Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Why study mediopassive constructions?

From the point of view of a native speaker of German, mediopassive constructions are fascinating. The German equivalent for a sentence such as *This material won't wash* can be either a reflexive construction with *lassen* (*Dieses Material lässt sich nicht waschen*, literally 'This material lets itself not wash') or a construction with *man* and a modal verb (*Dieses Material kann man nicht waschen*, literally 'This material can one not wash'). Another example would be the special kind of outdoor trousers with zips that can be worn long or as shorts. In German, a fairly lengthy description is needed to describe the crucial feature of these trousers. In English, the legs simply *zip off*.

What is so exotic about English mediopassive constructions is the fact that a verb in the active voice without any additional morphological marking can be used a functional notion that is neither clearly active nor a straightforward passive. A linguistic explanation for this marked difference between English on the one hand, and languages like German, French, Swedish or Russian on the other can be found in some typologically relevant long-term developments in English, as we will see.

Mediopassive constructions are also of interest because they are a potential source of variation between different national varieties of English – New Zealanders and Australians often say that a television programme *screens*, Americans prefer to say *air* and British speakers tend to use *show* (Hundt, 1998: 115ff.). Once alerted to this peculiar construction, I found it used quite regularly with almost any denominal verb (1), or more unusual items such as compound verbs (2), intransitive verbs (3) or with verbs in the progressive aspect (4).

1. Inside security pocket *zips* closed. (*SkyMall Catalog*, spring 1998, p. 70)
2. Outdoors, the two ends of the net simply *anchor* securely into the ground. (*SkyMall Catalog*, Spring 1998, p. 133)
3. Two weeks sailing on a private yacht, maximum capacity six passengers, exploring small island at which the bigger ships could never *dock*, [...]. (Frown, P12 74ff.)
4. The auto jack *plugs* into the cigarette lighter with a 12" cord. (*SkyMall Catalog*, Spring 1998, p. 141)
5. [...] medium-bodied with a long bracing, acidic finish. [...] Should *cellar* well for another three years. ('Wine commentary', *Christchurch Star*, 1/5/1996; attested example from Yoshimura 1998: 155)
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f. The lightweight aluminum pole telescopes from 39-to-70-inches long. (SkyMall Catalog, Spring 1998, p. 18)

(2) a. [air cleaner] ... does not wall mount. (Sears & Roebuck, 1986: 730)
b. Steel body [of cabinet] surface mounts. (Sears & Roebuck, 1986: 1134)
c. Door mirrors flush-mount with clips. (Sears & Roebuck, 1986: 902)
d. [...] sleepwear that machine washes. (Sears & Roebuck, 1986: 272)
e. [...] accent pillows which spot clean only. (Sears & Roebuck, 1986: 1235)

(3) a. [...] the routes are designed to bicycle in a few hours. (Frown, F41 5f.)
b. Despite the abuses we heap upon them, the big bays that adjoin our major cities still fish remarkably well. (ACE, E12; Modern Fishing, February 1986)

(4) a. These 85s are drinking well. (This Life, Episode The Plumber Always Rings Twice, BBC TV, 1997)
b. It's fortunate that the five 'police procedurals' that I wrote during my marriage are still selling well. (FLOB, K29 115f.)

Initially, I was sometimes confused by constructions that looked similar to the mediopassive but, on closer inspection, turned out to be slightly different. Examples include the following intransitive uses of fold, form or formulate:

(5) a. I tried to stand up, but I hadn't eaten for several days, so my weak legs wobbled and folded beneath me. (Waris Dirie, Cathleen Miller. 1998. Desert Flower. London: Virago. p. 1.)
b. One of the important conclusions [...] is that a danger appears to lie "where a concentration of immigrants has formed too quickly for an area's capacity to absorb them." (LOB, B15 138ff.)
c. And the strangest notion began to formulate in the mind so recently dedicated to the pursuit of unembellished fact. (C. Dexter. 1976. Last Seen Wearing. New York: Ivy Books. p.43.)

The example with non-mediopassive fold is particularly tricky because this verb is frequently used in the mediopassive construction, as in Glasses fold at bridge or Ladder folds for compact storage. But in the context of the example quoted above, the intransitive use of fold does not achieve the same semantic effect as that in the mediopassive constructions, i.e. no inherent quality of the subject is responsible for the action expressed in the verb. This semantic aspect is also absent from the uses of form and formulate. Similarly, the intransitive use of verbs like open, fill and freeze does not always result in a mediopassive construction (6), though the mediopassive is possible with these verbs, as the attested examples in (7) show: