

I was sat in front of my laptop:
The BE + *sat/stood* construction in English

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Humanities Faculty, Utrecht University
Mariëlle Ledder 4145003

Supervisor: Marcelle Cole
Second reader: Nynke de Haas

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Abstract

The occurrence and frequency of the use of the non-standard BE + *sat/stood* construction, termed pseudo-passive by some in the literature, in British, American and Irish English is researched. Additionally, a few explanations for the use of this construction are considered and reviewed. Analysis of multiple corpora is used to study the use of the construction in both spoken and written language. The selected corpora cover several time periods of the twentieth century, adding a diachronic dimension to the study in this way. Analysis showed that the construction is almost exclusively used in spoken language, which suggests that it is still a colloquial feature. It was, moreover, found that its use is predominantly Northern and additionally occurs in the South-West of Great Britain, which is a confirmation of earlier claims concerning its distribution made in the literature. Two possible accounts for the use of the BE + *sat/stood* construction are considered and, after a discussion of their defects, rejected. It is argued that the semantics of the two stance verbs that the construction involves play a part in its use, and that the past participles *sit* and *stand* should be reanalyzed as adjectival.

1. Introduction

Certain linguistic phenomena, similar to wearing socks and sandals or picking your nose in public, have the ability to spark a feeling of discomfort and sometimes even elicit negative verbal responses from those who encounter them. Interestingly, in English the use of BE + *sat/stood* in constructions such as *She was sat at the bus stop*, instead of the standard option *She was sitting at the bus stop*, is an example of grammatical usage that is sometimes more negatively regarded. The use of this construction in English is passionately debated on grammar fora and other language websites, where you can find both strong opponents of its use as well as those who do not mind it at all.¹ BE + *sat/stood* is regarded as a non-standard feature of English that is most often used in parts of the North and West of England (Hughes & Trudgill, 1987 & Klemola, 1999). What makes the construction interesting is that on the surface it looks like a regular passive, however, its meaning expresses that of the active progressive BE + *-ing* construction. As a result, the literature generally refers to the construction as a “pseudo-passive” (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 1985 & Klemola, 1999). In this thesis, the term ‘passive’ will be avoided and the label BE + *sat/stood* used instead in order to avoid making any assumptions concerning the construction’s status. The current study will investigate the occurrence and frequency of the use of the construction using evidence taken from both written and spoken language data. The use will be approached from both a diatopic as well as a diachronic perspective through analysis of Modern British, American and Irish English language corpora covering the second half of the twentieth century up to the present. This study will also consider possible reasons why non-standard BE + *sat/stood* is used instead of the standard progressive variant. The results confirm earlier claims from the literature concerning the distribution of the construction, and show that so far its use is only found in spoken language. Moreover, it will be argued that the semantic nature of the stance verbs *sit* and *stood* is connected to the use of the construction, and that this constitutes reanalysis of the past participle in the construction as adjectival.

¹ Examples can be found at <http://painintheenglish.com/case/4796>, <http://forum.wordreference.com/threads/we-were-sat-a-new-uk-trend.891844/> and http://www.mumsnet.com/Talk/pedants_corner/1446589-I-was-sat-is-incorrect.

1.1 Previous literature

The use of the BE + *sat/stood* construction has not received an extensive amount of attention in linguistic research so far. Quirk et al. (1985) mention it in a footnote in which they explain that it is “largely synonymous with, though less common than, the progressive construction” (p. 170). Hughes and Trudgill (1987) also very briefly discuss the construction, and state that it is widely used in the North and West of England. The BE + *sat/stood* construction has received slightly more attention in Cheshire, Edwards and Whittle (1989). They conducted a survey of British dialect grammar and looked at which features were used by the participating sixteen-year-old British pupils. Their results showed that the construction was reported mostly in the North and West of England, however, it appeared to be used in other areas as well. Cheshire et al. therefore suggest that the use of the construction recently spread from the North and the West to other areas in England, which could perhaps be regarded as the construction slowly becoming a feature of a “general non-standard English” (p. 200).

Klemola (1999) provides the most in-depth review of the BE + *sat/stood* construction. He uses the term “pseudo-passive” throughout his article to refer to the construction as, according to him, it is a “formally passive construction that [is] used to express the progressive aspect” (p. 132). In his research, he investigated in which areas in England the use of BE + *sat/stood* occurred and how far back in time this use could be dated. He analyzed two corpora of non-standard spoken English, namely the *SED* (*Survey of English Dialects on CD-ROM*, Klemola et al. *forthcoming*) and *BNC* (*British National Corpus*, BNC Consortium 1991-1994). Klemola concludes that in both the *SED* and *BNC* the use of the BE + *sat/stood* construction is very rare. When considering the regional distribution of the construction, the use was predominantly Northern in both corpora. He states that the construction is a “recent, late nineteenth century innovation in [the] Northern vernacular varieties” that has come about through hypercorrection (p. 139). Klemola also mentions that his findings provide more support for Cheshire et al.’s claim that the construction is becoming a feature of a more general non-standard variety of English.

1.2 Research questions and aims

The aim of this study is to gain more information on the use of the BE + *sat/stood* construction in English. In order to accomplish this, the following research questions have

been formulated: In which regions of Great Britain and which other English speaking countries is the BE + *sat/stood* construction used and how frequent is this use? How can the use of the BE + *sat/stood* construction in English instead of the progressive alternative BE + *sitting/standing* be explained? The research questions will be approached through analysis of several English language corpora, both spoken and written, along with investigation of existing literature on the subject.

This study can be regarded as a supplement to Klemola's study on the BE + *sat/stood* construction in English. It, first of all, studies the occurrence of the construction in British English during time periods that overlap with the periods covered by Klemola's researched corpora. Moreover, this study broadens the scope of research on the construction by also analyzing the use of the construction in American and Irish English. The corpora employed in this study cover several time periods from the second half of the twentieth century until the present. The scope of this study is thus both diatopic and diachronic. Finally, explanations found in the literature as to why the BE + *sat/stood* construction is used instead of its standard variant will also be discussed.

The following chapter will explain the method and data used to conduct the corpus analysis. Next, the results of the conducted research will be presented and interpreted. In the chapter following that, several explanations for the use of the construction and their defects will be discussed. The last chapter will provide a conclusion of this thesis and discuss possibilities for future research.

2. Research

2.1 Methodology

The present study made use of several corpora in order to investigate the distribution and frequency of the use of the BE + *sat/stood* construction. More specifically, and following Klemola (1999), the research questions were approached through quantitative and qualitative corpus analysis. Before moving on to a description of the corpora used for this study, a brief description of the two corpora analyzed by Klemola will be provided.

The first corpus discussed in Klemola's study, the *SED*, consists of transcribed dialect speech recorded from 1948 to 1973 in different rural areas throughout England. The data was taken from informal interviews with 298 NORMs, all born between 1863 and 1909, whose speech can be characterized as conservative. The other corpus used by Klemola, the spoken demographic component of the *BNC*, covers British English speech from a later period, namely the late twentieth century. The analyzed section of the corpus contains natural spontaneous conversations, both formal and informal, produced by speakers from different classes, ages and regions in England. Klemola has chosen to analyze these two corpora because they cover different time periods and therefore represent both the earlier and later use of the BE + *sat/stood* construction.

In this study, *FRED*, (*Freiburg Corpus of English Dialects*, Kortmann 2000-2005)², was used for analysis to research Klemola's claim that the investigated construction originates from the North of Great Britain and is spreading to become a feature of general non-standard English. It is a corpus containing transcripts of spoken English of native speakers from England, Scotland, Wales, the Hebrides and the Isle of Man. The data of the corpus was gathered through interviews, usually between one speaker and an interviewer, which were conducted between 1968 and 2000. The majority of the speakers were NORMs, the average age was 75, and more than half of the speakers were male. This study has analyzed five sections of the corpus, corresponding to the following five regions within Great Britain: the North, South-West, Midlands, South-East and Scottish Lowlands. *FRED* was chosen for analysis because it supplements Klemola's findings of the *SED* and *BNC*. Its

² *FRED* consists of approximately 2.5 million words extracted from 121 transcribed interviews, which make up a total of about 300 hours of speech.

scope completely overlaps with the *BNC* and partly covers that of the *SED* as well, thus providing more data for the use of the construction in spoken language during the second half of the twentieth century.

For a more complete overview of the use of the *BE + sat/stood* construction in Great Britain, two corpora specifically containing written British English were used as well. Firstly, the *LOB Corpus*, (*The Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen Corpus*, Leech, Johansson & Hofland 1970-1978), was used to study the occurrence of the construction in British texts published in 1961. This corpus supplements the *SED* by providing more information on the use in written English at the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century. By using the *F-LOB Corpus*, (*The Freiburg-LOB Corpus of British English*, Mair 1991-1996)³, a later version of the *LOB Corpus*, more information on the occurrence of the construction in British texts published in the early 1990s was gained. It can thus be regarded as a supplement to the *BNC*.

In order to gain more insight into the use of the *BE + sat/stood* construction in other English speaking countries, a few other corpora were analyzed as well. Firstly, the *Brown Corpus* (*The Standard Corpus of Present-Day Edited American English*, Francis & Kučera 1963-1964), and its later version the *Frown Corpus*, (*The Freiburg-Brown Corpus of American English*, Mair 1992-1996)⁴, were used to research written American English published in 1961 and the early 1990s. Moreover, the *COCA* (*Corpus of Contemporary American English*, Davies 2015)⁵, was also used for analysis. This corpus contains both spoken language and a number of varieties of written American English, gathered from 1990 until the present. It thus provides up-to-date information of spoken and written American English, and complements the data from the *Brown* and *Frown* corpora. Lastly, both the *ICE Ireland Corpus* (*International Corpus of English, Ireland sub corpus*, Kirk, Kallen, Lowry, Rooney & Mannion 1990) and its spoken variant, the *SPICE Ireland Corpus*, (*Systems of Pragmatic Annotation in the Spoken Component of ICE-Ireland*, Kirk, Kallen, Lowry, Rooney & Mannion 1990)⁶ were used to find out whether the construction was possibly also employed by speakers in Ireland. These two corpora contain written and spoken English

³ The *LOB Corpus* consists of 500 sample texts of 2000+ words each, which together make up the total of approximately 1 million words. It contains 15 text categories, of which 9 are informative and 6 imaginative. The *F-LOB Corpus* matches the *LOB Corpus* in size and number of texts. It was designed to resemble its earlier version as closely as possible, so instead of random sampling, the texts were selected carefully.

⁴ The *Brown* and *Frown* corpora are both designed in the exactly the same way as the *LOB* and *F-LOB*, as the latter are their British counterparts. All texts in the *Brown* and *Frown* corpora can be categorized as edited English prose.

⁵ The *COCA* consists of over 520 million words and is updated with new files each year.

⁶ The *ICE Ireland Corpus* contains about 1 million words, divided over 500 texts. *SPICE Ireland* consists of 15 spoken language categories, which comes down to a total of just over 600.000 words.

produced in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland after 1989. Through investigation for all of these corpora, more information on the distribution of the BE + *sat/stood* construction could be obtained⁷.

The occurrence of the BE + *sat/stood* construction in the aforementioned corpora was analyzed using the corpus analysis toolkit Antconc (Anthony, 2014). This program allows search queries for specific words within large numbers of texts. For each corpus all tokens were manually checked after the search was performed in order to distinguish the construction under investigation from real passives or other past tenses unrelated to this study. For example, “The table was stood on its edges (COCA)” was filtered out because the use of *was sat* in this phrase is undoubtedly passive, that is, it means that the table was put in a position making it stand on its edges by an agent. Moreover, other examples of frequently occurring filtered-out items were the idioms “to be stood on its head” and “to be stood up”.

In addition to the BE + *sat/stood* construction, a quantitative study of the alternative progressive construction BE + *sitting/standing* was also carried out to find out how often the non-standard variant was used in relative comparison to the standard variant. After performing the search query all tokens were once again reviewed.

The same research method was used for all corpora, except for the COCA, as this is an online corpus for which Antconc cannot be used. Because the corpus contains more than 520 million words, searching for *sat* and *stood* alone provided a number of tokens too large to review manually. Therefore, all possible conjugations of BE (sometimes along with an auxiliary verb) combined with *sat* or *stood* were searched. For instance, the constructions *am sat*, *is sat*, *was sat*, *have been sat* and so forth were all searched one by one. The same thing was done for the verb form *stood*. All tokens were once again reviewed.

2.2 Findings

This section presents the results gathered from the conducted corpus analysis on the aforementioned corpora. The summarized results of the research on each region in *FRED* can be found in Table 1.

⁷ It should be mentioned that these corpora cannot be compared directly as they differ in method of data collection, informants, type of language they record and so forth. Nevertheless, they provide us with an idea of the geographical distribution of the use of the construction and its diachronic depth.

Table 1. Number of BE + *sat/stood* and BE + *sitting/standing* constructions in *FRED* per region in Great Britain.

| Region | BE + <i>sat/stood</i> | BE + <i>sitting/standing</i> |
|-------------------|--|---|
| North | 25 (16 with <i>sat</i> ; 9 with <i>stood</i>) | 19 (12 with <i>sitting</i> ; 7 with <i>standing</i>) |
| South-West | 11 (4 <i>sat</i> ; 7 <i>stood</i>) | 26 (12 <i>sitting</i> ; 14 <i>standing</i>) |
| Midlands | 2 (1 <i>sat</i> ; 1 <i>stood</i>) | 16 (5 <i>sitting</i> ; 11 <i>standing</i>) |
| South-East | 1 (0 <i>sat</i> ; 1 <i>stood</i>) | 26 (13 <i>sitting</i> ; 13 <i>standing</i>) |
| Scottish Lowlands | 0 | - |
| Total | 39 (21 <i>sat</i> ; 18 <i>stood</i>) | 87 (42 <i>sitting</i> ; 45 <i>standing</i>) |

As can be seen in Table 1, a total of 39 instances of the BE + *sat/stood* construction was found in *FRED*. The files of the North section of the corpus contained the most instances of the construction, with 25 instances in total. With 11 instances, the South-West had the second most occurrences of the construction. The other three regions in *FRED* contained very few instances of BE + *sat/stood*. As the table shows, zero occurrences of the construction were found in the files of the Scottish Lowlands. When looking at the division between *sat* and *stood* in the total number of occurrences, it can be noted that both appeared more or less equally often, although BE + *sat* was slightly more frequent. The division of occurrence of the two verb forms was greater between the different regions in *FRED*. In the North, the BE + *sat* construction appeared more frequently than the variant with *stood*. In the South-West, on the other hand, BE + *stood* was found more often. However, with such few tokens it is not possible to make any conclusive remarks regarding these findings. A few examples of the construction in *FRED* can be found in (1):

- (1) a. She *was sat* on the window sill cleaning.
(North, LAN_009)
b. They'd *be stood* on one of their legs like that.
(South-West, SOM_005)

In the corpus, the alternative BE + *sitting/standing* construction occurred 87 times in total, which is more than twice as often as the BE + *sat/stood* construction. However, when examining the number of occurrences of the two constructions, it becomes clear that in the North section the BE + *sat/stood* construction occurred more frequently in the corpus than the

progressive alternative. The total number of occurrences of the constructions with BE + *sitting* and BE + *standing* shows that they appeared approximately equally often.

Table 2 shows the number and different kinds of BE + *sat/stood* constructions that were found in the COCA. The number of alternative BE + *sitting/standing* constructions in the COCA can be found in Table 3.

Table 2. Number of BE + *sat/stood* constructions per verb in the COCA.

| BE + <i>sat</i> | | BE + <i>stood</i> | |
|-----------------|----|-------------------|---|
| was sat | 4 | was stood | 2 |
| were sat | 1 | is stood | 2 |
| is sat | 1 | has been stood | 1 |
| had been sat | 3 | had been stood | 1 |
| be sat | 2 | be stood | 2 |
| Total: | 11 | Total: | 8 |

Table 3. Number of BE + *sitting/standing* constructions per verb in the COCA.

| BE + <i>sitting</i> | | BE + <i>standing</i> | |
|---------------------|-------|----------------------|-------|
| was sitting | 6333 | was standing | 5501 |
| were sitting | 2228 | were standing | 1618 |
| is sitting | 2477 | is standing | 2482 |
| are sitting | 1520 | are standing | 1145 |
| been sitting | 1477 | been standing | 772 |
| be sitting | 1622 | be standing | 906 |
| Total | 15657 | Total | 12424 |

As is evident in Table 2, the BE + *sat/stood* construction was also found to occur in the COCA. Comparison between the total number of constructions of the two analyzed verbs makes clear that the BE + *sat* construction was only slightly more frequent than the construction with *stood*, with 3 more occurrences. For the *sat* constructions, the combination *was sat* occurred most often, followed by *had been sat*. For *stood*, *was stood* was found as often as two other combinations, all occurring twice. The constructions did not solely appear in one type of written language. Instead, they appeared in quite a number of varying texts,

such as fiction, new articles, articles in magazines, and it even made an appearance in academic writing. (2) gives a few examples of the construction in the COCA:

- (2) a. I felt like I *was sat* frozen by the campfire.
(FIC, NorthAmRev)
- b. And Harry *is stood* behind, and Beatrice is next to the Queen.
(SPOK, ABC_20/20)

Table 3 shows that the BE + *sitting/standing* construction appeared a lot more frequently than the non-standard construction in the COCA. Comparison of the total number of occurrences shows that BE + *sitting* appeared more often than BE + *standing*. The table shows that the constructions with *was* appeared most frequently for both verbs.

Moving on to the other corpora that were employed for analysis, first of all, the two British corpora, the LOB Corpus and F-LOB Corpus, did not contain any examples of the BE + *sat/stood* construction. Neither did analysis of the Brown Corpus and its later version Frown yield any results. The ICE Ireland Corpus contained 1 instance of the construction, namely *were sat*. In the SPICE Ireland Corpus 2 occurrences of BE + *sat/stood* were found, one of each verb form, namely *were sat* and *be stood*.

2.3 Discussion of corpus analysis

This section will interpret the results of the corpus analysis and discuss their implications.

