

Dutch long passive was tried to reject

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Long passive is a complementation configuration with control, matrix passive, and promotion of the embedded object to matrix subject. It has long been regarded as unavailable in Dutch, but the results of our judgment experiment provide evidence that its acceptability depends on grammatical factors, in particular the matrix verb class. A rather high degree of inter-speaker variation further shows that long passive is acceptable to some participants. We propose a syntactic interpretation of our findings, showing how a marginal phenomenon can open up new perspectives on the syntax of a language.

1 Purpose of the study

In this paper, we provide first experimental evidence for the existence of long passive in Dutch. Long passive is a complementation configuration involving control in which an embedded object is promoted to matrix subject due to the passivization of the matrix verb (Wurmbrand 2001, 2014). The prevailing view in the linguistic literature is that long passive is absent from Dutch (Broekhuis 1992). However, recent claims about speaker variation (Tavenier 2020) and many examples found on the internet call for reconsideration. Two examples found in a local newspaper and on the internet are given in (1). That we are dealing with long passive is evident from plural agreement on the matrix auxiliary (1a) and nominative case on the pronominal object (1b).

- (1) a. [De beide personen]_i werd-en geprobeerd t_i te reanimeren ...
the both persons AUX-PL tried t to resuscitate ...
lit. 'Both people were tried to resuscitate ...' (De Gelderlander; August 11, 2019)
- b. Hij_i werd nog geprobeerd t_i over te halen door Eugene Reaper ...
he.NOM was still tried t PRT to convince by Eugene Reaper ...
lit. 'He was still tried to convince by Eugene Reaper ...' (GTA IV Wikipedia page)

We report on a judgment experiment further investigating the status of long passive in Dutch, having isolated two parameters from the literature that may impact its acceptability. Both factors concern the matrix verb class.

2 Rationale of the study

In their investigation of complementation configurations in a collection of typologically diverse languages, Wurmbrand and Lohninger (2019) make a distinction between EVENT verbs, such as *try* or *dare*, and SITUATION verbs, such as *decide* or *promise*. They show that complements of Event verbs are cross-linguistically more transparent for various dependencies, including long passive (see also Wurmbrand 2014). We expect in line with the cross-linguistic empirical landscape that configurations with a matrix Event verb are more amenable to long passive than those with a matrix Situation verb in Dutch as well.

Secondly, Pitteroff and Schäfer (2019) report that implicit control with *beginnen* 'begin' (2a) is less acceptable than with *proberen* 'try' (2b). Both verbs belong to Wurmbrand and Lohninger's (2019) Event class, but *beginnen* 'begin' is an aspectual and *proberen* 'try' a non-aspectual verb. Unlike long passive, these examples do not involve promotion of the embedded object. However, they do share two crucial properties with it: matrix passive and control of the embedded understood subject by the matrix implicit argument (hence *implicit control*). We expect Pitteroff and Schäfer's observation to extend to long passive as well.

- (2) a. Er werd begonnen de woonkamer op te ruimen.
there AUX begun the living.room PRT to clean
lit. 'It was begun to clean the living room.'

- b. Er werd geprobeerd de analyse te begrijpen.
 there AUX tried the analysis to understand
 lit. 'It was tried to understand the analysis.'

In all, we hypothesize that:

- H1** implicit control configurations (without long passive) are better than long passive;
H2 long passive is better with Event verbs than with Situation verbs;
H3 both configurations are better with non-aspectual verbs than with aspectual verbs.

3 The experiment

80 native speakers of Dutch rated how natural (0%-100%) sentences (24 target items, 48 fillers) would sound if uttered by a native speaker. Each target sentence was preceded by a single context sentence that licenses the use of a passive construction. The target sentences contained an implicit control or a long passive configuration and one of three matrix verb types: Event_{aspectual} (e.g. *begin*), Event_{non-aspectual} (e.g. *try*), or Situation (e.g. *decide*).

