

# *Passive Resistance in Spanish*

**Chris Pountain**

**School of Languages, Linguistics and Film**

**Queen Mary, University of London**



## What is a passive?

**Active** and **passive** are types of **voice**, which concerns the relation between a verb and its **subject** and **objects**.

The Western European grammatical tradition follows the morphological distinctions and syntactic constructions of Latin:

### Latin

*puer puellam amat* ‘the boy loves the girl’ (**active**) / *puella a puero amatur* ‘the girl is loved by the boy’ (**passive**)

*puer puellam amavit* ‘the boy has loved the girl’ (**active**) / *puella a puero amata est* ‘the girl has been loved by the boy’ (**passive**)

In the passive sentence the **direct object** *puellam* (in the accusative case in Latin) becomes the **subject** (in the nominative case) *puella* and the **subject** becomes the **agent** (in the ablative case with the preposition *a(b)*) *a puero*.

1 What is a passive?

## What is a passive?

In English (as it happens) the same kind of relation holds, though the morphology is different:

English

*Sir Walter Raleigh introduced tobacco into England* (**active**)  
(*Sir Walter Raleigh* is the **subject**; *tobacco* is the **direct object**)

*Tobacco was introduced into England by Sir Walter Raleigh* (**passive**)  
(*Tobacco* is the **subject**; *Sir Walter Raleigh* is the **agent**, introduced by the preposition *by*)

1 What is a passive?

## **What does a passive do?**

1. It makes the direct object of the active verb the topic of the sentence.

***Elephants have ivory tusks and [elephants] were hunted by Europeans***

2. It provides a means for the agent of the verb to be left unspecified.

***The documents have been mislaid***

## Are there any other passives in English?

**Be** + past participle is the construction that is usually called the passive, but a similar construction is **get** + past participle, which is especially common in the spoken language:

*Somehow the window got shut*

This has a slightly different meaning from ***The window was shut***, and is sometimes called a ***middle voice*** (following a morphological distinction sometimes made in Ancient Greek).

Other verbs are used occasionally:

*You stand accused of slander*

*I remain unconvinced*

## The astonishing flexibility of the English *be* + past participle passive

The grammatical subject of the passive sentence may be the **direct object**, **indirect object** or sometimes a **prepositional object** of the corresponding active verb:

*John painted this picture / This picture was painted by John*

*This picture* is the **direct object** of *painted*

*John gave Mary a bunch of flowers / Mary was given a bunch of flowers by John*

*Mary* is the **indirect object** of *gave*

*The boy drew on the blackboard / The blackboard was drawn on by the boy*

*The blackboard* is the **prepositional object** of *on*

## Spanish *ser* + past participle passive

This is the formal equivalent of English *be* + past participle

Spanish

*Sir Walter Raleigh introdujo el tabaco en Inglaterra* (**active**)  
(*Sir Walter Raleigh* is the **subject**; *el tabaco* is the **direct object**)

*El tabaco fue introducido en Inglaterra por Sir Walter Raleigh* (**passive**)  
(*el tabaco* is the **subject**; *Sir Walter Raleigh* is the **agent**, introduced by the preposition *por*)

## Spanish *ser* + past participle passive

### CONSTRAINTS

~ The ***ser*** + past participle passive is practically absent from everyday spoken language, though it is used in formal registers, and with some frequency in journalistic register.

Most Spanish courses written for English learners therefore tell learners to avoid it (e.g. by just using the active instead).

And one of the *Gramáticas* of the Real Academia Española famously remarked: ‘La voz pasiva es muy poco usada en español’.

Spanish therefore has a reputation for resistance to the passive.