The findings gathered from analysis of *FRED* are in line with earlier findings of Cheshire et al. (1989) and Klemola (1999). To be more specific, this study has found that the BE + *sat/stood* construction, although used on rare occasions, is predominantly found in the North of England, which is in agreement with the results from Cheshire et al. and Klemola's findings from the *SED* and *BNC*. Moreover, this study has also found occurrences of the construction in the South-West of England, which once again agrees with Klemola's findings. As previously claimed by Cheshire et al. and supported by Klemola, the BE + *sat/stood* construction probably originates from the North and now slowly seems to have become a feature of a non-standard general type of English. The results of this study provide further support for this claim in the sense that they confirm occurrence of the construction outside of the North, that is, in the South-West. However, evidence for the occurrence of BE

+ *sat/stood* in regions other than the North and South-West of England was not found, as the other regions were found to contain very few instances of the construction in question.

Klemola reported that in the *BNC* BE + *sat* was used much more frequently than BE + *stood*. The findings of this study for both *FRED* and the *COCA*, however, did not show a significant difference between the number of occurrences of the two verb forms. In both corpora, the construction with *sat* appeared only slightly more frequently than the one with *stood*. However, a difference as large as the one found by Klemola in the *BNC* was not present.

Furthermore, it was found that in *FRED* the BE + *sat/stood* construction was used overall in 31% of the situations in which both the construction and its standard progressive variant could be used. BE + *sitting/standing* was thus generally used twice as frequently by the speakers of the corpus. The number of occurrences in the North section, on the other hand, suggests that in that region the non-standard BE + *sat/stood* is used more frequently than the standard alternative (25 instances against 19 respectively). This would mean that the distribution of the use of the construction is conditioned geographically. However, as only one corpus was analyzed, not enough data has been gathered to make conclusive generalization of these findings possible.

The results from the *COCA* show that the BE + *sat/stood* construction only sporadically appeared in the American texts and spoken language. The progressive construction BE + *sitting/standing*, on the other hand, was found to be used far more often. This leads to the conclusion that occurrence of BE + *sat/stood* in the corpus was very rare. It can therefore be said that the few uses of the construction that were found are not examples of a specific feature of American English. Since so far no linguistic research on the occurrence of the construction in the United States has been carried out, there are no studies whose results we can compare to the results of this study. The speakers or authors of the texts containing BE + *sat/stood* might have had Northern English roots, which could have caused the construction to slip out on a rare occasion. Or perhaps they simply wanted to use language more freely and play around with their grammar, causing them to use a construction normally deemed as incorrect. However, these are just a few suggestions that unfortunately cannot be verified because the details of each file provided by the *COCA* do not contain very specific information such as family roots.

After analysis of the Brown and Frown corpora it was found that neither contained any instances of the BE + *sat/stood* construction. Thus, in the selection of American prose from 1961 and the early 1990s the construction was not used. These findings contrast with

the COCA findings, as in that corpus a few instances of the construction were found. However, the COCA encompasses a larger time period, 1990 to the present, and therefore contains significantly more words, over 520 million to be exact. This enlarges the possibility of finding instances of the construction. The other two corpora only cover a few years, and both contain approximately 1 million words, which is considerably smaller. The chances of finding the construction are further obstructed because both corpora only contain various kinds of prose, which tend to employ standard forms. The COCA, on the other hand, contains spoken language as well, which is more likely to contain non-standard constructions. Overall, the use of BE + *sat/stood* was found to be a rare phenomenon, which explains why only a very small number of instances was found in a large and varied corpus.

The LOB and F-LOB corpora, both consisting of British English texts, also did not contain any instances of BE + *sat/stood*. While *FRED*, covering spoken British English from 1968 to 2000, showed instances of the construction, BE + *sat/stood* was not used in the selection of written British English texts from 1961 and the early 1990s. An explanation for this result might be that the construction is still very much a colloquial feature and is therefore used in spoken language only. It is possibly not accepted and widespread enough to also appear in written language, so it does not replace the more standard progressive construction BE + *sitting/standing* in writing.

The BE + *sat/stood* construction was also absent from the ICE Ireland and SPICE Ireland corpora, apart from 1 instance in the ICE Ireland and 2 instances in the SPICE Ireland. These instances could have been produced by people who have ties with the North of England or could simply have been a production error. Based on the results it can be suggested that so far a spread from the BE + *sat/stood* construction to Ireland, or occurrence of the construction in general, has not taken place.

3. Discussion

3.1 Explanations for the use of the construction

This section focuses on possible explanations for the use of the BE + *sat/stood* construction in English. I start by discussing Klemola (1999) before moving on to discuss alternative explanations.

