

Dutch impersonal passives

Beyond volition and atelicity

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Dutch impersonal passives are often considered to be only compatible with atelic volitional verbs, such as *werken* ‘work’, *lachen* ‘laugh’, and *zwemmen* ‘swim’. Two recent corpus studies, however, argue that a wider range of verbs is compatible with the construction, presenting examples of attested impersonal passives with telic and non-volitional verbs. This paper lends further support to this view, by providing an exploratory study of the frequencies of different intransitive verbs appearing in the construction, as well as a discussion of the telicity of attested impersonal passives with *vallen* ‘fall’ and *sterven* ‘die’. The paper concludes that also with these telic non-volitional verbs, the impersonal passive merely conveys the occurrence of the type of act described by the verb, without specifying whether this occurrence is constituted by a single or multiple events, or whether it involves one or more participants.

Keywords: impersonal passive, unaccusativity, Dutch, volitionality, telicity, attested examples

1. Introduction

The Dutch impersonal passive construction is often said to allow only verbs with a human, volitional agent (e.g. Kraak & Klooster 1968, van Es 1970). (1) is an example of the construction in its most rudimentary form: it consists of an adverbial (*er* ‘there’ in 1), a form of the passive auxiliary *worden* ‘become, be’ (or *zijn* ‘be’ in the perfect tenses),¹ and a past participle.

- (1) *Er werd gefloten* (Kirsner 1976: 388)
there became[/was] whistled
‘There was whistling/People whistled/Someone whistled.’

1. For the use of *worden* and *zijn* in Dutch passives, see Verhagen (1992), Cornelis & Verhagen (1995), Haeseryn et al. (1997:959-960), de Haan (2000).

The construction is not easy to translate into English, since no person (or other entity) fulfils the grammatical function of subject. Kirsner's (1976) translation 'There was whistling' in (1) comes closest to the Dutch form; his two other translations ('People/someone whistled') are stylistically more natural in English, yet require a choice between a plural or a singular agent, which the Dutch construction does not specify.

Newspaper and television reports on professional cycling, however, regularly seem to ignore the alleged restriction of a human, volitional agent. The impersonal passive in (2), for instance, features the non-volitional verb *vallen* 'fall', which a TV presenter used to introduce the topic (cycling). This attested usage stands in stark contrast with much of the literature on impersonal passives, in which (constructed) examples with *vallen* are usually regarded as unacceptable or ungrammatical, cf. the asterisk in (3) (from van Hout 1996:323; for similar intuitions, see, for example, Zaenen 1988:317, Carnie & Harley 2005:46, Broekhuis et al. 2015:200).

- (2) *In de Tour de France werd ook vandaag weer veel gevallen.*
 in the Tour de France was also today again much fallen
(Nieuwsuur, 8 July 2015)
 'In the Tour de France, today yet again, there was much falling.'

- (3) **Er werd gevallen*
 there was fallen

Recently, two corpus studies (Primus 2011, van Schaik-Rădulescu 2011) have argued that Dutch impersonal passives allow a much wider range of verbs than is usually acknowledged, including the verb *vallen*. In support of their claim, they offer only a single attested example per verb, without discussing how frequently these verbs occur in the construction. In addition, the two studies differ in their analysis of the telicity of impersonal passives with telic verbs: Primus (2011) states that such constructions must receive an atelic interpretation (cf. Zaenen 1988, Carnie & Harley 2005), yet van Schaik-Rădulescu (2011) argues that telic interpretations are also possible.

The present paper evaluates these conflicting claims about the telicity of the impersonal passive, and about the range of verbs compatible with the construction, on the basis of data gathered from the internet. Section 2 provides an overview of the different sets of verbs that previous studies have claimed to be compatible with impersonal passives. Section 3 presents an exploratory Google search of the frequencies of different verbs used in the construction. The telicity of some attested examples with *vallen* 'fall' and *sterven* 'die' is analyzed in section 4. Section 5 concludes that the range of verbs compatible with the impersonal passive is indeed

larger than claimed by earlier studies based on constructed examples, and that the construction is unspecified for telicity.

