you can pull the paper out easily, the seals probably need **replacing**. (BNC)
(b) The mess on that carpet wants **cleaning**. Go and get some water. (BNC)
(c) And if they think your problem needs **sorting** out by a doctor, they will recommend that you go to see one. (BNC)
(d) 'We really need this house **redecorating**,' said Corinne's mother [...]. (CCCS)
(e) It needs a fortune **spending** on it. The roof's bad, there's no central heating, there's damp and the cellars are full of rot. (BNC)

2.1.1 Defining properties of the V-ING passive construction

The formal structure of the V-ING passive construction may be noted as (8):

- (8) NP₁ V₁ [(NP₂) V₂-ING () (BY NP_{AGT2})]

(8) is an abstract (categorical) notation of a complex sentence pattern in which the verb of the matrix clause (V₁) is complemented by a subordinate -ING clause (between square brackets). The V-ING form that heads the subordinate clause may be complemented by an agent BY-phrase (BY NP_{AGT2}), as in (7c); and the -ING clause may have an overt subject (NP₂), as in (7d, e). In most cases, however, neither is expressed, as in (7a, b).¹⁴

The V-ING form of the construction is what traditional grammars call a gerund, i.e. a verbal form displaying nominal properties ('verbal noun'), as opposed to a participle, i.e. a verbal form displaying adjectival properties ('verbal adjective'). Many grammarians have now abandoned this traditional distinction and recognise a single '-ING form' of the English verb, or indeed a single 'gerund-participle' form (Huddleston & Pullum 2002). Others, such as Abney (1987) and Taylor (2000), have instead argued that it is necessary to distinguish not only between -ING participles and -ING gerunds, but also between 'Acc-ING' gerunds (e.g. *I remember him doing it*) and 'Poss-ING' gerunds (e.g. *I remember his doing it*). As far as this presentation is concerned, the important point is that the V-ING form of the V-ING passive construction is more verb-like than noun-like. Like V-EN₂, it is a tenseless form and therefore lacks a crucial verbal property; in addition, it heads a structure which fills a typically nominal position – complement of a transitive verb. However, the V-ING form involved in the V-ING passive construction is verb-like as regards (i) its complementation properties and its ability to take a plain NP as subject (cf. *infra*); (ii) its ability to be modified by an adverb but not by an adjective (9a); and (iii) its inability to be determined by an article (9b):

¹⁴ Empty brackets are used to indicate the possibility of additional complements, depending on the kind of verb (V₂) involved (cf. ex. (14)–(17) below). Besides, (8) is an abstract notation of a basic realisation of the construction in the sense that the matrix clause headed by V₁ is suggested to be a declarative main clause although it may very well be interrogative (e.g. *Do the seals need replacing?*) or non-finite and embedded in a higher-level structure (e.g. *The seals are likely to need replacing / It's too obvious to need saying*).

- (9) (a) The seals need replacing [regularly / *regular].
(b) The seals need (*the) replacing.

Thus, the internal syntax of the structure headed by the V-ING form is largely verbal, although its external syntax is NP-like. It might be noted that the status of the -ING form involved can occasionally be ambiguous, as, for instance, in *He requires training*: the -ING form does not have any dependents that could clarify its status and *training* could well be an uncountable noun denoting an activity (e.g. *He requires [some / a little] training*) – indeed, whether *training* is an uncountable noun or a passive V-ING form does not significantly affect the interpretation of the sentence. However, such ambiguities are a secondary issue since they are not proper to the V-ING passive construction: they may also be found with ‘standard’ (active) -ING forms, as in *He likes training*. Similarly, structures of the type [*a good/little* V-ING] and the descriptive difficulties they may raise are inherent to V-ING forms and thus not restricted to the V-ING passive construction.

Countless sentences contain a matrix clause whose verb is complemented by a subordinate -ING clause without being instances of the V-ING passive construction (e.g. *She enjoys playing chess / Would you mind carrying this for me?*). However, there are two singular properties that make this construction unmistakable.

