



Acquisition of event passives and state passives by Mandarin-speaking children



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We examine the acquisition of event and state passives by Mandarin-speaking children.
- Adults and 6-year-olds could distinguish event passives from state passives.
- 4 and 5-year-olds tend to analyze event passives as the corresponding state passives.

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to investigate how children comprehend event passives and state passives in Mandarin and whether they can distinguish these two types of passives or not. Chinese action verbs were classified into three types: achievement, destructive, and creative. Each verb type was involved in a picture identification task using two kinds of passives, event and state passives. Sixty children grouped according to age (4, 5 and 6-year-olds) as well as twenty adults completed the tasks. Results showed that adults and 6-year-olds could distinguish event passives from state passives, while younger subjects were liable to treat event passives as state passives. Young Mandarin-speaking children (4 and 5-year-olds) tend to analyze event passives as equivalent to the corresponding state passives, whose structures are similar to adjectival constructions.

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1. Introduction

Studies of children's acquisition of passives in recent decades have produced some important findings. Passive structures start to occur around the age of two and children cannot fully grasp passives before age three (Hirsch and Wexler, 2004; Li, 1995) and until nine, children could master both syntactic and thematic dimensions of this structure (Messenger et al., 2012). Children are likely to interpret short passives as adjectival passives (Borer and Wexler, 1987), and long passives are more difficult for children to acquire than short passives (Horgan, 1978; Chang, 1986; Liu and Ning, 2009). Compared with psychological passives, children perform better in understanding passives with action verbs (Maratsos et al., 1985; Sudhalter and Braine, 1985; Xu and Yang, 2008). All the evidence indicates that children, until at least three

years old, have great difficulty comprehending and producing passive sentences.

To explain children's delay in passive acquisition, there are mainly four possible accounts, the syntactic account which claims that children do not have the relevant grammar to interpret passives in their early years (Borer and Wexler, 1987, 1992); the frequency account, which argues that children lack the relevant experience with passive construction (Brooks and Tomasello, 1999; Demuth, 1989); the cue-based account, which argues that children are not given strong and unambiguous cues to the passive construction (Bates and MacWhinney, 1987, 1989); and the incremental processing account, which proposes that the interpretation of passives is difficult when it requires children to revise an earlier commitment to a role assignment (Trueswell and Gleitman, 2004; Huang et al., 2013). Among these four accounts, the syntactic account is a generative approach which regards children's ability to acquire passive constructions as an essentially innate one (Borer and Wexler, 1987, 1992), attributing their early poor performance to task demands (Crain and Fodor, 1993) or their processing

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deficiency in the *by*-phrase (Fox and Grodzinsky, 1998). The A-chain Deficit Hypothesis (ACDH) proposed by Borer and Wexler (1987) specifies the reason for the relative delay in children's passive acquisition in terms of syntactic movement. A passive sentence is derived by moving an object to a subject position. Since the moved element arrives at an argument position, this process is called A-movement, which creates an A-chain. ACDH claims that children cannot interpret and apply the argument movement correctly before five years old, failing to form A-chains, so they have difficulty in acquiring passive structures.

The study by Israel et al. (2000) further provided empirical evidence that children at early ages tend to regard actional short passives as homophonous adjectival passives, which lacks the relevant A-movement. They conducted a naturalistic data analysis of seven children from the CHILDES database (mostly from around 2; 0 to 4; 6). Their research showed that all children manifested the same developmental sequence, first acquiring adjectival state passives (e.g. it's broken; 2; 6), then equivocal passives (e.g. that's gonna be broken too, 2; 7) and finally event passives (e.g. a monarch butterfly was killed by a bird, 3; 7).

Children's preference for adjectival passives over verbal passives can be illustrated by a typical ambiguous short passive in English, such as sentence (1), which has two interpretations. The first reading is a verbal passive: [The door]_i was closed *t_i*, which means that someone came along and closed the door (an event of 'door closing'). The second reading is an adjectival passive: The door was [_{ADJ} closed], implying the door was not open (in a closed state). In the first reading, a syntactic movement is involved in the verbal passive, which may cause difficulties for young children. In the second reading, it is an adjectival passive without movement, so children may find it easier to acquire.

(1) The door was closed.

In sum, many researchers agree that English-speaking children first acquire adjectival state passives and then verbal event passives. The present study seeks to check whether the acquisition of passives by Mandarin-speaking children is consistent with the prediction of the syntactic account on passive acquisition, such as ACDH. And the data collected from the controlled experiments will be helpful to enrich the current acquisition theories.