2. Types of verbs claimed to be compatible with the Dutch impersonal passive

Figure 1 illustrates how different sets of verbs have been claimed to be compatible with the impersonal passive construction. The smallest set, indicated by the red line, consists of verbs that have a human, volitional agent and that take *hebben* 'have' in the perfect tenses (e.g. Kraak & Klooster 1968, van Es 1970).² For these authors, the examples in (4) are acceptable, but those in (5) are not, since they involve an animal rather than a human agent (*blaffen* 'bark'), or constitute an involuntary act, such as *blozen* 'blush' (which takes *hebben* as its perfect auxiliary) or *vallen* 'fall' (which takes *zijn* as its perfect auxiliary).

- (4) *Er werd gelachen/gewerkt/gezongen*
 there was laughed/worked/sung
 'There was laughing/working/singing'

- (5) **Er werd geblaft/gebloosd/gevallen*
 there was barked/blushed/fallen

Perlmutter (1978) considers a wider set of verbs to be compatible with the construction, as indicated by the dashed blue line in Figure 1. In his influential (1978) proposal of the 'Unaccusative Hypothesis', he uses the Dutch impersonal passive

2. The *Algemene Nederlandse Spraakkunst* (Haeseryn et al. 1997) is not easy to place in this overview. Like Kraak & Klooster (1968) and van Es (1970), Haeseryn et al. claim that the Dutch impersonal passive implies a human 'logical subject' and does not normally combine with an intransitive verb that takes *zijn* as its perfect auxiliary. On the other hand, however, they provide an example with *sterven* 'die', which is used in a context that does not involve a human being, see (i). And they present variants of Kirsner's (1976) example in (ii), but then with verbs that take *zijn* as their perfect auxiliary: *beginnen* 'begin', *naar huis gaan* 'go home' and *inslapen* 'fall asleep'.

- (i) *(Het lijkt zo vredig tussen de waterviolieren. Maar onder water is rust onbekend.)*
 'It seems so peaceful between the water violets. But under water, there is no peace.'
Daar wordt koortsachtig geleefd en gestorven. (Haeseryn et al. 1997:1418)
 there is feverishly lived and died
 'Creatures feverishly live and die there.'
- (ii) *En nu, Jan[tje], wordt er geslapen!* (Kirsner 1976:398)
 and now, Johnn[y], there is sleeping!
 'And now, Johnny, go to sleep!'

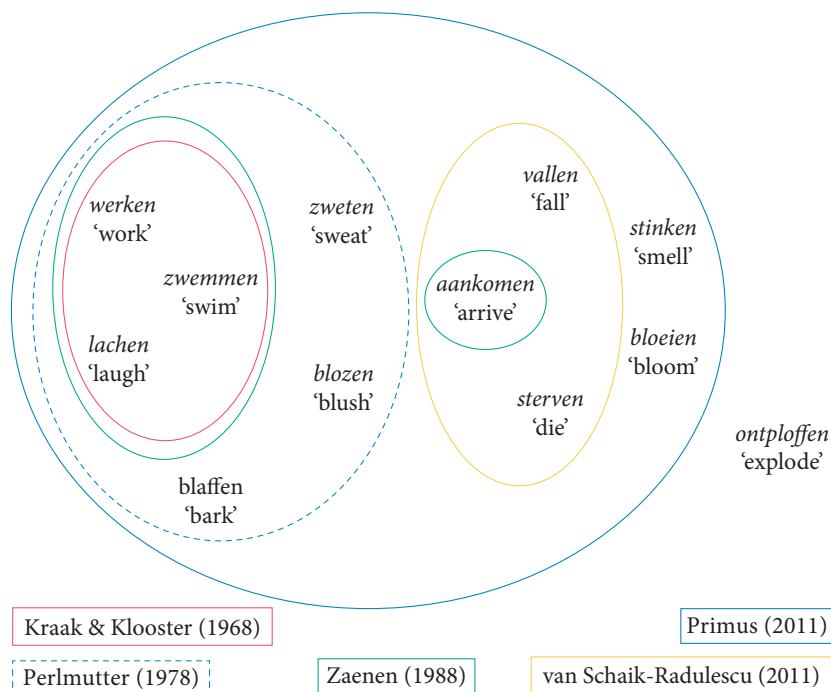


Figure 1. Different sets of verbs deemed compatible with the impersonal passive by different authors.

