

## Psych verbs and verbal passives in Pittsburghese<sup>1</sup>

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Verbs of psychological state with experiencer objects (henceforth *psych verbs*) have generated a large body of literature because they exhibit a number of remarkable properties. Among the questions that have been raised about psych verbs is that of whether or not they can form verbal passives. Belletti and Rizzi (1988), arguing from the Italian class of *preoccupare* 'worry' verbs, claimed that these verbs do not form verbal passives and that any instances of passivization they exhibited were adjectival. Grimshaw (1990) made a distinction between agentive and nonagentive psych verbs. She argued that the English equivalent of the *preoccupare* verbs, the nonagentive *frighten* verbs, also do not form verbal passives, but only adjectival passives. However, she claimed that the agentive *frighten* verbs do form verbal passives. Pesetsky (1995) maintained that these psych verbs of the *frighten* class do form verbal passives, the crucial element being not agentivity necessarily, but the presence of an implicit causer. In examining the status of the passives of psych verbs, Grimshaw and Pesetsky both focus on the progressive as a test for verbal versus adjectival passives. The progressive test is somewhat complicated and problematic, however (as Pesetsky points out), and it would be advantageous to have other tests for verbal passives with which to examine these verbs. This is especially so since some theoretical issues regarding the nature of passivization have been linked to the question of whether or not psych verbs can form verbal passives. A construction commonly heard in the dialect of English spoken in the Pittsburgh area of Western Pennsylvania<sup>2</sup> provides a clear test for verbal passives. The purpose of this note is to use this construction to test the predictions of these authors as to whether and under what conditions psych verbs can form verbal passives. The predictions made by Grimshaw and Pesetsky in the context of their theories differ minimally where causative<sup>3</sup> nonagentive psych verbs are concerned, and I will focus on these verbs.

Section 1 of this short note introduces the construction and demonstrates that it requires a verbal and not an adjectival passive. Section 2

shows that the evidence from Pittsburghese supports the general position of Grimshaw and Pesetsky (as opposed to Belletti and Rizzi) that psych verbs can form verbal passives, although it argues against Grimshaw's position that agentivity is necessary to do so. However, the Pittsburghese data suggest that there are more complicated factors involved than are predicted by Pesetsky's approach alone, and these are discussed in section 2. Between five and eight informants were consulted for each set of examples. I have designated in the notes the cases where my informants were not perfectly unanimous in their judgments.

### 1. A Pittsburghese construction that takes a verbal, and not an adjectival, passive participle

The construction I will discuss consists of the matrix predicate *need*,<sup>4</sup> followed by the passive participle of another verb, and possibly miscellaneous verb-phrase material as well. Examples I have collected over several years include *The transmitter needs fine-tuned*; *It's not anything that needs stored in memory*, and *Flowering shrubs need pruned now*.<sup>5</sup> Following the literature cited above, I focus here on the distinction between verbal and adjectival passives as a distinction between eventive and stative readings of the passive participle. Various kinds of evidence show that the embedded passive participle must be a verbal passive, with an eventive reading, rather than an adjectival passive, with a stative reading. Adjectival passives are impossible in the construction.

First, the construction is possible with adverbials that call for eventive readings rather than stative readings (such as manner adverbials, agentive *by* phrases, and certain aspectual modifiers). This indicates the verbal passive reading is possible:<sup>6</sup>

- |  |                                       |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| (1) The car needs washed very carefully. | The dog needs scratched for an hour.  |
| The car needs washed in a hurry.         | The house needs painted by the owner. |
| The dog needs scratched hard.            |                                       |

Second, the construction can occur with progressive aspect. Since progressive aspect is generally incompatible with stative predicates, this indicates that the embedded passive participle cannot have an adjectival passive reading. My informants agree that the sentences below are acceptable:<sup>7</sup>

- (2) The car has been needing washed for a long time now.  
The car might have been needing washed since last year; I'm not sure.

Third, adjectives cannot be substituted for the passive participle, indicating it is not adjectival:

- (3) \*The clown needs funny.  
 \*This house needs bigger.  
 \*The wall needs clean.

Fourth, negative *-un*, which attaches to adjectives but not to verbs (see Levin and Rappaport 1986; Siegel 1973) is impossible in this construction:

- (4) \*The car needs unwashed.      \*The dog needs unscratched.  
 \*The door needs unopened.      \*The house needs unpainted.