First, only a handful of semantically related verbs can fill the V₁ (matrix verb) slot of the construction. All express a kind of necessity or lack and are thus more or less synonymous with NEED, which indeed seems to be the verb most frequently used in that position. WANT and REQUIRE are also fairly frequent although the former is here only found in the ‘spoken’ or ‘informal’ use in which it expresses a need rather than a wish, a use which again is not restricted to the V-ING passive construction. The few other possible verbs notably include DESERVE, REPAY and MERIT:

- (10) (a) A transfer normally **requires** signing only by the seller. (BNC)
(b) I think this work **deserves** noting, watching and recommending. (BNC)
(c) [W]e are not claiming to exhaust his subtle text, which well **repays** reading in full. (BNC)
(d) You may believe, deep down, that you do not really **merit** listening to and so you put on a very unconvincing show or let others talk you down. (CCCS)

The second special property of the V-ING passive construction is that the V-ING form it involves is simple – the form is V-ING (e.g. *cleaning*), not BEING V-EN₂ (e.g. *being cleaned*) – but it is nonetheless semantically and syntactically passive.¹⁵ For instance, it can typically be paraphrased as ‘to be V-EN₂’ (11b) but not ‘to V’ (11c):

- (11) (a) The carpet needs cleaning.
(b) The carpet needs to be cleaned

¹⁵ Sentences such as ??*The carpet needs being cleaned* seem to be practically nonexistent. In a search of the BNC (2008/11/07), only one such occurrence was found.

(c) *The carpet needs to clean.

By contrast, (12a), which involves a ‘standard’ (active) V-ING clause, cannot be paraphrased as (12b) and is semantically close to (12c):

- (12) (a) Peter likes reading.
(b) ?*Peter likes to be read.
(c) Peter likes to read.

Incidentally, one may wonder what, semantically, differentiates (12a) from (12b). Presumably, some of the usual aspectual distinctions between -ING and -EN₂ are maintained: V-ING denotes an internal viewpoint on the event denoted by V, i.e. a representation of an event seen at some point of its internal temporal development and thus potentially ‘in progress’ provided that the verb expresses an occurrence rather than a state; by contrast, V-EN₂ denotes a terminal and resultative viewpoint on the event denoted by V. Consequently, one may hypothesise that (12a) tends to highlight the development of the cleaning event, while (12b) is more focused on the result which is to be reached. These aspectual distinctions may occasionally be felt but it should also be noted that [NEED V-ING] is also much rarer than [NEED TO BE V-EN₂].¹⁶ More generally speaking, the raw frequency of the V-ING passive construction seems to be very low.

In addition to accepting a passive ‘to be V-EN₂’ paraphrase, the verbs that can fill the V₂ slot of the V-ING passive construction are the same as those that can be used in the standard BE-passive construction. Basically intransitive verbs are excluded (13a) as well as verbs which are syntactically but not also semantically transitive (13b):

- (13) (a) *This problem doesn't need occurring.
(b) This book deserves [recommending / *having].

The V-ING form of the construction is also passive with respect to the grammatical mapping of its semantic arguments and thus its complementation. Usually, the -ING form of a verb has an active orientation and can take the same complements as a finite active form of that verb. For instance, CLEAN takes an object NP in its basic use (e.g. *John cleaned the carpet*) and so can normally its -ING form (e.g. *John hates cleaning the carpet*). In the V-ING passive construction, however, the V-ING form involved shows the same complementation properties as the corresponding passive past participle (V-EN₂): **The carpet needs cleaning* it is just as unacceptable as **The carpet was cleaned* it. Similarly, what could be the subject of a BE-passive sentence involving a given transitive verb could be the (main or subordinate) subject of a V-ING passive sentence involving the same verb (as V₂):

- (14) (a) She [reminded Peter of his obligations]. [active]
(b) Peter [was [reminded _ of his obligations]]. [BE-passive]

¹⁶ BNC search (2008/11/07): 579 occurrences of [NEED V-ING] as against 2.447 occurrences of [NEED TO BE V-EN₂] and only 9 (real) occurrences of [DESERVE V-ING] as against 170 of [DESERVE TO BE V-EN₂].