to distinguish two types of intransitive verbs: ‘unergatives’, which can occur in the impersonal passive, and ‘unaccusatives’, which cannot. Although he focuses on ‘willed or volitional acts’ in the examples that he discusses, his classification of unergative verbs also includes ‘involuntary bodily processes’, such as *blozen* ‘blush’ and *zweten* ‘sweat’, as well as non-human actions, in the case of ‘predicates describing sounds made by animals’, such as *blaffen* ‘bark’ (see Figure 1).

Focussing solely on volitional acts, Zaenen (1988) refines Perlmutter’s analysis: she states that the verbs that can occur in the impersonal passive are atelic, i.e. they do not have a ‘built-in endpoint’, and take *hebben* as their perfect auxiliary. She furthermore observes that some verbs classified as unaccusative, such as *aankomen* ‘arrive’ or *vertrekken* ‘leave’, can in fact occur in the impersonal passive, cf. her example in (6), but only if they receive an atelic (in this case, iterative) interpretation. In Figure 1, Zaenen’s set of verbs is indicated with two green ellipses: one coincides with Kraak & Klooster and van Es’s, and involves volitional, atelic verbs that take *hebben* in the perfect tenses; the second includes volitional, telic verbs that take *zijn*.

- (6) *In dat hotel heb ik geen oog dicht gedaan, want er werd de hele nacht
In that hotel I didn't sleep a wink, for there was the whole night
aangekomen en vertrokken.
arrived and left.*

In a recent corpus study, Primus (2011) 'allows' the widest range of verbs in the impersonal passive: the blue solid ellipse encompasses all the verbs in Figure 1, except for *ontploffen* 'explode'. Her study is based on examples from the internet that were checked for their grammaticality with native speakers of Dutch. The range includes all the types of verbs deemed acceptable by authors before her, as well as involuntary telic ones such as *vallen* 'fall' and *sterven* 'die'. She concurs with Zaenen (1988) that a telic verb that occurs in an impersonal passive must receive an atelic interpretation. In addition to these involuntary telic verbs, she argues that involuntary atelic verbs such as *stinken* 'smell, stink' and *bloeien* 'flourish, bloom' are compatible with the construction as well. To account for these telic and atelic non-volitional verbs, Primus proposes a refinement of Dowty's (1991) proto-agent role, stating that the Dutch impersonal passive allows verbs that involve 'volition', 'sentience', or 'self-organized motion'. In this way, she includes entities with "their own source of energy and an automatically running, self-organized motor program for the respective event" (2011:59), such as apparatuses or even plants.

The corpus study by van Schaik-Rădulescu (2011), finally, agrees with Primus (2011) and Zaenen (1988) that unaccusative (telic) verbs can occur in the Dutch impersonal passive construction (the yellow ellipse in Figure 1). Focusing only on those verbs, she provides attested examples of such constructions with *vallen* 'fall', *sterven* 'die', and *aankomen* 'arrive'. Unlike Primus (2011) and Zaenen (1988), however, van Schaik-Rădulescu claims that telic verbs in the impersonal passive construction do not necessarily receive an atelic interpretation. She provides (7) as an example of a telic construction. Such constructions, she states, "denote a single event" (2011:70) and "select implicit arguments that refer to an individual or to a group of individuals acting as one" (2011:79).