1.1. Long passives and short passives in Mandarin Chinese

To better understand adjectival passives in Mandarin Chinese, we first briefly describe the syntactic structure of Chinese passives. The typical passive structure in Mandarin Chinese is *NP₁ (patient)+BEI+NP₂ (agent)+V+Complement+LE* (Zhu, 1982; Lv, 1984). In terms of whether agents appear or not, Chinese passives can be divided into long passives and short passives (Li, 1980, 1986, 1993; Lu, 2004). For example, sentence (2) contains a verb *ti* 'kick', representing an active voice, (3) and (4) are corresponding passive sentences. Sentence (3) is a long passive, in which *Xiao lanfeng* is the patient of the verb *ti* 'kick', and *Xiao hongfeng* stands for the agent who did the action. Sentence (4) is the short passive without an explicit agent. Both these two passives have an overt passive marker *BEI*.

- (2) *Xiao lanfeng ti le xiaohongfeng.* (active)
Blue Bee kicked ASP Red Bee
'Blue Bee kicked Red Bee.'
- (3) *Xiao lanfeng BEI Xiao hongfeng ti le.* (long passive)
Blue Bee BEI Red Bee kick ASP
'Blue Bee was kicked by Red Bee.'
- (4) *Xiao lanfeng BEI ti le.* (short passive)

Blue Bee BEI kick ASP
'Blue Bee was kicked.'

1.2. Syntactic movement of passives in Mandarin Chinese

According to Huang (1999), Chinese long passives involve null operator movement, which are similar to English tough constructions, such as *John is easy to please* (Hicks, 2009). The detailed analysis is given in (5a), in which *BEI* selects a clause and the patient argument in the embedded clause is a null operator, which undergoes A'-movement and is bound by the matrix subject under the process of predication. With regard to short passives, Huang proposed that they are not agent-deleted versions of long passives, but structures parallel to English *get*-passives. As presented in (5b), *BEI* selects a VP, while a PRO, which originally follows the aspect marker *le*, undergoes A-movement to [Spec, VP], and then it gets controlled by the base-generated subject.

- (5) a. *Xiao lanfeng_i [_{VP} BEI [_{IP} OP_i [_{IP} Xiao hongfeng *ti le t_i]]]* (A'-movement)
Blue Bee BEI Red Bee kick ASP
'Blue Bee was kicked by Red Bee.'*
- b. *Xiao lanfeng_j [BEI [_{VP} PRO_j [*ti le t_j]]]* (A-movement)
Blue Bee BEI kick ASP
'Blue Bee was kicked.'*

From the above analysis, both Mandarin long passives and short passives involve syntactic movement: null operator derivation in long passives is attached to A'-movement, while PRO derivation in short passives belongs to A-movement.

1.3. Event passives and state passives in Mandarin Chinese

In this study, we employed short passives instead of long passives for the following reason. In English, only short passives with action verbs have two readings, i.e., both verbal and adjectival interpretations. In Mandarin Chinese, a short passive construction bearing no agent also has verbal and adjectival interpretations, which is similar to an English short passive.

Short passives in Mandarin Chinese can be further divided into event passives and state passives, and there are some distinctions between them. First, event passives describe actions which are in principle irreversible, so the adverbial *rengran* 'still' cannot modify the verb. State passives, by contrast, focus states brought about by the actions, which can be transitory, thus they can combine with the adverbial *rengran* 'still' (Kratzer, 2000). Second, state passives usually express obvious outcomes. For native Mandarin Chinese speakers, (7) is compatible with the state that 'Blue Bee has been kicked and it has become broken', but (6) just emphasizes 'the situation of being kicked'. Third, the slot in the Chinese expression *chuyu ... zhuangtai* 'under which state' can only be filled by an adjective, so this expression can be employed to test whether *beiti* 'be kicked' or *beitihuai le* 'be kicked broken' can be adjectival or not. For native Mandarin Chinese speakers, only 'the state of being kicked broken' can be acceptable, but 'the state of being kicked' is hard to accept. Thus, the event passive sentence (6) with the verb *ti*, is more likely to be a verbal passive and there are A-chains in its deep structure, while the state passive sentence (7) with the verb phrase *tihuai* 'kick and become broken', can be considered an adjectival passive without A-chains in Mandarin-Chinese.

Based on the above analyses, we claim that event passives are verbal passives with syntactic movement, which syntactic structures can be analyzed as follows:

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