- (c) Peter [needs [reminding _ of his obligations]]. [V-ING passive]
- (15) (a) Susan [taught him a lesson]. [active]
(b) He [was [taught _ a lesson]]. [BE-passive]
(c) He [needs [teaching _ a lesson]]. [V-ING passive]
- (16) (a) The leaflets also need distributing to families [...]. (BNC)
(b) The leaflets also need to be distributed to families.
- (17) (a) She didn't need telling who Dana's companion had been [...]. (BNC)
(b) She didn't need to be told who Dana's companion had been.

A further similarity with V-EN₂ is that the V-ING form of the construction may be complemented by an agent BY-phrase, as in (6a), (7c), (10a), and the following:

- (18) (a) Cataclysmic first quarter figures from MIPS Computer Systems Inc. [...] underline how much the company needs **rescuing by Silicon Graphics Inc.** (BNC)
(b) One example that springs to mind is children's clothing, which is sold in our country at less than cost and therefore needs **subsidizing by the state.** (CCCS)
(c) Other difficulties, such as general attitudes to workers and expectations of what being a 'good mother' means, may require **rethinking by the collective mind** but more immediately they require **dealing with by the individual concerned.** (CCCS)

Finally, it is not the case that in this construction 'the main clause subject corresponds to the implied object of the *-ing* clause' (Biber *et al.* 1999: 746). This analysis is clearly disconfirmed by sentences such as (7d) *We really need this house redecorating*, in which there are two subjects, one in the main clause (S₁, *we*) and another in the subordinate clause (S₂, *the house*), which refers to the second core participant in the relation denoted by the V-ING form. As is generally the case in similar structures (e.g. *Would you mind (John) opening the window?*), the subject of the subordinate clause is expressed only when it is not coreferential with that of the matrix clause (e.g. *This house needs redecorating*); the fact that the (passive) -ING clause is generally subjectless is also quite typical of non-finite clauses. From a theory-internal perspective, this analysis is also preferable to one positing a unique case in the English language in which the object, rather than the subject phrase, functions as a syntactic pivot (cf. Palmer 1965: 157).

2.1.2 *The V-ING passive construction as an idiom*

The V-ING passive construction may be considered as an idiom or a 'semi-frozen' expression, granted that the distinction between 'free' and 'frozen' expressions is a matter of degree. It is not idiomatic in the sense that it is a fully fixed expression with a non-compositional, unpredictable meaning (e.g. UNDER THE WEATHER / CARRY THE DAY) but in the sense that there are properties which are unique to that construction

and which cannot be accounted for by the rest of the grammar of English. These are essentially the constraints that bear on the V_1 (matrix verb) slot of the construction and the passive meaning and syntax of its simple V_2 -ING form.

First, it has been noted that only a handful of verbs may fill the V_1 slot of the V-ING passive construction – NEED, WANT, DESERVE, REQUIRE, MERIT and possibly a few others. This, in itself, is an argument for considering that the construction is semi-frozen. Of course, not just any verb may be complemented by a ‘standard’ -ING clause, but the numerical difference remains compelling. In addition, although the verbs that may fill the V_1 slot of the construction are semantically related, synonyms of these verbs cannot be used in their stead (19a), as they might in other contexts (19b), which is another well-known characteristic of more or less idiomatic expressions such as [V ATTENTION (TO NP)] in (20):

- (19) (a) The carpet [requires / ?*necessitates / *calls for] cleaning immediately.
(b) This situation [requires / necessitates / calls for] a new environmental policy.
- (20) (a) Peter [gave / ?*offered / *donated] attention to Mary.
(b) Peter [gave / offered / donated] a book to Mary.