- (7) *Rond km.38 zat ik iets meer achterin het peloton toen er vlak voor mijn neus
gevallen werd.* (van Schaik-Rădulescu 2011:71)
'At about km 38 I was riding a bit farther in the back of the pack when there
was a fall right in front of my nose'

According to van Schaik-Rădulescu, not all impersonal passives with telic verbs can receive a telic interpretation, however. She provides attested example (8) with *sterven* 'die' (2011:80), which receives an atelic interpretation: the example refers to several dying events (a 'distributive plural event interpretation', 2011:80). Her constructed example in (9) (van Schaik-Rădulescu 2011:81), however, is an attempt

to create a telic impersonal passive construction, i.e. one that refers to a single event, but it receives an asterisk, based on the unacceptability judgments from van Schaik-Rădulescu's informants.

- (8) “*Er wordt 's nachts veel gestorven*,” zegt organisator Marcellino Bogers. “*Maar het symposium gaat niet alleen maar over de nadelen van het nachtwerk*.”

“A lot of patients die at night,” says Marcellino Bogers, one of the organisers. “But the conference really doesn’t only deal with the disadvantages of night work.”

- (9) * *Er werd gestorven in een auto-ongeluk in Parijs, 's ochtends om 9.15 uur op 16 januari 2005.*

‘They died in a car crash in Paris, at 9 AM on [16] January 2005.’

To summarize, there are clearly different ideas about the types of verbs that can be used in the Dutch impersonal passive. Recent corpus studies allow the widest range of verbs, i.e. non-volitional as well as volitional verbs, and telic as well as atelic verbs. While they provide only a single attested example for each verb, more insight might be gained from information about the frequencies with which the verbs occur in the construction. For one thing, if there are several attested examples of impersonal passives with a particular verb, this is an argument for considering them in more detail. What is more, differences in frequencies can give insight into the relative ‘ease’ with which a verb can combine with a particular construction. The following section therefore explores such frequencies. Section 4 examines whether impersonal passive constructions can receive a telic interpretation.

3. Frequencies of individual intransitive verbs occurring in the impersonal passive

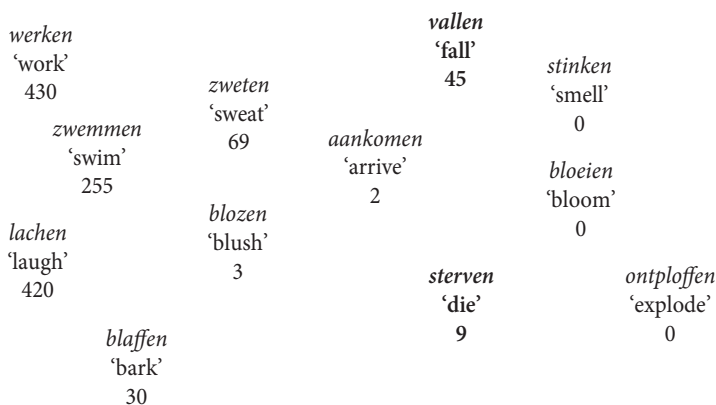
To get a sense of the frequencies of the verbs in Figure 1 in the impersonal passive, a number of simple three-word searches were conducted using Google, as shown in Table 1. The strings all started with *er werd* ‘there was’, followed directly by a specific past participle.

Not surprisingly, the largest number of hits were obtained with the strings with *gewerkt* ‘worked’, *gelachen* ‘laughed’, and *gezwommen* ‘swum’, which are the verbs that everyone agrees can occur in the impersonal passive. The string with *ontploft* ‘exploded’, a verb which no previous study has considered possible in the construction, produced no hits at all. The verbs in between these opposites were those that have been treated differently in different studies. The hits for these verbs

Table 1. Number of hits on Google for “*er werd ...*” with specific verbs (July 2015).

“ <i>er werd ...</i> ”	‘there was ...’	Hits	Asterisk
gewerkt	working	430	–
gelachen	laughing	420	–
gezwommen	swimming	255	–
gezweet	sweating	69	0
gevallen	falling	49	4
geblaft	barking	30	0
gestorven	dying	11	2
aangekomen	arriving	5	3
gebloosd	blushing	3	0
gebloeid	blooming	3	3
gestonken	stinking	1	1
ontploft	exploding	0	–

were considered in more detail, to see whether they contained examples with an asterisk, i.e. from the linguistics literature on impersonal passives. In the case of “*er werd gebloeid*”, for example, the three hits that Google produced consisted solely of such metalinguistic examples. Figure 2 presents the numbers of hits for all the verbs when those with an asterisk are excluded.

