Symmetric verbs and constraints on passivization: An English-German comparison

Abstract: Constraints on passivization have mainly been formulated in terms of semantic properties of verbs and their arguments. Comparative data from English and German suggest that at least in some areas of the lexicon other factors are at work as well. Different uses of the English verb meet have been investigated with respect to their occurrence in the active and passive diatheses. It turns out that there are striking differences between these uses, for some (near) categorical and for others in terms of frequency. A comparison to their German counterparts, each realized as a formally distinct lexeme and each conforming to the general frequency distribution of actives and passives in German, reveals that semantic and pragmatic motivations cannot sufficiently account for the distribution in English. I propose that verb senses and voice values are associated in such a way that semantic ambiguities are minimized.

1. Introduction

It is well-known that the passive is a relatively rare phenomenon across text types. According to Biber et al. (1999: 476–479) passives are less frequent than actives overall, some marked differences between registers notwithstanding. The relative frequency of passives increases with the degree of formality: whereas only 2% of all finite verbs in conversation are passive, the number rises to 25% in academic prose. In general, it is well-established that the active realization of verbs is significantly more frequent in English. Similar figures have been provided for German. Brinker (1971) and Schoenthal (1976) found ratios of seven and nine percent passives in their samples respectively.¹

It is also well-known that certain verbs are always (or almost always) realized in the passive voice (John Lennon was born on 9 October 1940 vs. Someone bore John Lennon on 9 October 1940). In this paper I will look at the uses of a verb for which at first sight we would not expect a passive use at all: meet. Being commonly categorized as ‘symmetric’ (see for instance Lakoff and Peters 1969), we would expect meet to repel passivization, the reason being the non-

¹ The composition of Brinker’s (1971) sample differs somewhat from that of Schoenthal (1976), but both studies are mainly based on written German (see also Vogel 2003).
affectedness of the underlying object, the non-agentivity of the underlying subject (or the non-directedness or bidirectionality of the event expressed, depending on one’s perspective). The constraint does not hold for a number of ‘non-symmetric’ uses of meet, however. This is not surprising, since the verb does not denote a symmetric event in these uses. What is striking is that some of such uses occur significantly more frequently in the passive than in the active. I will argue that this frequency asymmetry cannot be solely due to semantic or pragmatic factors favouring passivization, given that the German verbs corresponding to the uses of meet at issue do not behave in the same way (under the reasonable assumption that in general the same semantic and pragmatic motivations are at work in the two languages).

It will be proposed that the lexical association of verb senses and voice values is structured in such a way that ambiguities are minimized. The structure of the paper is the following. Section 2 gives an overview of how the verb meet is used in Present-day English and of how the relevant meanings are expressed in German. In Section 3 I will discuss corpus data which show that the different uses of meet attract or repel passivization in a way that contrasts strikingly with the German data. After briefly reviewing the issue of the lexical specification of argument structure, Section 4 will then deal with those English-German contrasts and similarities in the field of voice argument realization that may be relevant for the case under discussion. In Section 5 I will finally put forward an account of how information structural motivations and the need to distinguish verb senses formally can be taken to interact in the case of meet and its German counterparts.

2. The different uses of meet and their German counterparts

2.1 English

The verb meet is often discussed as a paradigm example of the category ‘symmetric predicate’, the latter class being defined as containing predicates that express a necessarily bidirectional relation. In this way it is assumed that the sentence Nick met Greg is synonymous with the sentence Greg met Nick, whereas such an interchangeability of arguments does not hold for a non-symmetric predicate like see: Nick saw Greg does not entail, and therefore is not synonymous with Greg saw Nick. The verb meet displays a number of other uses that are not consistent with this definition of symmetry, however. We would also expect the non-symmetry of these verb uses to be reflected by passivization facts. This prediction is borne out in almost all of the uses under consideration. Consider the following examples:

(1) I’ve only met her once.
(2) Not even in Paradise Street had Rose met that phenomenon.
[BNC K8V 3266]
The use of *meet* in (1) is the one predominantly discussed in the literature on symmetric predicates. It will henceforth be called COME TOGETHER (*meet*$_{\text{COMTOG}}$). The event denoted in (2) is slightly different. While the participants involved basically act in the same way in the case of *meet*$_{\text{COMTOG}}$, there is a clear asymmetry in participation when *meet* is used in the way exemplified by (2). Here, the subject participant is moving and consciously attends to the entity denoted by the object, but the reverse does not hold. In sentences of this type the object can refer not only to inanimate entities, but also to animates (including humans) that remain passive in a similar way. In the following the label COME ACROSS (*meet*$_{\text{COMACR}}$) will be used for this type. The use types in (3)–(5) share with *meet*$_{\text{COMACR}}$ the non-identical participation that the two participants exhibit, and historically they seem to be extensions of *meet*$_{\text{COMACR}}$ (Haas 2007: 204). The meaning in (3) will be called STANDARD (*meet*$_{\text{STAND}}$), because the referent of the active subject fulfills (or attempts to fulfill) a standard, requirement or need, as specified by the active object. Sentence (4) illustrates a use of *meet* that is similar to *meet*$_{\text{STAND}}$ in that the active subject (or passive subject, as in the actual example) also acts as a type of reference point or stimulus. We should nevertheless treat it as a distinct type, since the event denoted by *meet* is here not predetermined by the reference point, as is the case with *meet*$_{\text{STAND}}$. The label REACTION (*meet*$_{\text{REACT}}$) seems appropriate: what the by-phrase in (4) refers to is an event which functions as a reaction to the stimulus denoted by the subject. The reading in (5), finally, exemplifies what I will call the ARRIVAL (*meet*$_{\text{ARR}}$) use of *meet*. The active object (or passive subject) refers to a person (or a group of persons or a means of transport conducted by the latter) waiting for and then receiving the other participant, typically at an airport, a station, or any other place that is construed as an arrival point of that kind.

2.2 German

If we translate the examples in (1)–(5) into German, we find that for each of the use types under discussion German has a formally distinct verb stem:

(6) *Ich habe sie nur einmal getroffen.*
I have her only once met
‘I’ve only met her once.’

(7) *Noch nicht einmal in der Paradise Street hat Rose dieses Phänomen angetroffen.*
still not even in the Paradise Street has Rose this phenomenon met$_{\text{COMACR}}$
‘Not even in Paradise Street had Rose met that phenomenon.’
Um allerdings unnötige Verspätungen beim Erreichen der Vorgaben zu vermeiden …

‘However, to avoid unnecessary delays in meeting the expectations of the staff …’

Widerstand wurde mit Schlägen, Strafzahlungen und Verhaftungen beantwortet.

‘Resistance was met by beatings, fines or imprisonment.’

Sie und ihr Mann wurden am Bahnhof von einer kleinen Kutsche abgeholt, die sie zum Palast brachte.

‘She and her husband were met at the station by a small open carriage which took them to the palace.’

There are still other verbs that correspond to the relevant uses of meet and there are also other English verbs that parallel them (e.g. fulfill [meetSTAND], receive [meetARR]). The crucial contrast between English and German, however, is that there is no German verb that covers all of the relevant meanings in the same way as English meet.

3. Meet and the passive

3.1 Data

In conformity with the semantic constraints on passive use discussed above, meetCOMTOG, as exemplified in (1), is not passivizable.2 The same holds for its German counterpart treffen. The situation is different for the remaining uses of the verb. The verbs in (7)–(10) can all be realized passively. This has been tested on corpora of written German which are made available by the Institut für Deutsche Sprache (Mannheim) via the COSMAS II interface.3 Table 1 shows the

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2 The uses of meet that involve a PP introduced by with also behave in accordance with this regularity. Compare the following examples from Couper-Kuhlen (1979: 167):

(i) Many misfortunes were met with during the course of this year.
(ii) An accident was met with on the way to the opera.
(iii) *An old friend was met with at the dinner party.

For reasons of space, only those uses of meet will be discussed that select for a direct object in what follows.

3 Cf. the COSMAS II-website: https://cosmas2.ids-mannheim.de/cosmas2-web/.
proportions of active and passive realizations of these verbs. The following two observations seem to be relevant here: (i) The active is more frequent across the board, yet passive instances are by no means marginal, amounting to around 30 per cent for *einhalten*, *erwidern*, *beantworten*, *abholen* and *antreffen*; (ii) there are thus no significant contrasts between the verbs as far as the ratio of passives is concerned.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTIVE</th>
<th>PASSIVE</th>
<th>PASSIVE %</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>einhalten</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>erwidern</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beantworten</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>abholen</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>antreffen</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unterstützen (‘support’)</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Frequencies of active and passive realizations of six German verbs

Turning to English, we meet a strikingly different picture. A classification of the first 2,000 instances of the lemma *MEET* in the BNC, reveals the following distribution: Whereas the *meet* use repels the passive as expected, the other uses of the verb do not at all behave like the German verbs. Table 1 shows that, in contrast to the homogeneous distribution of diathesis realizations for the German verbs, the passive proportions of *meet* uses vary a lot. Crucially, these ratios do not only differ from the German matches of the relevant meanings, but also from a random choice of other passivizable transitive verbs. Thus, in order to show that we are not dealing with a completely general phenomenon I have chosen the verbs *encounter*, *support* and *achieve* as a control group, assuming them to represent the usual distribution of actives and passives in English. *Encounter* is related to *meet* insofar as it can also express that meaning. It can therefore help us find out whether the special preference for the active that *meet* will be shown to derive from its meaning or whether there have to be other relevant factors. *Achieve* partially corresponds to *meet* and *support* is

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4 Note that the meanings of the German verbs do not exactly overlap with the uses of *meet* under discussion. German *abholen*, for example, is compatible with inanimate patients (corresponding to English *collect*). The figures in Table 1 only refer to those instances of *abholen* that correspond to *meet* and the same holds for the other verbs and their translations.

5 It remains to be seen whether the higher ratios of passives with these verbs in comparison to the figures reported in the literature (Brinker 1971; Schoenthal 1976; Vogel 2003) is significant or has to do with the different types of corpora used. Giving an answer to this question is beyond the scope of the present paper.


7 For the lemma *SUPPORT* the first 200 (randomly generated) instances and for *ACHIEVE* and *ENCOUNTER* the first 500 instances were checked in the BYU-BNC.
semantically and formally unrelated to *meet*, but, as mentioned above, it conforms to the standard situation in which English verbs are realized significantly more often as actives than passives (Biber et al. 1999: 476–479).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ACTIVE</th>
<th>PASSIVE</th>
<th>PASSIVE %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>meet</em>&lt;sub&gt;STAND&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>720</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>meet</em>&lt;sub&gt;REACT&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>meet</em>&lt;sub&gt;ARR&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>meet</em>&lt;sub&gt;COMACR&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>meet</em>&lt;sub&gt;COMTOG&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>encounter</em></td>
<td>242</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>support</em></td>
<td>150</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>achieve</em></td>
<td>265</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Frequencies of active and passive realizations of *meet* uses and three other verbs

The *meet*<sub>STAND</sub> use, with 910 occurrences out of 2,000 the most frequent type in total, is the only use of *meet* that displays a passive ratio conforming to the general distribution mentioned above: 21% passives. With *meet*<sub>REACT</sub>, however, the proportion of passives rises to 81%. A chi-square test comparing the passive ratios of *meet*<sub>REACT</sub> and the control verb *achieve* shows the difference to be statistically highly significant (p<0.001). The same holds for a comparison of *meet*<sub>ARR</sub> occurring with a frequency of 72 per cent in the passive, and *achieve* (p<0.001).

If we go further down in Table 1, we come across the fact that *meet*<sub>COMACR</sub> shows a frequency skewing of the converse type. Out of 87 instances of *meet*<sub>COMACR</sub> in the sample, only two (2.3 per cent) are used passively. Although this time the use of *meet* under discussion is more often used actively than passively, just like our control verb *achieve*, the frequency skewing between the two is statistically highly significant (p<0.001). In other words, the preference for an active realization of *meet*<sub>COMACR</sub> is clearly stronger than that of a verb like *achieve*. A pairwise comparison of *meet*<sub>REACT</sub>, *meet*<sub>ARR</sub> and *meet*<sub>COMACR</sub> with their German counterparts also shows the relevant contrasts to be statistically significant (with p<0.001 for the pairs *meet*<sub>COMACR</sub> – *antreffen*, *meet*<sub>REACT</sub> – *erwidern* and *meet*<sub>REACT</sub> – *beantworten*, and a significance level of p<0.01 for the pair *meet*<sub>ARR</sub> – *abholen*).

To sum up the corpus findings, *meet*<sub>REACT</sub> and *meet*<sub>ARR</sub> are significantly more often used passively in English than their German counterparts. *Meet*<sub>COMACR</sub>, by contrast is used basically only in the active voice, again contrary to its German counterpart *antreffen*. 
3.2 Lexical specification of argument structure

It is of course not a new observation that lexemes select for specific argument structure patterns. Well known are also cases where the alternation between different patterns such as the double object and the prepositional object construction with ditransitive verbs is more restricted or even limited to a single option for particular (classes of) verbs (see e.g. Levin 1993: 45-48). In the domain of the passive it could be argued that with verbs such as *say* the choice between active and passive realization selects for a specific sense of the verb in a similar way:

(11) *I said this because* […]. [BNC CK1 576]
(12) *I endorse everything that was said* […]. [BNC KGM 513]
(13) *Farrah, 45, is said to be shopping for a challenging film role.* [BNC CH6 4591]

The use of *say* in (13) is only compatible with a passive. The variant *They say Farrah, 45, to be shopping for a challenging film role* is not possible. It has to be kept in mind, however, that it is not the passive as such that triggers this sense, but rather a more specific construction that involves the passive and the infinitive complement *to be* V-ing. Note that the passive sentence in (12) displays the same meaning of *say* as (11). The cases with *meet* are different in that in terms of argument structure the senses at issue are basically transitive verbs which – from a purely formal point of view – can be realized either actively or passively. In other words, notwithstanding the possible exception of *meet* to be discussed below and the extremely marginal occurrence of *meet* in the passive voice the different readings are compatible with active and passive voice, without depending on a more specific construction, as was exemplified by the NcI construction in (13). The corpus data suggest that there are nevertheless strong preferences for specific readings to be associated with either the active or the passive voice. In the case of *meet* this preference seems to be near-categorical.

This state of affairs is well compatible with a usage-based approach to language, where verbs are assumed to be conventionalized together with syntactic constructions to different degrees (see, for instance, Stefanowitsch and Gries 2003; Diessel 2004; ch. 2; Bybee and McClelland 2005; Hay and Bresnan 2006). The question remains, however, as to why the conventionalizations of *meet* uses and their respective voice constructions are distributed the way they are.

4. Where do English and German differ?

4.1 Use of passives in English and German

Before turning to the differences, let me point out commonalities in the use of English and German passives. If we assume that the semantic and pragmatic motivations for using passives in English and German are the same or at least very
similar, we should not expect the aforementioned contrasts in the distribution of diathesis types (active vs. passive) over verb senses in English and distinct verb forms in German. Therefore I will suggest that in English the need for distinguishing senses of *meet* has led to a tighter association between *meet*$_{COMACR}$ and the active voice on the one hand, and between *meet*$_{REACT},$ *meet*$_{ARR}$ and the passive voice, on the other.

For many verbs passivization is excluded. With others the passive is not possible for specific uses of the verb. Parameters such as the affectedness of the referent denoted by the passive subject, the event type (state vs. action), the visibility of a resultant state, or more generally the non-symmetric nature of the event have been found to constrain passivization (see Tuyn 1970; Couper-Kuhlen 1979; Beedham 1982; Siewierska 1984: 186–216). As far as factors motivating the use of the passive in the first place are concerned, it is above all information structure that seems to be relevant. According to Birner and Ward (1998: 199), long passives, i.e. those where the agent is overtly expressed, are constrained in that the passive subject must not represent newer information than does the NP in the *by*-phrase. Conversely, the passive can be seen as one of a number of non-canonical clause types that render marked relations between thematic roles and the categories ‘given’ and ‘new’.

Despite some minor differences having to do with word order contrasts between English and German (Doherty 1996), the motivations for using the passive, as well as the constraints on the passivizability of transitive verbs, are the same in German (on the use of the German passive see Eroms 1974; Schoenthal 1976; Zifonun 1992; Zifonun et al. 1997: 1837–1850; Eisenberg 1999: 127; König and Gast 2007: 132). The same holds for the frequency distribution of passives as opposed to actives in German, as mentioned in the introduction.

### 4.2 Lexical contrasts in the verbal domain

Plank (1984) shows that English predicates allow complements of semantically diverse types to a higher degree than German predicates. He analyses this contrast in terms of ‘semantic agreement’ between verbs and their objects. Verbs of dressing and undressing provide a good example. While English gets by with the generic phrasal verbs *put on* and *put off*, German distinguishes a number of different lexemes that are chosen in accordance with certain properties of the object (Plank 1984: 313-315). *Put on*, for instance, translates as *anziehen, aufsetzen, anlegen, umbinden, umlegen* and *anstecken*.

It seems that the case of *meet* and its German translations conforms to this tendency, although arguably the uses of *meet* under discussion are semantically more distinct from each other than the uses of *put on* and *put off*. To be sure, the particular movements that *put on* denotes for the different objects varies, but the type of movement that applies in a given case can be predicted from inherent properties of the object referent. With *meet* the situation is different. It cannot be denied that the senses we are investigating are semantically related, *meet*$_{COMTOL}$...
and $meet_{COMACR}$ being historically the oldest and semantically the most central ones. Nevertheless, they are not predictable from properties of their objects. Consider $meet_{COMACR}$ and $meet_{ARR}$, for example. Both readings are possible with a human object. Thus, the sentence:

(14) I met my boss at the station.

is acceptable in either of the following two situations: ‘I went to the station, picked up my boss and drove him to the hotel’ or ‘I was surprised to find my boss lying drunk on a bench at the station’. Putting it differently, the semantic differences between senses of $meet$ go beyond what Plank (1984) described as semantic agreement with the object. The greater semantic idiosyncrasy of $meet_{STAND}$, $meet_{REACT}$ and $meet_{ARR}$ notwithstanding, the general contrast applies: Where in German a number of formally distinct lexemes are distinguished, a single form seems to be sufficient in English. In the following I will argue that the semantic ambiguity of sentences like (14), which would be rendered unambiguously in German (Ich habe meinen Chef vom Bahnhof abgeholt vs. Ich habe meinen Chef am Bahnhof angetroffen) is counterbalanced by a stricter association of certain verb senses and restrictions on the choice of otherwise variable syntactic constructions (either in the form of significant frequency asymmetries or of near categorical constraints).

5. Towards an explanation

5.1 Sense distinguishability as a driving force

As I mentioned earlier, motivations for using the passive are usually assumed to be pragmatic ones, insofar as the passive presents the verbal event from a different perspective, which also correlates with a reversed given-new structure with respect to the active: the passive subject typically refers to given information and the optional by-phrase may introduce new information (Birner and Ward 1998: 199). The point I would like to make is that the different uses of the verb $meet$ are distributed over the active and the passive voice in a way that cannot be exclusively reduced to the choice of perspective or given-new structure.

An important factor seems to be the functional need for distinguishing the different senses of the verb in discourse, which is achieved by conventionally associating a given sense with a particular diathesis. For example, if $meet_{COMACR}$ is realized only actively, while $meet_{ARR}$ is conventionally realized passively, the identification of the intended sense by the hearer is strongly facilitated. There is no functional need for such a conventionalization in German, since the different meanings are expressed by formally distinct verbs anyway. Consider the following examples:

(15) I was met at the station.
(16) Ich wurde am Bahnhof abgeholt.