## Spanish *ser* + past participle passive

### CONSTRAINTS

~ In the *ser* + past participle passive the grammatical subject of the passive sentence can only be the direct object of the corresponding active sentence (this is true of all the Spanish passives we shall consider):

*Juan pintó este cuadro / Este cuadro fue pintado por Juan*  
*Este cuadro* is the **direct object** of *pintó*

*Juan le dio a María un ramillete de flores / \*María fue dada un ramillete de flores por Juan*  
*María* is the **indirect object** of *dio*

*El niño dibujó en la pizarra / \*La pizarra fue dibujada en por el niño*  
*La pizarra* is the **prepositional object** of *en*

(Linguists use an asterisk \* to indicate sentences which are not acceptable to native speakers)

## Spanish *ser* + past participle passive

### CONSTRAINTS

~ The *ser* + past participle passive is constrained in the present and imperfect

≈ It is possible with verbs which denote a state of affairs

***Todos respetan a ese médico / Ese médico es respetado por todos***

But with verbs which denote an action or event *ser* + past participle must be interpreted as repetitive

***El aeropuerto es utilizado por varias aerolíneas extranjeras***

‘The airport is (regularly) used by several foreign airlines’

or (for the present) as a commentary or ‘historic present’

***En aquel momento el gol es anulado por el árbitro (=El árbitro anuló en gol [...], El gol fue anulado [...])***

## Spanish *ser* + past participle passive

### CONSTRAINTS

~ The *ser* + past participle passive is constrained in the present and imperfect tenses

≈ Some past participles have special meanings:

***Las causas del desastre eran sabidas***

‘The causes of the disaster were well-known’

(***Saber*** can denote both a state of affairs ‘to know, be aware of’ and an event ‘to get to know, to learn’)

***Esta charla es aburrida***

‘This talk is boring’

(***Aburrido*** has two meanings, ‘bored’ and ‘boring’)

## ***Estar* + past participle**

~ This always denotes a state of affairs, typically the result of a previous action:  
compare

***Las casas estaban edificadas con mucho cuidado*** (resultant state)

***Las casas fueron edificadas con mucho cuidado*** (action)

It is often difficult to render this distinction in English without fuller explanation:

***Toda la iglesia está llamada a vivir en comunión con Dios y es enviada por Cristo para salvar el mundo*** (ABC, 19.10.87)

***Está*** + past participle is often close in meaning to ***ha sido*** + past participle:

***Los bolsos están diseñados para proporcionar una mayor comodidad en los viajes***

## **Estar + past participle**

### CONSTRAINTS

~ The **estar** passive can only take an **agent** when the **subject** of the corresponding active verb is necessarily involved in the ongoing state of affairs represented by the past participle:

***La ventana fue cerrada por la limpiadora*** (action)

***La ventana estaba cerrada (\*por la limpiadora)*** (state)

but

***La ventana estaba bloqueada por óxido*** (state)

## ***Estar* + past participle**

### CONSTRAINTS

~ Some past participles cannot be used with *estar*:

**\**El secreto está sabido***

**\**El cuarto estaba limpiado***

## **Other verbs + past participle**

*Tres libros van publicados en la serie*

*El país quedó dividido en tres zonas*

## The reflexive passive (*pasiva refleja*)

Not really paralleled in English, where reflexives usually have a literal meaning.

? *vende plátanos en el mercado* / *Se venden plátanos en el mercado*

(*Plátanos* is the **direct object** of *vende*, and appears to be the **subject** of *se venden*)



## The reflexive passive (*pasiva refleja*)

### CONSTRAINTS

~ The reflexive (passive) often seems to have a ‘middle voice’ meaning:

***Se me perdió el pasaporte***

‘My passport got lost’

## The reflexive passive (*pasiva refleja*)

### CONSTRAINTS

~ It does not freely (if at all) accept the expression of an **agent**:

☹ *Se publicará un comunicado por el Gobierno Civil*

It is usually said that the **ser** passive necessarily implies the involvement of an agent (even if this is not expressed), while the reflexive passive does not. So where no specific agent can be involved, the reflexive passive is the only possibility:

*Se produjeron incidentes / \*Fueron producidos incidentes*

but where an agent is implicitly involved, the **ser** passive must be used:

*El radio fue descubierto en 1898 / \*El radio se descubrió en 1898*

(I use ☹ to indicate official disapproval)

## The reflexive passive (*pasiva refleja*)

### CONSTRAINTS

~ It cannot be used if the reflexive verb has a literal, ‘conventionalised’ or ‘intransitive’ meaning:

#### ***María se lavó, se vistió y se peinó***

‘María washed, dressed and combed her hair’ NOT ‘María was washed, dressed and (had her hair) combed’

#### ***Mario se despidió sin motivos***

‘Mario took his leave without reason’ NOT ‘Mario was dismissed without reason’ (*Mario fue despedido sin motivos*)

#### ***El buque se alejó de la costa***

‘The ship moved away from the coast’ NOT ‘The ship was sent away from the coast’ (*El buque fue alejado de la costa*)

(The passive meanings above also necessarily imply the involvement of an agent.)