**Figure 2.** Number of hits for different verbs in the string “*er werd ...*”, excluding examples with an asterisk

Note that there were no attested examples with the involuntary verbs *stinken* ‘smell, stink’ and *bloeien* ‘bloom, flourish’, which Primus (2011) claimed to be compatible with the construction, and only two examples for *aankomen* ‘arrive’, which is more generally considered to be compatible with the construction (see Zaenen 1988,

Primus 2011, van Schaik-Rădulescu 2011). *Zweten* ‘sweat’ and *blaffen* ‘bark’, categorized by Perlmutter (1978) as unergative verbs and therefore compatible with the impersonal passive, each yielded quite a substantial number of hits. The non-volitional, telic verbs *vallen* ‘fall’ and, to a lesser extent, *sterven* ‘die’, finally, also produced a respectable number of hits, which therefore warrant further investigation (see Section 4).

The question of how these different frequencies can be explained goes beyond the scope of the present paper, but I will make some suggestions here. For one thing, we cannot take these frequencies at face value. If a certain string produced no hits, that does not necessarily mean that the verb cannot be used in the construction: since the three-word strings were very specific, the numbers in Table 1 and Figure 2 only scratch the surface of the actual usage of these verbs in the impersonal passive construction. Nor does one, a few, or even several hits necessarily mean that a substantial number of speakers of Dutch allow the verb in the impersonal passive construction as part of their (largely tacit) grammatical knowledge. In this respect, acceptability judgments also play a crucial role with attested data.

The preliminary frequencies in Figure 2 do seem to suggest, however, that the data cannot be accounted for by positing a categorical distinction between verbs that occur in the impersonal passive and verbs that do not, as has been common in many previous studies. More insight, I expect, can be gained from what Achard (2009) calls a ‘local analysis’, which consists in studying the semantics of the construction at hand, in this case the Dutch impersonal passive. Whether a verb can occur in the construction depends on the compatibility between the verb’s semantics, the semantics of the construction, and the “particular circumstances in the context of the conceptualized situation” (Achard 2009:528). Attested data are crucial for such an analysis, not just because of insight into frequencies, but also because individual examples can be viewed in their original context, i.e. the actual communicative situation in which a speaker was motivated to use the construction. The following section illustrates this approach, examining some attested examples with *vallen* ‘fall’ and *sterven* ‘die’ in more detail.

4. *Analyzing the telicity of impersonal passives with vallen ‘fall’ and sterven ‘die’*

As we saw in section 2, Zaenen (1988) and Primus (2011) state that telic verbs in an impersonal passive construction must receive an atelic (iterative) interpretation; van Schaik-Rădulescu (2011), conversely, claims that some telic verbs may also receive a telic interpretation, but that *sterven* ‘die’ cannot. On the basis of attested examples with *vallen* ‘fall’ and *sterven* ‘die’, the present section proposes

that the impersonal passive is in fact neutral with respect to whether one or more people (or other entities) are involved, or whether there was a single event or multiple ones: it merely conveys that a *type* of act takes place (cf. the notion of a process *type*, as discussed in Langacker 1999:96-97).³

This proposal is in fact in accordance with some earlier observations about the construction, even though they only considered human, volitional acts. Van Es (1970) argues that the verbal part (i.e. the passive auxiliary and the past participle) of the impersonal passive is semantically in the center of the attention (1970:213), with the construction stating that the act described by the verb took place (1970:216). The agent of this act is backgrounded ('not focussed'), for example, because it is 'irrelevant or unknown' (Kirsner 1976). What is more, this 'implied logical subject' refers to an unspecified number of human beings (Pollmann 1970:41,43).