It is also worth noting that the number of potential candidates to the V_1 position of the V-ING passive construction seems to have considerably decreased in the past centuries. In his *Historical Syntax of the English Language*, Visser (1973: §1788) gives a list of 22 such verbs (ABIDE, AVOID, AWAIT, BEAR, CONTINUE, DESERVE, DESIRE, ESCAPE, FEAR, HATE, LACK, MERIT, MISS, MOT (obsolete), NEED, PREFER, PREVENT, REPAY, REQUIRE, STAND, SUFFER, WANT). By way of comparison, Quirk *et al.* (1985: 1190) list only four verbs (DESERVE, NEED, REQUIRE, WANT), although their list is probably not meant to be exhaustive: MERIT and REPAY, for instance, are not mentioned although their use in the V_1 slot of the construction, however rare, is still attested. The difference is nonetheless striking: it suggests that the V-ING passive construction used to be more productive and has become increasingly fixed over time, with ever fewer verbs allowed in its V_1 slot.

The second main reason for treating the V-ING passive construction as an idiom is of course its passive V-ING form. Only in this construction can a simple V-ING form such as *counselling* be semantically and syntactically passive, with its first argument potentially expressed in an agent BY-phrase.¹⁷ There is a relation between this special use of V-ING and the verbs that may fill the V_1 slot of the construction, since *counselling* could be paraphrased as ‘to be counselled’ in *He needs counselling* but not in *He likes counselling (people)*. However, it is uncertain whether this special use of V-ING could be (synchronically) explained on the basis of semantic properties

¹⁷ Even [(BE) WORTH V-ING], despite its semantic links with the V-ING passive construction, is a different kind of construction since the V-ING form it involves may be derived from a verb that could not be used in the BE-passive (e.g. *This book is worth having*) and cannot take an agent BY-phrase (e.g. **The company is worth rescuing by Silicon Graphics Ltd.*).

shared by the potential V₁ verbs – the latter are semantically related but synonyms are excluded, as noted above. In addition, it does not seem justified to recognise a particular variant of the -ING morpheme for the sole purpose of accounting for this construction. Instead, it seems that this particular, passive use of a simple V-ING form is a circumscribed remnant of an earlier stage of the English language when V-ING forms, which were originally nominal, were still neutral as to the (verbal) category of voice and had not yet taken their active orientation. It might be recalled that the simple, ‘active’ progressive construction (e.g. *is building*) could itself originally be used with either an active or a passive meaning; indeed, such passive uses could still be found in the 1960s.¹⁸

Idioms, and lexicalised combinations of symbolic units more generally speaking, often include elements that are old-fashioned or archaic (e.g. *kith* in *kith and kin*) or elements that are still part of the ordinary language, but which are used in an ‘anomalous’ way or meaning, which may be old-fashioned or archaic (e.g. *appoint* in *disappoint*; *by and large*, *all of a sudden*). As noted by Fillmore *et al.* (1988: 247), idioms can notably be divided into ‘grammatical’ idioms, ‘which have words filling proper and familiar grammatical structures’, and ‘extra-grammatical’ idioms, ‘which have words occurring in constructions which the rest of the grammar cannot account for.’ Using that terminology, the V-ING passive construction might be regarded as an extra-grammatical idiom: synchronically, the rest of the grammar of English cannot account for the passiveness of its simple V-ING form, nor for the special restrictions that bear on the verbs that can be complemented by such a form.¹⁹

2.2 The V-ABLE₁ passive construction

The second kind of marginal passive construction to be discussed in this paper is the one that involves a particular kind of V-ABLE form and is hereafter referred to as the ‘V-ABLE₁ passive construction’:

- (21) (a) This argument is not **disputable**.
(b) [T]hose tenements shall be **recoverable** by the donor or his heirs [...]. (BNC)
(c) Each turn is covered in sufficient detail for it to be **understandable** and **achievable** by most skiers. (BNC)
(d) ‘The defendant is not entitled to any credit for any sum paid or **payable** by the insurers,’ Mr Justice Waller said. (CCCS)

¹⁸ The following examples are quoted by Visser (1973: §1881): *Barrels of beer were discharging into every shape of jug and ewer* (R. Hughes 1961) / *We've all been up to look at it [= the house] while it was building* (A. Christie 1967) / *An old film [...] was showing at a small cinema in a side-street* (G. Greene 1969).

