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## **Syntactic, semantic and pragmatic functions of the VIDERE passive in Romance languages**

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### Organization of the talk:

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- 'Basic passive' and 'non-basic passive' features of the VIDERE passive
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### General remarks on passive constructions in Romance

Romance languages have a periphrastic passive and a pronominal passive. Periphrastic passives are formed with an auxiliary – in most cases a form related to Latin ESSE 'be' – and the past participle of the main verb:<sup>1</sup>

- (1) FR: mais euh on leur dit euh par qui le spectacle est organisé quoi (oral; C-ORAL-ROM)  
'but they are told by whom the event is organized'
- (2) IT: andare poi a [/] nel museo / e vedere quello che / c'è esposto (oral; C-ORAL-ROM)  
'to go then to the museum and to see what is exhibited there'
- (3) SP: una sentencia / dice que es delincuente // es decir / es / quien es condenado por delito  
(oral; C-ORAL-ROM)  
'a sentence says that s/he is an offender, that means is / who is sentenced for a crime'

The pronominal passive is formed with the finite main verb preceded by the reflexive pronoun SE:

- (4) FR: par exemple un Aligot se boit frais (oral; C-ORAL-ROM)  
'for example an Aligot is drunk chilled'
- (5) IT: quindi / era un sesto di casa // e si vendeva quel sesto di casa (oral; C-ORAL-ROM)  
'so it was the sixth (part) of the house and that sixth of the house was sold'
- (6) CT: [l'amor] no s'ofereix com les mercaderies (oral; COR)  
'love isn't given away like goods'

Some Romance languages use other auxiliarized verb forms, namely the position verb STARE 'be located' and movement verbs which have developed out of Latin IRE 'go' or VENIRE 'come':

- (7) CT: El ministre anava acompanyat del subsecretari (Bartra Kaufmann 2002: 2124)  
'the minister was accompanied by the undersecretary'
- (8) CT: El retrocés econòmic ve explicat [...] pel col·lapse de la demanda externa de béns de consum (written; www.cambrabcn.org)  
'the economic recession is due to (literally: is / gets explained by) the collapse of the external demand for consumer goods'
- (9) IT: uno sport che va fatto / con la testa sulle spalle (oral; C-ORAL-ROM)  
'a sport that is done with responsibility (lit.: with the head on the shoulders)'
- (10) IT: l'argilla rossa / viene cotta a una temperatura / dai nove e cinquanta ai nove e ottanta / novecentottanta gradi (oral; C-ORAL-ROM)  
'the red clay is burnt at a temperature from 9 50 to 9 80 / 980 degrees'

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations for languages: CT = Catalan; FR = French; IT = Italian; SP = Spanish.

In Italian, which commonly uses *venire* alongside *essere* as passive auxiliary, the *venire* construction explicitly expresses a dynamic passive:

- (11) IT:  
 a. La porta è aperta ‘the door is open(ed)’  
 b. La porta viene aperta ‘the door gets opened’  
 c. La porta è aperta dal vento ‘the door is opened by the wind’  
 (Maiden / Robustelli 2000: 282, modified)

Mentioning the agent through an adjunct phrase is always possible with a periphrastic passive as long as an identifiable agent referent exists, whereas the pronominal passive is much more restricted concerning the presence of an agent adjunct:

- (12) FR: [le paludisme] vu que ça se transmet par les moustiques c’est quand même relativement dangereux (oral; C-ORAL-ROM)  
 ‘malaria since it is transmitted by mosquitoes is actually quite dangerous’  
 (4a) FR: \*par exemple un Aligot se boit frais par un connaisseur  
 ‘for example an Aligot is drunk chilled by a connoisseur’

There are further periphrastic passive constructions in Romance which contain other auxiliarized verb forms: verbs etymologically related to Latin FACERE ‘make, let’ and LAXARE ‘unbend, let’, yielding a causative meaning; and perception verbs such as SENTIRE ‘perceive by the senses; feel; hear’, INTENDERE ‘hear; understand’ and VIDERE ‘see’. These passive constructions have the structure REFL + AUX + PP/INF:

- (13) FR: si un caméraman se fait tuer / ce sera de votre faute (oral; C-ORAL-ROM)  
 ‘if a cameraman gets killed that will be your fault’  
 (14) SP: [no tiene así ningún amigo realmente] pero no se siente / aislado en clase / ni nada (oral; C-ORAL-ROM)  
 ‘he doesn’t really have a friend but he doesn’t feel marginalized in the classroom’  
 (15) FR: Abu Talib al Razi [...] s’entend reprocher, par une voix intérieure, d’avoir dit un jour : [...] (written; Djaffar Mohamed-Sahnoun, *La perception mystique en Islam*, Paris 2009, p. 13; retrieved on books.google.com)  
 ‘Abu Talib al Razi feels / is (lit.: hears himself being) accused, by an inner voice, to have said once: [...]’  
 (16) FR: M. Proust se voit reprocher d’avoir été à l’origine d’un montage financier (written; LE MONDE)  
 ‘M. Proust is / gets (lit.: sees himself to be) accused of having been the author of a financial machination’

The status of these perception-verb constructions as passives is controversial (“passivoïdes” [Vet 2000], ‘para-voice constructions’ / “Para-Diathesen” [Wehr 2005, referring to H. Stimm]). Within this group of passive or passive-like constructions, the VIDERE construction is the most grammaticalized one (Yllera 1999: 3431; Wehr 2005: 190).

#### VIDERE passive: distribution and status among Romance languages

Within Western Romance, the VIDERE passive is attested in, and described in reference grammars for, French, Spanish, and Catalan:

- (17) FR: Le ministre s’est vu insulter par des agriculteurs en colère (Riegel / Pellat / Rioul 2009: 742; cf. also [16])  
 ‘the minister has been insulted by angry farmers’

- (18) SP: Es el caso de la Policía Judicial, que [...] se ha visto reforzada durante los últimos meses [...] (Yllera 1999: 3431)  
‘This is the case for the Judicial Police, which has been reinforced during the last months’
- (19) CT: El Garrotxa es veu superat per un bon Roser (internet; www.lesportiudecatalunya.cat)  
‘The Garrotxa (team) is defeated by a good Roser (team)’

For Italian, the VIDERE passive is sporadically attested but not mentioned as such in grammars:

- (20) IT: la City si vede scippare ad uno ad uno, senza poter fare granchè (written; CORRIERE)  
‘the City is / gets snatched away little by little, without being able to offer much opposition’
- (21) IT: ci sono docenti (centinaia a Milano, migliaia in tutta Italia) che si vedono imporre la restituzione dei soldi (written; CORRIERE)  
‘there are teachers (hundreds in Milano, thousands in all Italy) who are forced / obliged to retribute money’

The Romance language where the VIDERE passive is most prominent is French.

#### ‘Basic passive’ and ‘non-basic passive’ features of the VIDERE passive

The functions of passives in relation to the corresponding active sentences can be described on the levels of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic structure (Wehr 1995: 78ss; 2005: 178s), with three core functions:

- de-transitivation through subject demotion and object promotion
- modification / manipulation of the mapping of thematic roles onto syntactic functions
- topicalization

The VIDERE passive conforms to what Keenan and Dryer (2007) consider as “defining characteristic of passives”, namely that “in a passive, the subject in the corresponding active is expressed by an element that is neither a subject nor an object in the corresponding passive or is not expressed at all; if it is not expressed, its existence is still entailed by the passive” (Keenan / Dryer 2007: 352).

Keenan and Dryer distinguish between basic and non-basic passives, the former being characterized by the following features: “(i) no agent phrase [...] is present, (ii) the main verb in its non-passive form is transitive, and (iii) the main verb expresses an action, taking agent subjects and patient objects” (Keenan / Dryer 2007: 328s). The VIDERE passive partly shares these characteristics of basic passives (cf. ex. [17-20]):

- (18a) SP: la Policía Judicial, que [...] se ha visto reforzada < *x* ha reforzado la Policía Judicial
- (20a) la City si vede scippare < *x* scippa la City

In this case the VIDERE passive is a mere variant of, and can alternate with, the more common ESSE passive, particularly when the main verb appears as past participle:

- (18b) la Policía Judicial, que [...] se ha visto reforzada < la Policía Judicial, que [...] ha sido reforzada

But the VIDERE passive also comes close to what Keenan and Dryer (2007) describe, under the heading of non-basic passives, as the passivization of the second object of ditransitive

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verbs. Romance languages, unlike English, cannot demote the subject and promote the indirect object by using the ESSE periphrasis. Only the direct object, carrying the semantic role of patient or theme, can be felicitously promoted:

- (22) FR:  
 a. Jean a donné le livre à Pierre ‘Jean has given the book to Pierre’  
 b. Le livre a été donné à Pierre ‘the book was given to Pierre’  
 c. \*Pierre a été donné le livre ‘Pierre was given the book’ (Keenan / Dryer 2007: 349)

The VIDERE periphrasis, however, does allow the promotion of the indirect (recipient, addressee or beneficiary) object referent:

- (16a) FR: M. Proust se voit reprocher d’avoir été à l’origine d’un montage financier < *x* reproche à M. Proust d’avoir été à l’origine d’un montage financier  
 (21a) IT: ci sono docenti che si vedono imporre la restituzione dei soldi < *x* impone ai docenti la restituzione dei soldi  
 (23) FR: Le sénateur Philippe Marini (RPR, Oise) s’est vu confier par le premier ministre une mission (written; LE MONDE)  
 ‘the senator Philippe Marini [...] has been intrusted by the Prime Minister with a mission’  
 < Le premier ministre a confié au sénateur Philippe Marini une mission

For French, this primarily syntactic feature of promotion and topicalization of a constituent coded as an indirect addressee or recipient object in the corresponding active sentence is considered to be a core function of the passive constructions with reflexive perception verbs (Wehr 2005: 189; Riegel / Pellat / Rioul 2009: 743). For the VIDERE passive, this is corroborated by Polzin’s (1998) quantitative analysis: in an 11 million word corpus of newspaper French, she found 489 occurrences of the VIDERE passive; in 72%, the subject constituent was the indirect object of the reconstructed active sentence (*se voir* + INF: 94%; *se voir* + PP: 2% [Polzin 1998: 225]).

Polzin also counted the distribution of the semantic feature [HUM] among the subject referents in the VIDERE passive occurrences: 66% were [+HUM] while 34% were [-HUM] (*se voir* + INF: 30.4%; *se voir* + PP: 46.5% [Polzin 1998: 225]). There are probably many metaphoric or metonymic uses as in (18-19) or (24-25):

- (24) FR: Deux projets cofinancés par PROPARCO se sont vu décerner le prix “Deal of the Year 2010” (written: www.proparco.fr)  
 ‘two projects co-financed by PROPARCO have been awarded the “Deal of the Year 2010” prize’  
 (25) FR: Un avion d’Air France en difficulté s’est vu refuser l’autorisation d’atterrir à Brazzaville (written; democratiechretienne.org)  
 ‘an Air-France airplane in trouble has been refused the permission to land at Brazzaville’

but even then, there are sufficient examples with clearly inanimate subjects to claim that VIDERE shows a strong tendency of grammaticalization towards auxiliary status:

- (26) SP: Los discos y vídeos no se verán afectados por la liquidación de Galerías (Yllera 1999: 3431)  
 ‘Records and videos will not be affected by the liquidation by (the) *Galerías* (shops)’

- (27) [...] le terme générique de créole se voit modifier par un adjectif (written; Danièle Latin, *Inventaire des usages de la francophonie*, Montrouge 1993, p.67; retrieved on books.google.com)  
 ‘the generic term of *creole* is / gets modified by an adjective’

### Semantic and pragmatic features and functions of the VIDERE passive

The VIDERE passive shows additional properties on the semantic and pragmatic level in comparison with, and in contrast to, the ESSE passive. First, when the main verb appears as in infinitive, the verbal event is marked as dynamic, whereas the ESSE passive tends to be ambiguous between a static or dynamic reading unless the agent is explicitly mentioned (cf. [11]). Stimm (1957) has emphasized that the infinitive denotes the mere verbal event (“Im Infinitiv kann ja nur der reine *Vorgang* bezeichnet werden” [Stimm 1957: 591; emphasis in the original) and is aspectually unmarked. Therefore, in the VIDERE passive construction, it can get into a functional opposition with the potentially aspect-marked past participle, with the participial form yielding a resultative-perfective reading and the infinitival form yielding a procedural-imperfective reading (Bat-Zeev Shyldkrot 1981: 384ss; Wehr 2005: 191):

- (28) FR:  
 a. Il se voyait envahi par une étrange agitation nerveuse (Bat-Zeev Shyldkrot 1981: 394)  
 ‘he was affected by a strange nervous agitation / uneasiness’  
 b. Il se voyait envahir par une tristesse mortelle (Bat-Zeev Shyldkrot 1981: 394)  
 ‘he got affected by a fatal sadness’

However, this aspectual difference can not always be contextually accommodated in a straightforward way:

- (29) FR: [...] le contexte dans lequel évoluent les systèmes de retraite [...] se voit modifié par la crise économique (written; Claire Delbos et al., *Guide de la retraite*, Paris 2013, p. 8; retrieved on books.google.com)  
 ‘the context in which the pension systems evolve is / gets modified by the economic crisis’

Second, if the referent promoted to subject position in the VIDERE passive sentence bears the semantic feature [+HUM], the passive subject referent tends to be presented as a mere observer – a “spectator subject” (“sujet spectateur” [Riegel / Pellat / Rioul 2009: 743]) – who is deprived of power or control with regard to the event that is affecting her/him. This is unsurprising when the passive subject referent is a promoted direct patient object. But most subject referents in the VIDERE passive are promoted indirect addressee or recipient objects, for which affectedness and control are unspecified. In these cases, the “spectator subject” reading can arise as a persistence effect of the lexical meaning of the – still not fully grammaticalized – reflexive perception verb VIDERE.

According to Bat-Zeev Shyldkrot (1981), this lower degree of grammaticalization imposes restrictions on the interchangeability of the VIDERE and the ESSE constructions in the case of promoted direct patient objects, because the physical presence of the patient at the event is felt to be necessary, or at least must not be impossible, to produce fully acceptable sentences:

- (30) FR:  
 a. Il a été rayé de la liste des candidats ‘he was deleted from the list of candidates’  
 b. Il s’est vu rayé de la liste des candidats ‘he was deleted from the list of candidates’  
 (Bat-Zeev Shyldkrot 1981: 396)
- (31) FR:  
 a. Il a été rayé, en son absence, de la liste des candidats

- b. ?Il s'est vu rayé, en son absence, de la liste des candidats (Bat-Zeev Shyldkrot *ibid.*)  
'he was deleted from the list of candidates in absence'

Third, on the pragmatic level, the VIDERE passive can bear some subtle modal values: The event described by the main verb is often read as occurring surprisingly and unexpectedly for the passive subject referent, a modal value related again to the original lexical meaning of VIDERE. At least in French, *voir* allows a perfective reading in the sense of 'perceive, behold' and an imperfective reading in the sense of 'observe' (*Trésor de la Langue Française Informatisé* s.v. *voir*, <http://atilf.atilf.fr>). When contextual clues induce the perfective reading of *voir*, the VIDERE passive is interpreted in an 'incidence schema' mode (in the sense of Pollack [1961]) as denoting a sudden, unexpected and sometimes unintended or unwanted event:

- (32) Denis tombe malade [...]. Du coup il se voit contraint d'annuler toutes les dates de gala (written; [www.denissimon.fr](http://www.denissimon.fr))  
'Denis falls ill. As a consequence, he is forced to cancel all the gala dates'
- (33) à peine l'hôte a-t-il pris place, qu'il se voit proposer du café, du thé ou des boissons fraîches (written; [www.linguee.fr](http://www.linguee.fr))  
'as soon as the guest has taken place, he is / gets offered coffee, tea or refreshment beverages'

On the other hand, Polzin (1998), while comparing example (34a) to its made-up variant with the ESSE passive

- (34) FR:  
a. Christian Bachmann et Nicole Le Guennec analysent le "mécanisme d'étouffement" par lequel les jeunes de ces quartiers se voient entourés d'interdits qui les privent de leur propre identité  
'Christine Bachmann and Nicole Le Guennec analyze the "thumbscrews mechanism" by which the youngsters of these neighborhoods are encircled by bans which deprive them of their identity'  
b. [...] par lequel les jeunes de ces quartiers sont entourés d'interdits qui [...] (Polzin 1998: 253)

claims that the ESSE passive presents the event in a more neutral way as a matter of fact, whereas the VIDERE passive leaves open whether the purported event actually occurred or not. Thus, the writer of the text implicitly dissociates him/herself from, and reduces the assertive force of, what s/he writes.

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**Corpora:**

COR: Alturo, Núria et al. (eds. 2004): *Corpus oral de registres. Materials de treball*. Barcelona: Publicacions de la Universitat de Barcelona.

C-ORAL-ROM: Cresti, Emanuela / Moneglia, Massimo (eds. 2005): *C-ORAL-ROM. Integrated reference corpora for spoken Romance languages*. Amsterdam / Philadelphia: Benjamins.

CORRIERE: 500.000 word corpus of articles of *Corriere della Sera* 1995 archive CD.

LE MONDE: 570.00 word corpus of articles of *Le Monde* 1996 archive CD.

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