Let us first consider two examples with *vallen*.⁴ (10) is an example of an impersonal passive that involves several falling events during a single stage of the Tour de France (an atelic, iterative interpretation), without it being specified who exactly are involved. In (11), on the other hand, the text following the impersonal passive makes it clear that there was only a single fall, involving a single rider, Rick Ottema, which supports van Schaik-Rădulescu's view.

- (10) *Ik herinner mij een Touretappe waar heel veel werd gevallen en Gesink*
 I remember me a Tour-stage where very much was fallen and Gesink
*in feite meteen naar huis kon, maar dapper doorreed*⁵
 in fact immediately to home could, but bravely on-rode
 'I remember a stage in the Tour in which there was a great deal of falling and
 Gesink could just as well have gone home immediately, but bravely cycled on'

3. The term 'act' is used here in a sense that is unspecified for telicity or volitionality. As suggested in Beliën (2012:18), "[a]n 'act' can be atelic, as in the act of swimming, flying, or walking, but also telic, as in the act of breaking a mirror". Note furthermore that the latter act can be volitional or non-volitional. It would be interesting to see if 'act' can be defined more precisely in terms of Primus' (2011) notions of 'volition', 'sentience', and 'self-organized motion', inspired by Dowty (1991, see Section 2 above).

4. The examples with *vallen* 'fall' discussed in this section were found by Googling "*werd gevallen*" -*rede -lastig* on October 24, 2015, which yielded 326 in total (-*rede -lastig* was added so as to exclude the fixed expressions *in de rede vallen* 'interrupt' and *lastig vallen* 'bother, harass'). These hits included 92 unique examples of impersonal passives.

5. tourpool.nu/column?user=joop&id=2, accessed October 28, 2014.

- (11) *Ook in die laatste etappe werd gevallen, [...] Rick Ottema reed ver vooruit*
 also in that last stage was fallen Rich Ottema rode far ahead
*en gleed pardoës uit*⁶
 and slipped suddenly out
 ‘In the last stage there was falling too, Rick Ottema was riding far ahead and suddenly slipped’

One final example with *vallen* demonstrates, in my view, that speakers can actually exploit the construction’s ‘neutrality’ regarding the number of participants. The excerpt in (12), from a novel, takes the perspective of the character Frans, who is cycling a match with high stakes for him. Note the sequence of events: Frans almost falls, then he hears other riders swearing, and then there is ‘crunching’ and ‘falling’ behind him, the latter described by the impersonal passive. It seems fair to say that this construction is an eminent choice: it just states that ‘falling’ took place, without specifying how many people were involved in the fall. At this point in the narrative, we as readers do not know, nor does Frans seem to know. He then looks over his shoulder and sees that it is one rider, Pawel Szymanowski.

- (12) *Verdomme. Daar was het bijna misgegaan. Een moment van onachtzaamheid. Frans schampte het achterwiel van Ramakers. Met een forse zwieper hield hij zich overeind. Achter hem vloekten ze. Hij hoorde gekraak, er werd gevallen. Terloops keek hij over zijn schouder. Het was de Pool, Pawel Szymanowski. Die had al een tijdje comfortabel in het laatste wiel gezeten en schoof nu akelig hard over zijn linkerheup en -schouder over het asfalt.*⁷
 ‘Damn. It almost went wrong there. A moment of absentmindedness. Frans brushed Ramakers’ rear wheel. With an enormous swerve, he [Frans] managed to stay upright. Behind him, they swore. He heard crunching, *there was falling*. Stealthily, he looked over his shoulder. It was the Pole, Pawel Szymanowski. He had quite comfortably been the last rider of the group for a while and was now sliding terribly hard with his left hip and shoulder across the tarmac.’

The two final examples to be discussed here feature *sterven* ‘die’. A Google search for “werd gestorven” on May 1, 2014, yielded 13 unique examples of impersonal passives.⁸ Most of them involved multiple people dying at different times, including (13) below, which describes what daily life was like in the Netherlands during

6. wielernerdaagse.nl/index.php/voorbeschouwing, accessed October 28, 2014.