¹⁹ Of course, the V-ING passive construction also displays ‘regular’ properties: for instance, the subject of the -ING clause is not mentioned if it is coreferential with that of the matrix clause, the primary core participant in the relation denoted by V-ING may be mentioned by means of an agent BY-phrase, etc. This mixture of regularity and irregularity, of general and more particular properties, is in fact very typical and fully expected when lexicon and grammar are regarded as the two opposite poles of a single continuum.

- (e) This latter undertaking was, however, independent of and **severable** from that of the shareholders and there was no reason why it should not be **enforceable** by the shareholders among themselves as a personal agreement that in no way fettered TBL in the exercise of its statutory powers. (BNC)

2.2.1 *The -ABLE₁ variant of the -ABLE morpheme*

As with the -EN morpheme previously discussed, several variants of the -ABLE morpheme may be recognised. The one involved in the V-ABLE₁ passive construction (and therefore noted ‘-ABLE₁’) is usually considered to be a derivational suffix which attaches to transitive verb stems to yield adjectival forms. V-ABLE₁ forms have what may be called a ‘passive potential’ meaning and can typically be paraphrased as ‘that can be V-EN₂; capable of being V-EN₂’ (22a). In some cases, V-ABLE₁ forms may express other, related kinds of ‘modal’ values, essentially a notion of obligation rather than ability – ‘that must be V-EN₂; to be V-EN₂’ (22b) – or an idea of worthiness – ‘that should be V-EN₂; worthy of being V-EN₂; deserving to be V-EN₂’ (22c) –, sometimes in addition to the potential meaning (22d). These secondary values may be regarded as extensions from the primary meaning of passive potentiality.

- (22) (a) BREAKABLE ‘that can be broken’; DISPUTABLE ‘that can be disputed’
(b) PAYABLE ‘that must be paid; to be paid’
(c) ADMIRABLE ‘deserving to be admired; that should be admired’
(d) READABLE ‘that can be read’ (syn. LEGIBLE); ‘worthy of being read’

The -ABLE₁ variant should notably be distinguished from the -ABLE₂ variant suffixed to nouns (23a) and from the two other forms of the ‘suffix -BLE’, i.e. -IBLE (23b) and -UBLE (23c). The latter are mainly found in loan words (from Latin or French) and differ from -ABLE₁ both in terms of what Bauer (1988, 2001) calls ‘generalisation’ (number of known, existing words containing the suffix) and productivity (ability to be used for producing new words): -ABLE₁ is far more generalised than -IBLE and the latter is itself far more generalised than -UBLE, which is found only in a very few words; besides, -ABLE₁ is the only living, productive form of -BLE: neither -UBLE nor -IBLE are productive in PDE and only -ABLE₁ has become a truly English suffix, as shown by etymologically heterogeneous formations such as (23d).²⁰

- (23) (a) knowledgeable, objectionable, marriageable, pleasurable, sizeable
(b) accessible, compatible, flexible, visible
(c) soluble, indissoluble, voluble
(d) bearable, breakable, drinkable, laughable, readable, unspeakable, wearable

²⁰ It might be added that -ABLE₁ is predominantly a neutral suffix (well-known lexicalised exceptions include COMPARABLE, PREFERABLE, ADMIRABLE) while -IBLE is non-neutral and triggers morphological modifications of the base it is attached to (e.g. DEFENDABLE v. DEFENSIBLE; DIVIDABLE v. DIVISIBLE).