3.1.1 Influence of standard English and hypercorrection

Klemola (1999) was the first to construct a possible scenario explaining how and why the BE + *sat/stood* construction could have arisen in the North of England. He argues that the construction has come into use through influence of a specific rule of standard English on the regional dialects. Klemola explains that until the late eighteenth century, *sitten* was the past participle of the verb *sit*. However, starting from that time onwards, *sitten* was replaced by *sat* as the correct past participle in the Southern regions of England (p. 136). Klemola mentions that the *EDD*, (*English Dialect Dictionary*, Wright 1898-1905) shows clear proof that during the nineteenth century, *sitten* was still being used by speakers in the Northern areas of England. He explains that the standard norms of English finally introduced *sat* into these vernacular varieties during the late nineteenth century (p. 137). Information crucial to his explanation of the origins of the construction is that in the Northern dialects, *sitten* and *sitting* were homophonous in /'sit(ə)n/ (Ellis, 1981, p. 292). Klemola claims that hypercorrection took place when *sat* was introduced in the North. In other words, not only *sitten* but also *sitting*, which is not a past participle, was replaced by *sat*, causing possibly all cases of BE + *sitting* to be changed into BE + *sat* (p. 137). This process did not take place in other English dialects because the linguistic condition for the overgeneralization, *sitten* and *sitting* sounding identical, was not present in those dialects.

The question then remains how besides BE + *sat*, the construction came to be used with *stood* as well. It is argued by Klemola that the expansion of the construction to another verb was caused by analogy. According to him, it was not a coincidence that *stood* was the next verb to be used in the same way as BE + *sat* (p. 137). He quotes Quirk et al. (1985), who mention that *sit* and *stand* are both part of a specific class of verbs, namely the “stance verbs” (p. 205-206). Verbs of this class are grouped together because they share certain syntactic

features. A more detailed discussion of the stance verbs and their relevance for the construction will follow shortly. Klemola argues that the syntactic similarity between *sat* and *stood* is what caused the construction to be extended to *stood* (p. 138). He considers the rise of the construction as a good example of how “the standard variety can be seen as the instigator of an innovation in the non-standard variety” (p. 137). It shows how influence from the standard variety of a language does not necessarily lead to an identical construction in the non-standard variety.

Klemola does not divide much attention to the relation between the use of the construction and social stratification. He mentions that during the nineteenth century, when education became more accessible, English dialect speakers came into closer contact with the standard variety employed by the middle classes, which then caused the overgeneralization to take place (p. 138). From this we could infer that the use of the construction was thus more common among the less educated working classes. This furthermore seems to be suggested by its absence in written language, which proves that its use is at least colloquial. The use of the construction appears to be stigmatized to some extent, and is therefore used in variation with the standard progressive variant.

The account put forward by Klemola, however, appears to contain a flaw causing it to no longer be a suitable explanation for the use of the construction. It is possible to use the explanation for the predominantly Northern use because, according to Klemola, *sitten* and *sitting* were only homophonous in that region. However, this was in fact not the case. As mentioned in McColl Millar (2007), in many varieties of British English the suffix *-ing* had two pronunciations, one of which was realized with a final coronal nasal, usually represented as *goin'* in writing (p. 343). The condition for the construction to be used, the alternative pronunciation of *-ing* which is homophonous with *-en*, was thus not exclusively present in the North. It would then be expected that other varieties of English would also have developed the BE + *sat/stood* construction, however, this was found to not be the case. Klemola's argument for the use of the construction therefore does not hold.

3.1.3 *The medio-passive*

Apparent similarities between the medio-passive, e.g. *Those shoes sold well last week*, and the BE + *sat/stood* construction suggest that this might be a fruitful line of enquiry for constructing a possible explanation for the use of non-standard BE + *sat/stood* (Nynke de

Haas p.c.). The medio-passive is explained by Grady as a “syntactically active pattern where the subject is tagmemically subject-acted-upon” (1965, p. 271). To clarify what this means, we can take a look at the examples below:

- (3) a. The book reads easily.
 b. The mat does not roll up easily.
 c. The cars were selling well last week.

As becomes clear from the examples in (3), all sentences have an active syntactic pattern. However, the subjects in the sentences are not agents but themes, because they do not actually perform the acts described by the verbs. The books in the first sentence do not read themselves, nor would the mat ever have the ability to magically roll itself up or could the cars sell themselves. Instead, the subjects in (3) are subjects-acted-upon, the book is read by someone, the mat is rolled up by someone, and the car is sold by somebody.

The last sentence in (3) is particularly interesting because it shows the use of a form of BE in a medio-passive sentence. Grady (1965) states that a form of BE is always absent from the medio-passive construction (p. 271). Hundt (2007), on the other hand, repeatedly provides examples of the medio-passive containing a form of BE. Hundt’s version of the medio-passive could be related to the BE + *sat/stood* construction, as it also uses BE.