## **Other ways of rendering the functions of the passive in Spanish**

Making the object of the active verb a topic

***Este libro lo escribió Gallo en 1991***

(= This book was written by Gallo in 1991)

## Other ways of rendering the functions of the passive in Spanish

Not expressing the agent of the action

***Se admira a los héroes***

(= Heroes are admired)

***Dicen que no se ganó Zamora en una hora***

(= It's said that Rome wasn't built in a day)

***La gente debe reconocer que la situación es muy grave***

(= It must be recognized that the situation is very serious)

## Changes in progress?

Exploitation of *ser* + past participle in the present and imperfect

The imperfect of *ser* + past participle is increasingly used (in formal registers) with a repetitive meaning which is like the English **progressive be + being** + past participle:

***Ignorábamos que éramos observados muy de cerca***

‘We did not know that we were being watched very closely’

(The use of this construction may be encouraged by disapproval of ***estar siendo*** + past participle:)

☹ ***Ignorábamos que estábamos siendo observados muy de cerca***

## Changes in progress?

Are only direct objects passivisable?

*Preguntar*

The standard construction is

***Juan le preguntó al autor su opinión***

(*su opinión* is the **direct object**; *el autor* is the **indirect object**)

But where there is no direct object, journalistic Spanish makes extensive use of the *ser* passive with the indirect object of *preguntar* as its subject :

***“No, de ninguna manera”, es la respuesta de José Mourinho al ser preguntado sobre si el partido que el Real Madrid disputará el domingo en el Camp Nou es definitivo.***

(José Mourinho is the **indirect object** of *preguntar*)

5 Changes in progress?

## **Changes in progress?**

Are only direct objects passivisable?

Some other examples:

*Elías resucita al muchacho después de haber sido rogado por su madre*

*El paciente fue transplantado de corazón*

*La víctima fue forzada sexualmente y prendida fuego*



## **Changes in progress?**

Can the passive reflexive take an agent?

*Este libro se publicó por Seix Barral*

*El secreto se reveló mucho más tarde por un antiguo espía ruso*

*Las pirámides se construyeron por esclavos*

☹ *El más antiguo tratado de trigonometría esférica escrita en el mundo se escribió precisamente por un cadí o un juez de Jaén*  
(se escribió corrected to fue escrito / lo escribió)

*\*Este cuadro se pintó por Tàpies*

*? Entonces Granada se organizó como ciudad enteramente cristiana, según lo habían sido las otras ciudades de su reino*

## Changes in progress?

Can the passive reflexive be used even if the reflexive verb has a literal, etc., meaning?

***La actriz, que llegó a fotografiarse ataviada con un casco norvietnamita durante la guerra [...]***

(‘[...] who managed to get herself photographed [... ]’)

***El pobre se mató en un accidente de carretera***

(‘The poor chap was killed in a road accident’)

Cf.

***Un año más tarde se autoexilia definitivamente de Colombia***

(‘[...] he went into voluntary exile [... ]’)

## Final thoughts

- ~ Spanish and English appear to be similar in having parallel passive constructions (*be / ser* + past participle), but the circumstances in which these can be used are quite different.
- ~ Spanish actually has a number of constructions which qualify to be called passives in the sense that the subject of the passive verb is the direct object of the corresponding active verb (the reflexive passive, the *estar* passive and other verbs with the past participle).
- ~ The typical functions of the passive (topicalisation of the direct object and non-expression of the agent) can be rendered in Spanish by still other constructions.
- ~ The properties of the three main passives of Spanish are undergoing change.

# *Passive Resistance in Spanish*

**Chris Pountain**

**School of Languages, Linguistics and Film  
Queen Mary, University of London**

<http://webpace.qmul.ac.uk/cjpountain/schools.htm>