7. Gio Lippens, *Halverwege de heuvel*. Amsterdam: Atlas Contact, 2012.

8. The search produced 103 hits in total, from which irrelevant hits (not containing an impersonal passive), repeated examples, and three metalinguistic examples were removed.

the Second World War. Note that the impersonal passive in (13) is followed by a specification of the different causes of these deaths.

- (13) *Er werd gestorven (aan difterie, tbc, bij bombardementen), gespeeld (op het puin van Rotterdam), [...] ondergedoken [...]*⁹
 ‘There was dying (from diphtheria, TB, during bombings), playing (on the rubble of Rotterdam), going into hiding ...’

In (14), on the other hand, we find another case of the writer exploiting the impersonal passive’s property of not specifying how many people are involved in the event described by the verb. The example comes from a librarian’s blog on children’s literature. This particular post is on the novel *The fault in our stars* by John Green, which the librarian was hesitant to read at first, because of the heavy topic: two teenagers with cancer who meet at a patient support group. Here too, the writer seems to have chosen the impersonal passive *er werd gestorven* ‘there was dying’ quite deliberately. It allows her not to give the plot away: the construction only states that ‘dying’ occurred, but does not specify whether one of the teenagers dies, both of them die, or someone altogether different dies.

- (14) *Tot mijn verrassing begon het boek erg geestig, en heb ik een aantal keer hardop zitten lachen. Om de fijne galgenhumor van de hoofdpersonen. Maar daarna begon toch het onvermijdelijke huilen. Er werd gestorven en het kwam niet goed. Maar toch had ik een heel mooi boek gelezen. En dat was het huilen waard.*¹⁰

‘To my surprise, the book started off very funny, and I laughed out loud a couple of times. Because of the amusing gallows humor of the main characters. But after that, the inevitable crying started. *There was dying* and things did not turn out right. But still, I had read a very beautiful book. And that made the crying worthwhile.’

The attested examples in this section show that impersonal passives with telic verbs do not necessarily receive an iterative interpretation (unlike Zaenen 1988 and Primus’s 2011 claim to the contrary). The construction is compatible with interpretations that involve only a single, telic event, even with *sterven* ‘die’ (counter to what van Schaik-Rădulescu’s 2011 asserts). The whole point about the construction appears to be that it abstracts away from telicity: in the case of the simple past, the impersonal passive merely conveys that the type of act described by the verb occurred, without specifying the number of events, or the number of participants, that instantiate this type of act.

9. deleunstoel.nl/artikel.php?artikel_id=3297, accessed May 1, 2014.

10. oba.nl/nieuws/115975:jeugdletteratuurblog--mooi-verdrietig.html, accessed May 1, 2014.

5. Conclusion

This paper has provided support for the view that the Dutch impersonal passive construction is compatible with a wider set of verbs than just those describing atelic, volitional acts. An exploratory search by means of Google showed that telic, non-volitional verbs such as *vallen* ‘fall’ and *sterven* ‘die’ occur in the construction too, though not as frequently as, for example, *werken* ‘work’, *lachen* ‘laugh’ and *zwemmen* ‘swim’. A discussion of specific attested examples with *vallen* and *sterven* revealed that such constructions can receive an iterative interpretation, but that they might also correspond to a single telic event, involving a single participant. The Dutch impersonal passive seems to abstract away from how many participants are involved, or the telicity of the event: the construction merely states that a certain *type* of act occurred.

These findings raise questions for the unergative-unaccusative distinction that has been proposed for Dutch intransitive verbs, because a rigid classification into two types of verbs does not appear to do justice to the intricacies of the attested data. It seems more insightful to consider frequencies with which individual verbs can occur in the impersonal passive, as well as the specific contexts of such attested examples. In so doing, we can obtain a better understanding of the semantics of the construction itself, and its compatibility with the semantics of a particular verb, seen within the specifics of the communicative situation.

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