Moreover, some languages always use the medio-passive when expressing a change in the posture of the body, thus involving stance verbs (Kemmer, 1993, p. 16). In these cases, a middle voice marker is used. Examples of these languages are Djola, a Mande language spoken in several West-African countries, German and Hungarian (p. 17). (4) shows some examples, taken from Kemmer, of the medio-passive used in these languages. The morphemes in boldface are the middle voice markers:

- (4) a. Djola *lak-ɔ* ‘sit down’
 b. German *sich* *hinlegen* ‘lie down’
 c. Hungarian *emel-ked-* ‘rise’, ‘get up’

Even though the function of the medio-passive construction in these languages is different from its use in English, this shows that the use of the medio-passive with stance verbs is not a rare phenomenon.

There exist, however, a few differences between BE + *sat/stood* and the medio-passive that make the explanation of the construction as a type of medio-passive unlikely. First of all, there is a difference in the semantic roles fulfilled by the syntactic subject in the BE + *sat/stood* construction and the medio-passive. In the aforementioned medio-passive sentences, the subjects do not perform an act themselves and could therefore not be regarded as agents. Instead, they are themes because they are acted upon, as Grady would call it. The BE + *sat/stood* construction, on the other hand, does not have a passive meaning and its subject is not a theme. Rather, it fulfills the role of experiencer, as the participles *sat* and *stood* in the construction are stative and used adjectivally (argumentation for this claim will follow shortly). This is quite a crucial difference between the two, which makes regarding the BE + *sat/stood* construction as a medio-passive more difficult.

Moreover, the BE + *sat/stood* construction needs a form of BE to function properly, otherwise it cannot be formed. This, however, is not a necessity for medio-passive constructions. They can also be formed without any form of BE, as the first two sentences in (4) show. This fact provides further evidence for the claim that BE + *sat/stood* is not a medio-passive construction.

What should lastly be mentioned is that the use of BE plus the particles *sat* or *stood* gives the sentence a passive pattern, which is by definition not what a medio-passive is. Both Grady (1965) and Hundt agree that it concerns “a verb in the active voice” (Hundt, 2007 p. 1).

3.1.2 *Stance verbs and the passive*⁸

A more convincing way of explaining the use of the BE + *sat/stood* construction is through the semantic aspects shared by *sit* and *stand* and the adjectival function of the English passive to express a continuing state.

Sit and *stand* both belong to the category of posture verbs, as both express the state of being in a certain spatial position. The two, along with *lie*, are claimed to belong to a special group within this category because they are “salient and recurrent in our everyday lives” and behave in similar ways (Newman, 2009, p. 30-33). Quirk et al. (1985) add *live* to this small set of verbs and call them the stance verbs. They claim that they are “intermediate between stative and dynamic categories”, meaning they can both express the continuation of a state or

⁸ This account has been developed in collaboration with Marcelle Cole.

express an action being performed (p. 205-206). Furthermore, the stance verbs can denote a permanent state when used with the non-progressive, as well as a temporary state when used with the progressive (p. 205-206).

In addition, the stance verbs *sit*, *stand* and *lie* share a locative function. In English, the three verbs can be used to express the location of non-human entities (Newman, 2002, p. 7). The examples below show how stance verbs and BE can both be employed in English:

- (5) a. Our television *is/is sitting* on the table.
b. Your house *is/is standing* on a hill.
c. Her books *are/are lying* on the floor.

In the examples of (5), the constructions with the stance verbs can be used instead of BE to express where the subjects of the sentences are located. However, it should be noted that in English BE is generally preferred in these contexts and the use of stance verbs is considered more colloquial (p. 9).

In Dutch, stance verbs can also be used as a semantic equivalent to BE to express the location of a non-human referent (p. 9). The following examples are all translations of (5), and again show both options:

- (6) a. Onze televisie *is/staat* op tafel.⁹
b. Jouw huis *is/staat* op een heuvel.
c. Haar boeken *zijn/liggen* op de grond.

What is interesting is that in Dutch, the options with the stance verbs are actually more preferable and idiomatic than the use of BE, which is the reverse of the preference in English (p. 10). Despite this difference in preference, both languages show similar use of the stance verbs, which provides further evidence for the view that they possess distinct features which separate them from other verbs.

The English passive is known to be able to function in two ways: it can act as an adjective to express a continuing state, or act as a verb to express a dynamic action (Israel, Johnson & Brooks, 2000, p. 104). Therefore, a sentence such as *The glass window was*

⁹ In this sentence the Dutch translation of *stands*, namely 'staat', has been used to replace English *sit*, as a form of the verb *to sit* would not be used in Dutch in this context.

shattered can mean that something or someone broke the glass or that it was simply not intact. In the second reading, the sentence is no longer passive because the participle is used as an adjective.

