A striking characteristic of English morphology is that perfect and passive participles are the same for every verb, despite rampant irregularity in the verbal system (Embick 2004, Anderwald 2009). Even when a paradigm is innovated for a verb, the passive and perfect participles never diverge. For instance, some speakers have an innovated strong past *snuck* for the historically weak *sneak/sneaked* and for a subset of speakers the strong form is extended to the participle (%*have snuck*) but (apparently) no speakers extend the participle only to one or the other of the passive and perfect. Morphologically, the perfect and the passive use the same participle in English.

A direct form-meaning relationship would require a single semantics for the participle, yielding passive in one syntactic context and perfect in another — the semantic identity hypothesis (SI). Alternatively, the meanings of the perfect and the passive participle are distinct and the identity is purely morphological, the morphological identity hypothesis (MI). In this paper we argue for SI, using data from Scandinavian languages.

Most Scandinavian dialects are like English in systematically using the same participle for perfect and passive (once gender-number-case concord is controlled for). However, some dialects, including Standard Swedish and a Norwegian dialect spoken on the island of Senja (in the northwest of Norway, far from Swedish influence), show divergence. Swedish perfect participles of strong verbs are formed with the suffix -*it* (*har skrivit* ‘has written’), whereas passive participles have -*et* (*är skrivet* ‘is written’) (Platzack 1989, Larsson 2009). Children sometimes generalize -*it* to other conjugation classes, but not to passives. In Senja dialect, the perfect ending is -*e* (*har skrevve* ‘has written’), but strong verbs have -*en* in the passive (*bei skrevven* ‘became written’).

The two languages show different diachronic paths to the same distinction. Strikingly, however, the details of the distribution are consistent crosslinguistically. The “passive” form is potentially agreeing in both languages, and is used in certain unaccusative and causative constructions (Senja *er kommen* ‘is arrived,’ *få skrevven* ‘get written’). This consistency suggests a semantic basis for the distinction, along the lines of SI: the same form (-*en*) implies the same meaning (Aktionsartal, on our analysis). MI, on the other hand, suggests that arbitrary assignments of morphological form are possible, and cannot explain why Swedish and Senja dialect have independently innovated the same pattern of syncretism.

In sum, the best explanation for the observed patterns appears to be the following. A set of “passive” contexts share a meaning, and hence can be expressed by the same set of forms (-*et/-en* plus assorted vowel changes, in Swedish/Senja). But these contexts share a meaning with a set of “perfect” contexts (e.g. property abstraction, as suggested by Ramchand and Svenonius 2004), and hence systematic syncretism across “passive” and “perfect” is also possible, as in English. Since the systematic syncretism applies to entire paradigms, including listed irregular forms (like *snuck*), it is formally distinct from homonymy of exponents (such as plural -*s* and possessive -*s*, which diverge in listed forms like *mice* vs. *mouse’s*).

References