Fifth, degree modifiers have been used as tests for verbal versus adjectival passives. Since adjectival passives are stative, Pesetsky (1995) uses the modifier *much* to force a stative reading, and hence the adjectival passive interpretation. These examples should be adjectival passives:

- (5) The car was much washed when a teenager owned it.  
 The door was much opened when children lived here.  
 The dog was much scratched when it was good.  
 The house was much painted when paint was cheap.

Half the informants consulted for this test did not like this use of *much* (so this test was not applicable to them), but for those who did accept the sentences in (5), the *much* test failed in the Pittsburghese construction.<sup>9</sup>

- (6) \*The car needed much washed when a teenager owned it.  
 \*The door needed much opened when children lived here  
 \*The dog needed much scratched when it was good.  
 \*The house needed much painted when paint was cheap.

Sixth, idiom chunks have been used as tests for the adjectival passive (see Levin and Rappaport 1986; Wasow 1977). Idiom chunks are prohibited as the NP subject of the passive participle in the adjectival passive:

- (7) \*Tabs, remain  $t_i$  kept on the subject (Levin and Rappaport 1986: 626).

Idiom chunks can occur, however, as the subject of the passive participle in the Pittsburghese construction. \*\*

- (8) a. Tabs need kept on the suspect.  
 b. Progress needs made soon.  
 c. Lip service needs paid to the boss.  
 ,d. The bullet needs bitten to get through this.  
 e. The cat needs let out of the bag.

The evidence from adverbial modifiers, progressive aspect, adjective substitution, negative *-un*, degree modifiers, and idiom chunks shows that the embedded passive participle in the Pittsburghese construction must have a verbal passive eventive reading.

## 2. Psych verbs and verbal passives in Pittsburghese

Since the Pittsburghese construction requires an eventive verbal passive as the embedded participle, Belletti and Rizzi (1988) would predict that psych verbs can never occur in the construction; and Grimshaw (1990) would predict that they can never occur when they are nonagentive. Neither prediction can be maintained in the face of the data I have obtained from my informants. The sentences in (9) are grammatical for some though not all speakers. Each of the sentences in (9) was marked as grammatical by three to four informants, out of seven informants consulted. A nonagentive *by* phrase occurs in each sentence.

- (9) a. Some people need saddened by tragedy, in order to achieve wisdom.  
 b. Nobody needs angered by the truth.  
 c. Nobody needs irritated by the truth.  
 d. Nobody needs discouraged by the truth.  
 e. Nobody needs dismayed by the truth.  
 f. Nobody needs alienated by the truth.

Since nonagentive psych verbs are sometimes possible in this construction, it cannot be the case that they are ruled out by any feature of universal grammar, as Grimshaw (1990) would predict. Since these are causative psych verbs Pesetsky (1995) would predict they can form verbal passives, so Pesetsky's approach best accommodates these facts. However, this still leaves the question of why there is this kind of individual variation between speakers, and why the verbal passive is less salient for these verbs than for other types of verbs. Judgments vary further with the particular psych verb used. The sentences in (10) generally degrade for my informants. Each of the sentences was marked as marginal to grammatical by one to three, out of seven, informants:

- (10) a. The actor needs excited by the play.  
 b. The actor needs fascinated by the play.  
 c. The actor needs frightened by the play.  
 d. The teachers need pleased by the proposed contract, or the strike will not end.

- e. Young people shouldn't need depressed by life.
- f. The local farmers need concerned by the worsening drought.

I will suggest the following approach to these facts. The Pittsburghese data show us that there is no prohibition on verbal passives of non-agentive psych verbs arising out of universal grammatical principles. But there is a felicity condition (at least in English) that verbal passives are more felicitous the more eventive the verb. A complex of factors influences the degree of eventiveness, including not only agentivity but also volitionality, punctuality, and the affectedness or change of state in the experienter. A loose gradient can be defined from the purely stative ascription of property to the most eventive verb type; I do not suppose this to be a strictly grammatical construct, but it is one that speakers make reference to. Individual speakers vary in how strict they are with this scale in making verbal passives. Although the sentences in (9) are not agentive, (9a) could be understood as implying a change of state in the experienter, and (9b)–(9e) could be understood as punctual if the truth was discovered in a sudden moment. Though not essential, agentivity does make a significant contribution to eventiveness for many speakers. Some informants who rejected (10d), (10e), and (10f) accepted the same verbs in the construction when the context was manipulated to emphasize agentivity:<sup>11</sup>

- (11) Susan enjoys frightening her sister; she thinks her sister needs frightened.  
 Susan enjoys depressing her sister; she thinks her sister needs depressed.  
 Susan enjoys pleasing her sister; she thinks her sister needs pleased.