I was at the station picked up

‘I was picked up at the station.’
(17) *Ich wurde am Bahnhof angetroffen/aufgefunden.*

I was at the station found

‘I was encountered at the station.’

Simplifying slightly, the sentences in (15)–(17) are all unambiguous. The crucial point is that they are unambiguous for different reasons. While *meet* in (15) will be interpreted as having the *meet* \textsubscript{ARR} sense because *meet* \textsubscript{COMACR}, the only competing sense that would be appropriate in the context given, is conventionally associated with the active voice, the verbs in (16) and (17) do not trigger the relevant ambiguity in the first place; *abholen* unambiguously expresses the *meet* \textsubscript{ARR} sense, while *antreffen* and *auffinden* unambiguously express the *meet* \textsubscript{COMACR} sense, whether realized actively or passively.

The competition between *meet* \textsubscript{STAND} and *meet* \textsubscript{REACT}, on the one hand, and their German counterparts, on the other, can be illustrated in a similar way:

(18) *The government’s requirements were met by…*

(19) *They met the government’s requirements by…*

(20) *Die Vorgaben der Regierung wurden von den Firmen…*

the standards the GEN government were of the companies

\textit{eingehalten}.

fulfilled

‘The government’s standards were adhered to by the companies.’

(21) *Die Firmen hielten die Vorgaben der Regierung ein.*

the companies kept the standards the GEN government PTCL

‘The companies adhered to the standards of the government.’

(22) *Die Vorgaben der Regierung wurden mit Protesten…*

the standards the GEN government were with protests

\textit{beantwortet}.

answered

‘The government’s standards were answered with protests.’

(23) *Die Firmen beantworteten die Vorgaben der Regierung…*

the companies answered the standards the GEN government

\textit{mit Protesten}.

with protests

‘The companies answered the government’s standards with protests.’

(24) *Die Vorgaben der Regierung wurden erst spät bemerkt.*

the standards the GEN government were only late noticed

‘It was only late that the government’s standards were noticed.’
For the passive sentence fragment (18) the senses $\text{meet}^\text{STAND}$ and $\text{meet}^\text{REACT}$ are theoretically possible. The active variant in (19), however, would preferably be interpreted as $\text{meet}^\text{STAND}$, because $\text{meet}^\text{REACT}$, as discussed above, is more strongly entrenched as a passive verb. Interpreting the sentence fragment as involving $\text{meet}^\text{COMACR}$ would be possible for the active variant in (19), but not for the passive variant in (18). Again, the reason is that the $\text{meet}^\text{COMACR}$ use is associated with the active to a very high degree. The German versions in (21)–(25) are all unambiguous. Whatever voice the speaker chooses, there is no ambiguity comparable to the one found in English, where one lexeme $\text{meet}$ corresponds to a number of different senses. Although this has not been investigated for the German corpus data, the choice between active and passive can probably be derived from those pragmatic factors that have been shown to operate on the active-passive alternation in general (see Zifonun et al. 1997: 1837–1850).

This brings us to what turns out to be the crucial English-German contrast; the choice between active and passive voice for the German verbs under discussion conforms to general motivations operating in English and German, whereas the use of English $\text{meet}$ cannot be accounted for by these motivations alone. From the perspective of the speaker this means that there are certainly discourse situations in which he or she has to use either the active or the passive, because the distribution of given and new or the (ir)relevance of the agent referent, to name the most important pragmatic motivations, are such that the other option would result in unacceptability. Yet, the distribution in Table 2 suggests that in those cases where the discourse context would require the lexically dispreferred realization speakers will rather use a different verb from the outset.