In (23c), VOLUBLE does not have a passive meaning. Neither do all V-ABLE₁ forms (e.g. SUITABLE ‘that can suit’; VARIABLE ‘that can change, likely to change *or* that can be changed’). Initially, V-ABLE₁ forms and more generally adjectival forms in -BLE were neutral with regard to voice and could be used with an active or a passive meaning.²¹ The (exclusively) passive meaning of Engl. -ABLE₁ was a progressive development. As noted by Jespersen (*MEG VI*: 405–406), some adjectives in -BLE which today could only be used with a passive sense were sometimes used with an active sense by Shakespeare: e.g. *He is too disputable* [‘disputatious’] *for my company (As You Like It, II, 5) / Show me thy humble heart, and not thy knee, whose duty is deceiveable* [‘deceptive’] *and false (Richard II, II, 3)*. By and large, active forms in -BLE or active meanings of such forms have become obsolete, although a non-trivial number have survived to this day such as SUITABLE, AGREEABLE, etc., as well as forms which are not synchronically or morphologically analysable such as CAPABLE, DURABLE, etc. In more recent formations, however, the meaning of -ABLE₁ is resolutely passive: for instance, if KOREANISE (or KOREANIZE) were to become an established transitive verb, one might expect a corresponding V-ABLE₁ form such as KOREANISABLE, which would undoubtedly mean ‘that can be Koreanised’, not ‘able to Koreanise (NP)’.²² Interestingly, while V-ING and V-ABLE₁ were both originally voice-neutral, the former has acquired an active orientation while the latter has acquired a passive orientation; and for both more or less important traces of their past neutrality may be observed.

2.2.2 V-ABLE₁ forms v. V-EN₂ forms

V-ABLE₁ forms are rarely discussed in presentations of the English passive voice. The main reason for this exclusion is that voice is regarded as a category of the English verb and while past participles are regarded as verb forms, V-ABLE₁ forms are not: -ABLE₁ is considered to be a derivational, adjective-forming suffix and is generally discussed in connection with word-formation instead. An additional reason is presumably that V-ABLE₁ cannot be confused with past participles, unlike past participial adjectives – indeed, the label ‘adjectival passive’ is quite traditional and might otherwise be expected to include sentences such as (21b), for instance.

V-ABLE₁ forms are undeniably more adjective-like than verb-like. Unlike V-EN₂ forms, they cannot take an NP complement (24a); if V is prepositional, the

²¹ That was also the case for Lat. -A/I/U-BILIS, which could express either an active or a passive possibility (e.g. CREDIBILIS ‘credulous’; FORMIDABILIS ‘that can frighten *or* that can be frightened’). Similarly, it appears that French adjectives in -ABLE were in fact predominantly active in Old French and that the passive meaning became generalised only at the beginning of Classical French (cf. ‘-BLE’ in TLFi, <http://atilf.atilf.fr/tlf.htm>).

²² The example is taken from Bauer (1988: 60): ‘You may not know what it means to *Koreanise* the US economy (because I have just this moment invented the word), but given that it exists, you know that it is possible to discuss the degree to which the US economy is *Koreanisable*. This [i.e. *-able*] is an extremely productive suffix.’ In fact, some uses of KOREANIZE may (now) be found on the internet, as was pointed out to me by J. Albrespit (p. c.).

corresponding V-ABLE₁ form does generally not retain the preposition (24b)²³; V-ABLE₁ forms readily coordinate with basic adjectives (24c) and they usually pass the basic tests for adjectivehood, i.e. they can be premodified by VERY (24d) and can be used either attributively (24e) or predicatively after copular verbs such as SEEM and LOOK (24f):

- (24) (a) *He is teachable a lesson. ['He can be taught a lesson']
(b) These contact lenses are disposable (*of). ['They can be disposed of']
(c) These contact lenses are disposable and cheap.
(d) very enjoyable / very reliable
(e) an enjoyable evening / a reliable person
(f) She seems reliable. / He looks presentable.