The raw judgment data were transformed into z-scores and entered into an LMER (Table 1). Statistical analysis revealed that long passive items were rated significantly lower than implicit control ones [**H1**] and items with an aspectual verb significantly lower than items with a non-aspectual verb [**H3**]. Post-hoc pairwise comparisons revealed significant differences between Event and Situation verbs in long passive items [**H2**], their direction depending on the sub-class (aspectual vs. non-aspectual) of the Event verb (aspectual: $t = -10.34$, $p < .001$; non-aspectual: $t = 3.46$, $p = .007$; Tukey-adjusted). The results are visually presented in Figure 1. Furthermore, we find considerable inter-speaker variation in items with long passive and non-aspectual Event matrix verbs: long passive is in fact perfectly available to at least some participants, see Figure 2.

Table 1: Specifications of the statistical analysis

($z \sim \text{verb class} * \text{construction} + (1 + \text{construction} | \text{participant}) + (1 + \text{construction} | \text{item})$)

	β	SE	t	p	
(intercept)	-0.12	0.05	-2.52	.018	*
construction type	-0.80	0.09	-8.93	< .001	***
verb class	0.22	0.02	11.47	< .001	***
aspectuality	0.75	0.05	13.77	< .001	***
construction * verb class	-0.18	0.04	-4.75	< .001	***
construction * aspectuality	0.04	0.11	0.37	.712	

4 Theoretical implications

Our findings indicate that the acceptability of long passive in Dutch is dependent on the class of the matrix verb. This is an important finding, because it may very well be where the grammatical core of the acceptability judgment shines through (cf. Schütze 1996) despite the marginal status of the configuration. Since the verb classes we studied behave differently with regard to a range of grammatical phenomena in various languages (Wurmbrand & Lohninger 2019), we conclude that the observed contrasts in the compatibility of these classes with long passive in Dutch (for those speakers who accept it) are connected to grammatical properties of the verbs in question.

Furthermore, the marginal status of long passive is a result of strong inter-speaker variation, which implies that our participants have distinct grammars. We believe that Dutch long passive therefore deserves follow-up research, especially in light of recent findings that an investigation of individual grammars may be required to arrive at, or render obsolete, certain generalizations (Lyskawa & Ranero 2022). Schütze (1996: 37) makes the case most eloquently: “[i]t has come to be generally acknowledged that not all speakers of ‘the same language’ might have the same competence, but that does not justify basing the theory only on sentences for which

Figure 1: Mean judgment scores (left) and z-scores (right) per condition (error bars indicate within-subject standard errors from the mean)

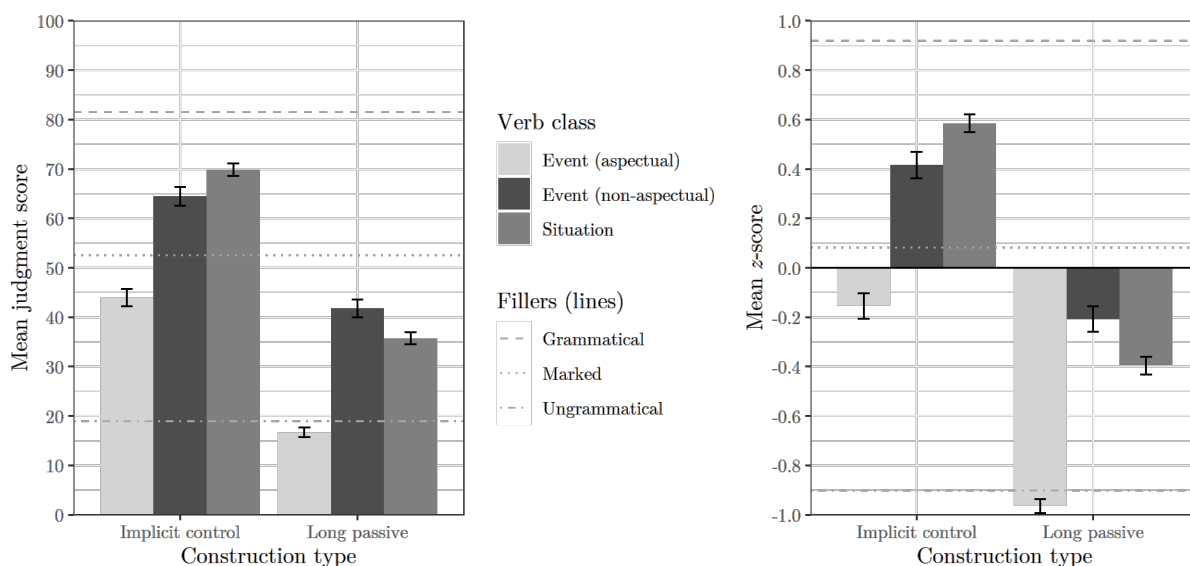
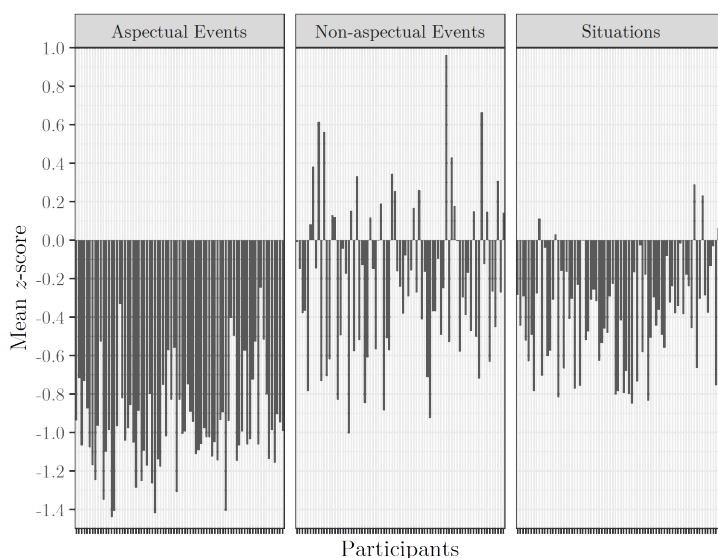