What will be argued here is that the semantic characteristics of the verbs *sat* and *stood*, combined with the adjectival function of the English passive to express a continuing state could have given rise to the BE + *sat/stood* construction. *Sit* and *stand* can both express a stative meaning and be used as semantic alternatives to BE to express the location of a non-human entity. Moreover, the participle used in a passive construction can have an adjectival meaning. These facts combined could mean that the past participle in the BE + *sat/stood* construction has undergone reanalysis from verbal to adjectival. Furthermore, with inanimate entities it might be moving in the direction of being reanalyzed as a semantic equivalent to BE. The sentence mentioned in the introduction, *She was sat at the bus stop*, is then meant to express that at some point in time a female in a sitting position at the bus stop existed.

Examples of constructions very similar to BE + *sat/stood* can be found in other languages as well. The example in (7), taken from Hualde, Olarrea & O'Rourke (2012, p. 459), shows how in Spanish a construction similar to the non-standard English one is used to express BE + *sat*:

- (7) 1. Oscar está sentado en su casa.
'Oscar is sat in his house.'

In Spanish, the participle *sentado* is used as an adjective, which would receive inflection if the subject was female. This thus suggests a parallel in the use of the verb *sit* with the non-standard English construction.

French, another Romance language, shows the same use of the construction as shown above in Spanish and English. The example in (8)¹⁰ demonstrates how a form of BE + *stood* is used:

- (8) 1. Il était debout au coin de la rue.
'He was stood at the corner of the street.'

¹⁰ Example taken from <http://random-idea-english.blogspot.nl/2013/11/random-thoughts-he-was-sat-she-was-stood.html>

Debout in (8) is once again an adjective, used to express that the subject could be found in a standing position at the corner of the street. Similarity with English and Spanish BE + *sat/stood* is evident in this sentence.

The fact that constructions like the ones presented above can be found in languages other than the non-standard variety of English shows that the rise of the construction in English is not necessarily rare or undefinable. The non-standard construction BE + *sat/stood* turns out to be standard in, for example, Spanish and French. The development of the construction could thus very well be a linguistic option made possible by the semantics and features of the stance verbs it involves. In the English vernaculars, the treatment of *sit* and *stand* could have developed in a similar way as in Spanish and French. However, in standard English this development did not take place, and it is therefore not an accepted construction in this variety.

4. Conclusion and future research

The results of the present study have confirmed earlier work by Cheshire et al. (1989) and Klemola (1999) and shown that the BE + *sat/stood* construction is predominantly used in spoken language from the North of Great Britain. Additionally, some occurrences of its use were also found in speech from the South-West, which suggests a slightly wider distribution of the construction, something which has previously been claimed by Cheshire et al. and confirmed by Klemola. No evidence of the use of the construction was found in standard written British English, thus indicating that it is still very much a colloquial feature. Some occurrences of BE + *sat/stood* were found in American writing and speech. However, the uses of the construction seemed to be incidental and it can therefore not be concluded that the construction is a common feature of American English. Both written and spoken Irish English did not show any instances of the use of the construction. Therefore, it so far does not seem to be a feature of this variety of English.

Next, an explanation for the use of BE + *sat/stood* in English was sought, and some possible accounts for the use of this construction provided by the literature were discussed. Firstly, Klemola argues that the influence of a standard English language rule and hypercorrection have given rise to the construction. However, this was regarded as unlikely since the homophonous pronunciation of *-en* and *-ing*, that constituted the crux of Klemola's argument, occurred in more varieties of British English than just the Northern vernacular. Furthermore, the explanation of the construction as a medio-passive was also considered. However, multiple characteristics of the medio-passive could not be identified in the BE + *sat/stood* construction. It was therefore rejected as a possible explanation for the use of the construction. I have argued that a more plausible explanation involves the reanalysis of *sat* and *stood* as adjectival. The semantics of the two stance verbs and the adjectival function of the English passive provide evidence for this account. Moreover, its use seems to have parallels in other languages such as Spanish and French, which shows that the development of such a construction in a language is not a rare phenomenon.

Future research on the subject could perhaps investigate more precisely when exactly BE + *sat/stood* was first used in English and where this use occurred, by comparing corpora that contain data from before the twentieth century. It could also perhaps focus on the attitude of speakers towards the use of the BE + *sat/stood* construction, as online debate seems to hint to

quite strong responses. People's opinions on the construction could tell us more about whether the use could someday spread to other areas in Great Britain or not. Finally, the stigmatization of the construction would also be an interesting line of research.

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