5.2 Some speculations on diachrony

From a diachronic point of view I assume that higher frequencies for certain uses of $\text{meet}$ were first due to pragmatic motivations, and later increased in order to strengthen distinguishability. What would make a preferred passive use of $\text{meet}^\text{REACT}$ and $\text{meet}^\text{ARR}$ plausible from a pragmatic point of view? As for $\text{meet}^\text{REACT}$, the information structural distribution of thematic roles over the arguments of this verb use is in fact one that is compatible with the passive construction. Let us distinguish between Agent, Stimulus and the (rather unconventional but specific) role Reaction here. In example (4), resistance has the Stimulus role and beatings, fines or imprisonment qualifies as Reaction. A passive realization, such as the one in (4), is pragmatically motivated when the Reaction NP contains newer information than the Stimulus NP.
Note, however, that this does not have to be the case, if we consider the larger context of (4), given in (26), we note that in this example the two NPs refer to referents that are equally new:

(26) Around 12 million Africans were captured and transported to work the cotton fields and tobacco and sugar plantations of the Caribbean and North America. Later in India and Africa, entire villages were rounded up and forced to work for minimal wages set by foreign officials. Resistance was met by beatings, fines or imprisonment. Unions were forbidden.

Motivations for using the passive other than the distinguishability from other readings here might be (i) the iconic mapping of the event’s temporal sequence on syntactic constituents (the Stimulus temporally and causally precedes the Reaction), and (ii) syntactic parallelism (the sentence under discussion is preceded by two passive sentences; see Bock 1986 on this phenomenon). Whereas (ii) can certainly not account for all instances of the passive with meet\textsubscript{REACT} (i) seems to be a serious candidate for boosting the frequency of passives. Again, however, I would like to suggest that in order to fully explain the significantly higher incidence of passives with meet\textsubscript{REACT} in English as compared to the passive ratio of German erwidern and beantworten, an additional factor is needed. One way of avoiding the active realization of meet\textsubscript{ARR} and meet\textsubscript{REACT} without enforcing the passive against its pragmatic restrictions is to opt for other verbs with the same (or at least a similar) meaning in these cases.

Let us consider this option for the state of affairs described in (26). An active realization of the same information structural distribution as in (26) is of course possible, provided the Agent, not overtly expressed in the passive variant, as well as the Stimulus are given information:

(27) They met the slaves’ resistance with beatings, fines or imprisonment.

As argued above, in such a case the speaker has the option of using the passive. Another way of avoiding the active use of meet\textsubscript{REACT} and at the same time retaining the overt expression of a highly accessible Agent would be to use a different verb such as react:

(28) They reacted to the slaves’ resistance with beatings, fines or imprisonment.

I assume that the tendency to use such an alternative verb will be stronger if the lexically preferred voice realization is excluded by information structure restrictions. Summing up this argument, the theoretical possibility of sentences like (27) supports the proposed thesis because the information structural configuration displayed by the passive sentences under consideration is not incompatible with an active structure. As a consequence, it cannot be argued that the presence of a given Stimulus and a new Reaction alone makes a passive realization necessary. Thus, when there is a choice between an active variant, on the one hand, and a passive variant, on the other, speakers will tend to use the passive variant for meet\textsubscript{REACT} and meet\textsubscript{ARR} and the active variant for meet\textsubscript{COMACR}. In those cases
where information structure would not allow for the lexically preferred variant, there will be a significant preference for using an alternative verb. Apart from general considerations concerning the interplay of pragmatic factors and lexical preferences, there is no direct evidence for the latter point in the data discussed here. Further work involving parallel corpora and experiments will address this question.

To conclude, it has been argued that the polyfunctionality of the verb meet leads to a stronger association of its respective uses with either the active or the passive voice. A comparative view on English and German suggests that the significantly different voice preferences of these verb uses in English cannot be reduced to those pragmatic, i.e. information structural, factors that usually favour the choice of diathesis types in English and German. Under the assumption that there is no strict boundary between lexicon and syntax in that verbs (or uses of verbs) and the constructions in which they occur can be represented together in the mind of the speaker, the facts under discussion are nothing special, but tie in with other observations undertaken from a usage-based perspective on grammar.

Works cited


