

Passive participles in Serbo-Croatian: verbs, adjectives, or both?

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This talk examines the internal makeup of passive participles in Serbo-Croatian (SC). Participles are characterized by mixed properties which allow them to pattern with verbs or adjectives, depending on their environment. An overview of the relevant environments is provided in Wasow 1977.

This mixed behavior has led to a distinction between the so-called verbal and adjectival participles. The former, it has been argued, are derived in the syntax, and the latter in the lexicon (Wasow 1977). Since I will show that all passive participles in SC have the external syntax of adjectives, making accounting for the differences between them virtually impossible in a lexicalist framework, I will instead pursue a syntactic approach to word formation (Halle & Marantz 1993). Passive participles, then, do not start out with a predetermined categorial feature such as ‘verb’ or ‘adjective’, but instead become categorized in the course of the derivation.

I first examine the main diagnostics used to distinguish between the two types of participles in English. Diagnostics that have been argued to single out adjectival participles are the ability to occur as a prenominal modifier, as the complement of verbs such as *seem* and *remain*, and allowing negative *un-* prefixation. Conversely, *by*-phrases combine only with verbal participles. In SC, there is no outright ban on passive participles appearing with verbs such as *seem* (1a) nor on passive participles with the negative prefix *ne-* ‘un-’ co-occurring with a *by*-phrase (1b). Note that the negative and reversative ‘un-’ are not homonyms in SC. Furthermore, the restriction on *by*-phrases appearing with prenominal participles does not hold for SC, as long as the *by*-phrase does not intervene between the participle and the noun (1c) (a word-order option not available in English).

- (1) a. Ova vaza mi se čini izlomljenom od strane nestašnih patuljaka.
this vase me SE seems broken.PF by-side mischievous dwarfs
lit. ‘This vase seems to me broken by the mischievous dwarves’
- b. Računi neplaćeni od strane naših roditelja ostaće nama.
bills unpaid.PF by-side our parents remain.FUT us
‘The bills unpaid by our parents will remain for us’
- c. od strane naše učiteljice otvoreno pismo
by-side our teacher opened.PF letter
lit. ‘a by our teacher opened letter’

Based on these generalizations, I argue that a dichotomous distinction between adjectival and verbal passives cannot be maintained for SC. Instead, I analyze SC passive participles as deverbal adjectives which contain both verbal and adjectival structure. With respect to the verbal structure, all SC passive participles show overt verbal morphology, including at least a theme vowel which is the exponent of the verbalizing head (Caha & Ziková 2016) and optional aspectual morphology:

- (2) is-traž-i-va-ti / is-traž-i-va-n
PF-explore-V-IMPF-INF. PF-explore-V-IMPF-SUFF.
‘explore/explored’

Yet, in terms of their external syntax and other morphological characteristics, passive participles in SC belong to the category of adjectives. Supporting this claim is the presence of adjectival morphology on all participles (3a), their ability to form comparative and superlative forms (3b), and their modification by the prefix *polu-* ‘half’, which attaches to adjectives (3c), but not to verbs (3d). All of the above crucially holds even when an eventive interpretation is forced with the insertion of an agentive *by*-phrase.

- (3) a. tuž-n-a / (od strane moje majke) napis-a-n-a knjiga
 sad-ADJ-F.SG by-side my mother write-V-ADJ-F.SG book.F.SG
 ‘a sad/(*by my mother) written book’
- b. Valjevo je (od strane ljudi) najzagađeniji grad u Srbiji .
 Valjevo is by-side people SUP-polluted-COMP.M.SG. city.M.SG. in Serbia
 ‘Valjevo is (*by people) the most polluted city in Serbia’
- c. Ova kuća je polulepa / već polusagrađena (od strane marljivih zidara).
 this house is half-pretty already half-built by-side hardworking builders
 ‘The house is half-pretty/already half-built (by the hardworking builders)’
- d. *Marljivi zidari su već polusagradili kuću.
 hardworking builders are already half-built house
 ‘The hardworking builders have already half-built the house’

The proposed structure of the passive participle is shown in (4), using the participle from (3a) as illustration:

- (4) [_{AgP} a [_{aP} n [_{AspP} na [_{VoiceP} od strane... [_{VP} a [_{√P} pis]]]]]]

Having established the uniform structure of SC passive participles, I then turn to the question whether English and SC are parametrically different, or whether the traditional division of participles into verbal and adjectival should be abandoned altogether, and argue for the latter approach. Although much more research is needed on this topic, proposals that espouse the latter view have been made for English (Friedin 1975) and even for unrelated languages such as Arabic (Fassi-Fehri 1993). The differences previously handled in terms of a binary category distinction can largely be explained in terms of the amount of verbal structure (e.g. the presence/absence of VoiceP) embedded under the adjectival layer.

References:

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