Figure 2: Mean z-scores for three different verb classes in long passive, per participant



there is universal agreement, and extrapolating by some means to dictate the status of the remainder. In cases where people disagree, that fact cannot be ignored; the theory must be able to describe *every* speaker's competence, and thus must allow for variation wherever it occurs."

5 Deriving the distribution

The judgment patterns we find can be accounted for under [Wurmbrand and Shimamura's \(2017\)](#) analysis of long passive. These authors argue that long passive involves a syntactic dependency between an embedded underspecified Voice_R head and the matrix passive Voice head encoding the passive implicit argument (e.g. [Legate 2014](#)). This relation serves as a basis for semantic argument sharing, and a control-like relation can thus be established without PRO, allowing promotion of the embedded object to matrix subject (otherwise, PRO would intervene).

We propose that [H1] is due to markedness of Voice_R in Dutch and a preference for control via PRO. Specifically, Dutch speakers whose grammars are able to generate long passive have

Voice_R in their lexical inventories, while speakers who reject long passive do not and can only establish control via PRO, which makes promotion of the embedded object impossible. Concerning [H2], Wurmbrand and Lohninger (2019) argue that Event verbs, but not Situation verbs, can take radically reduced complement clauses such as VoiceP_R (as opposed to e.g. TP or CP). The relatively high ratings of Situation verbs in long passive may be due to a coercion of these verbs into a simultaneous interpretation (see Wurmbrand 2001), making them compatible with VoiceP_R, but also explaining their degraded status compared to non-aspectual Event verbs. Regarding [H3], Dutch aspectual verbs may combine with an infinitive or with a prepositional phrase (e.g. *beginnen met zingen* lit. ‘begin with singing’). We propose that the low ratings for long passive with aspectual verbs are the result of the infinitive not being their complement, but an obligatory control adjunct. Following Landau (2021), obligatory control adjuncts are CPs embedded into a PP-layer. This analysis for infinitival dependents of Dutch aspectual verbs is corroborated by the observation that the preposition may also be overt, as illustrated in (3) for the verb *ophouden* ‘cease’. Long passive is then unacceptable because such an elaborate structure blocks both promotion of the embedded object and the dependency between the embedded and matrix Voice heads which is needed for control to be established in long passive.

- (3) ... voldoende om op te houden **met** onze tijd te verknoeien.
 ... enough for PRT to cease **with** our time to waste
 ‘... enough to cease wasting our time.’ (J. van de Wetering: De zaak Ijsbreker, p. 70)

Our results show considerable contrasts between verb classes, reflected both in the general acceptability of long passive and the extent of individual variation, providing new perspectives on Dutch verbal syntax. We conclude that devoting attention to marginal phenomena as well as inter-speaker variation may provide valuable insights into broader aspects of grammar.

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