However, excluding V-ABLE₁ forms from an account of voice because of their adjectival properties is debatable. Participles are themselves partly verbal and partly adjectival: as previously noted, it may not even be the case that they are properly called verbs. The distinction between verbs and adjectives is graded rather than binary and while V-ABLE₁ forms are more adjectival than participles, they also share several important morphological, syntactic, and semantic properties with V-EN₂ forms. These properties link them more closely to the English participial system than basic adjectives such as OLD and BLUE and are also what relates V-ABLE₁ forms to central passive constructions.

Morphologically, -ABLE₁ has the same domain (input) as -EN₂: both morphemes typically combine with transitive verb stems; both may be problematic or excluded with verbs (or verb uses) which are syntactically but not also semantically transitive (e.g. HAVE, RESEMBLE; WEIGH 'have a particular weight') and both are excluded with basically intransitive verbs (e.g. BE, OCCUR, REMAIN, GLITTER). The distribution of -ABLE₁ is more restricted than that of -EN₂, but -ABLE₁ is nonetheless very productive and it fairly freely combines with the relevant (transitive) verb stems. The vitality of the suffix is such that dictionaries may list lexicalised, semantically specialised V-ABLE₁ forms but not fully predictable ones such as OPENABLE, PUBLISHABLE, MAGNETISABLE or SEVERABLE in (21e). Considering the uncertain status of participles, which are not infrequently presented as (verbal) adjectives, there are also reasons to think that the output of -ABLE₁ may not be fully unlike that of -EN₂. As a contrastive note, it might be added that many languages (e.g. Finnish, Latvian, Lithuanian, Lezgian, Turkish, Russian, etc.) have in their participial system a passive present (imperfective) participle, which in some of them similarly has a passive potential (or deontic) meaning (cf. Haspelmath 1994; Hewson & Bubenik 1997).

Semantically, there is an obvious logical relation between V-ABLE₁ and V-EN₂ forms in the sense that 'only what is V-ABLE₁ can be V-EN₂': only what is breakable can be broken, only what is understandable can be understood, etc. Most

²³ Forms like *get-at-able* and *come-at-able* are admittedly exceptional. Jespersen (*MEG* VI: 400–402) quotes rather formidable 19th-century nonce-formations such as *uncomeoverable*, *un-do-without-able*, *undryupable* (ink), *un-keep-off-able* (flies), *unrelyuponable* and *untalkaboutable*.

importantly, perhaps, V-ABLE₁ forms possess the two semantic properties (2a, b) which are characteristic of V-EN₂ forms and thus of central passives: -ABLE₁ impose the same kind of perspective on the event denoted by V as -EN₂, i.e. the view from the perspective of P₂ so that V-ABLE₁, like V-EN₂, can only be predicated of P₂; and V-ABLE₁ forms similarly involve the presence of P₁.

Syntactically, an important common point between V-ABLE₁ and V-EN₂ forms is that both can take an agent BY-phrase. Such a complementation is admittedly rarer with V-ABLE₁ forms but may nonetheless be found as in (21b–e). This syntactic property is obviously related to the fact that V-ABLE₁ forms involve the presence of P₁ but the so-called ‘middle’ construction (e.g. *Gill scares easily*), which similarly has a passive potential meaning (‘Gill can be scared easily’), shows that the notional presence of P₁ does not imply that P₁ may be mentioned by means of an agent BY-phrase (e.g. *Gill scares easily (*by violent men)*).²⁴ From a formal point of view, the ability to take an agent BY-phrase is a crucial passive property and the fact that V-ABLE₁ can take such a phrase is therefore a strong argument for their classification as a kind of marginal passive construction.²⁵ A characteristic of V-ABLE₁ forms, however, is that the corresponding ‘agent’ (P₁) rarely has specific reference, as noted by Quirk et al. (1985: 1555):

As with passive verb phrases, the agent can sometimes be expressed with a *by*-phrase (though chiefly a general agent rather than a specific one: ‘The comet was observable by anyone owning a powerful telescope’ but ?‘... observable by John’).