The view outlined here can explain why there has been a continuing disagreement in the literature about the facts concerning verbal passive formation with psych verbs. In sum, there is no grammatical prohibition against psych verbs forming verbal passives; but a complex of factors influencing their acceptability produces the range of individual speaker variation seen with these verbs.

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2. Frazer et al. (1994) have shown that this construction is a feature of the North Midlands dialect area of American English and, as such, can be heard a considerable distance west of Pittsburgh. However, I refer to the dialect as Pittsburghese since all my informants were Pittsburghers. I have not ascertained whether the facts described here hold of the construction in the other areas where it is heard. I have, however, had some anecdotal confirmation by a speaker of the dialect from Oregon, who saw some of these sentences and told me he had similar judgments.

According to Frazer et al., it is very likely that this construction is of Scotch-Irish origin. Nearly all of the attestations in their survey occur in the North Midlands dialect area, with a large cluster of attestations in Western Pennsylvania. These areas were settled by Scotch-Irish, and the construction is typical in modern Scots English. However, Frazer et al. point out that the evidence for this should not be considered conclusive until it can be shown for certain that the construction existed in seventeenth century Scots and/or Scotch-Irish.

3. Pesetsky makes a further distinction between these causative psych verbs and an unaccusative class of psych verbs, e.g. *elude* in *The correct generalization eluded Panini*. (Pesetsky 1995: 52). The discussion in this squib pertains only to the class of causative psych verbs discussed by both Grimshaw and Pesetsky.
4. *Want* may also occasionally be used as a matrix predicate (*He wants entertained*), and even more rarely, other predicates have been attested (*Your radiator could usefished*). However, since none of these predicates is used as productively as *need*, I focus in this squib only on the construction with *need*.
5. It is important to clarify that this Pittsburghese construction is not simply a collapsed version of the Standard American English (SAE) passive, with *to he* omitted. Speakers of this dialect have different constraints on the SAE passive and the Pittsburghese passive. The verbs that are acceptable in the Pittsburghese construction are a subset of the verbs that are acceptable in the SAE passive. I have encountered numerous instances where informants reject the Pittsburghese passive, but unanimously and unreservedly accept the corresponding version with the Standard American English passive. This phenomenon is quite robust.
6. Seven out of eight informants consulted agreed that all the sentences in (1) were grammatical. One of the eight informants objected to *by* phrases in the construction in general (*\*The house needs painted by the owner*). This was one of my more conservative speakers, who seemed to prefer less material following the passive participle in any case.
7. Six out of seven informants consulted agreed that both sentences were grammatical. One of the seven informants put a question mark besides the second sentence of the pair in (2), which is a somewhat convoluted sentence in any case.
8. Seven out of eight informants consulted agreed on the judgments in (3). One of the eight informants accepted *The wall needs clean*, and rejected the other sentences. I have no explanation for this, other than the possibility that this is because of the close phonetic resemblance this sentence bears to *The wall needs cleaned*.
9. Out of eight informants consulted, four rejected both groups of sentences in (5) and (6). Of the four who accepted (5), one marked the sentences in (5) as questionable and

- the sentences in (6) as outright unacceptable. Another marked those in (5) as acceptable and marked those in (6) as degraded but said they would be acceptable if *much* were placed after the passive participle (which would make the sentences more amenable to a verbal passive reading). The other two accepted the sentences in (5) and rejected those in (6).
- 10 The judgments of the Pittsburghese speakers I consulted on these idiomatic constructions were more erratic than for the other tests discussed in this section. These judgments seem to be subject to the kind of idiosyncratic speaker variation typical of idiomatic usage. Nevertheless, it is clear that there is no blanket prohibition on these constructions. Three out of seven informants consulted accepted all of the sentences in (8) as grammatical. The other four informants variously accepted, questioned, or rejected (8a), (8b), (8c), and (8d). All seven informants consulted accepted (8e). Idiom chunks are clearly possible in the construction, even though they are subject to some idiosyncratic and individual constraints on idiomatic usage.
- 11 It is a lexical property of any given verb whether or not it is potentially agentive. Judgments with the verb *concern* did not show the same improvement with the emphasis on agentivity: \**The local farmers need concerned by the worsening drought*; \**Susan enjoys concerning her sister*; *she thinks her sister needs concerned*.

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