While the limited compatibility of V-ABLE₁ forms with agent BY-phrases at large may be related to their being more adjectival than V-EN₂ forms, their tendency to be used with a non-specific agent is probably related to the potential meaning of -ABLE₁. What is ‘observable’ is what ‘one’ can observe: the implicit agent is indeterminate and virtual, so that ?*observable by John* certainly sounds odd.²⁶

3. Summary and conclusion

Traditional formal definitions of the passive voice in PDE tend to focus on the ‘BE + past participle’ construction and more generally on sentences whose VP contains a combination of BE or some verb ‘commutable’ with BE and a past participle. However, such definitions fail to capture clauses which are recognised as passive although they do not contain any kind of ‘helping’ verb such as the auxiliary BE or the copular verb GET. Instead, we argued that standard or ‘central’ passive constructions are characterised by the fact that they involve a passive past participle form, which

²⁴ In addition, many languages are said to have only a short, agentless passive (e.g. Turkish, Fijian, Amharic, Huichol, Lithuanian, etc.), which also suggests that it is not because an ‘agent’ is semantically involved that it may be grammatically expressed.

²⁵ This may also be taken as an argument for not classifying the ‘middle’ construction as a passive construction.

²⁶ In the case of the middle construction, the implicit ‘agent’ (P₁) is similarly understood to be any agent within the range of potential agents allowed by the verb (although it cannot be grammatically expressed).

presupposes a distinction between active/perfect past participles (V-EN₁ forms) and passive past participles (V-EN₂ forms). The two major properties of a V-EN₂ form are that (i) the relation denoted by V is viewed from the perspective of its second core participant P₂, so that V-EN₂ is to be predicated of the phrase referring to P₂; and (ii) the primary core participant P₁ is nonetheless involved in the conceptualisation of the relation in question and potentially expressed by means of a grammaticalised variant of the preposition BY, in an ‘agent’ BY-phrase. We suggested that central passives may be either simple/bare or periphrastic, i.e. expanded by means of some helping verb. In such an account, the BE-passive is a kind of periphrastic central passive construction whose special status is due to its high(er) degree of grammaticalisation.

The two major properties that characterise V-EN₂ forms and thus central passives are also found in two constructions which do not contain a passive past participle and have been called ‘marginal’ passives, *viz.* the V-ING passive construction and the V-ABLE₁ passive construction. The deverbal forms contained in these constructions display the same passive orientation as V-EN₂ forms and may similarly take an agent BY-phrase. The V-ING passive construction contains a simple V-ING form which is nonetheless semantically and syntactically passive; whether on its own or as the head of a passive -ING clause, this V-ING form is only found after the verb NEED and a handful of semantically related verbs. The special and unpredictable properties of the V-ING passive construction are such that it seems better to treat it as an idiom than to postulate a special passive variant of the -ING morpheme. The V-ABLE₁ passive construction is quite a different case. V-ABLE₁ forms are more adjectival than participles, but the latter are not fully verbal themselves and indeed often not considered as verb forms. In addition, V-ABLE₁ forms share crucial semantic and formal properties with V-EN₂ forms which link them more closely to the English participial system than basic adjectives and may be considered to justify their classification as a kind of passive construction.

If any conclusion is to be drawn, it is that the label ‘passive voice’ cannot be restricted to the ‘BE + past participle’ construction and comparable combinations. In an approach focused on passive past participles, the different kinds of central passives may be accommodated without bringing into question the special status of the BE-passive. When the semantic properties of passive participles are taken into account without neglecting some of their formal properties, it appears that the label ‘passive voice’ can reasonably be extended to constructions whose passiveness is, otherwise, not explicitly accounted for.

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