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On the adjectival interpretation of passives in acquisition☆

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Abstract

Borer and Wexler (1987) hypothesised that children interpret verbal passives as adjectival passives in a language like English in which the two passives are syntactic homophones. This has been assumed in the literature, although no direct evidence for it has ever been provided. Here we present two experiments, the first testing comprehension of short and long passives by Catalan-speaking children, the second testing whether such children indeed interpret short passives as adjectival. For this second experiment we capitalise on a particular grammatical property of Catalan: unlike in English, verbal and adjectival passives are not syntactic homophones, since verbal passives select auxiliary *ser* while 'true' adjectival passives (in Meltzer-Asscher's 2011 terms) select auxiliary *estar* – although the participle is identical in both passives. Our results show that Catalan-speaking children miscomprehend verbal passives until the age of 6 and assign them an active structure, in consonance with results from many other languages. Second, when made to choose between an eventive and a stative depiction upon hearing a short passive, they choose the stative depiction, consistent with the adjectival interpretation and incompatible with the verbal one (in spite of auxiliary mismatch). Thus we add to the findings in the literature for the first time direct evidence for the adjectival interpretation of verbal passives during the acquisition period.

Keywords: Passive; Acquisition; Adjectival passive; Verbal passive; Catalan; Adjectival interpretation

1. Introduction: The acquisition of passive

Two observations can be made on the acquisition of passive: first, the comprehension of passive sentences is delayed with respect to that of active sentences (Fraser et al., 1963; de Villiers and de Villiers, 1985; Baldie, 1976; Borer and Wexler, 1987, 1992, and many others) and, second, there is an interaction between poor comprehension of passives and verb type (Maratsos et al., 1985). Among English-speaking children, Maratsos et al. (1985) found that while their comprehension of sentences involving active verbs was generally very high, with 91% comprehension for actional verbs and 89% for psychological verbs, the two verb types elicited very different comprehension rates when in the passive – 67% for actional verbs but only 40% for psychological verbs.

Limiting ourselves to generative accounts, the delay in comprehension of passives seen in children is attributed to different factors by different authors; most proposals share a maturational view that originated in Borer and Wexler (1987, 1992) whereby passives cease to be problematic for typically developing children as soon as their grammars mature, although exactly what mechanisms mature is subject to debate. Many hypotheses have been put forward, such as the A-Chain Delay Hypothesis (Borer and Wexler, 1987, 1992), the Theta Transmission Delay Hypothesis

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(Fox and Grodzinsky, 1998), the External Argument Requirement Hypothesis (Babyonyshev et al., 2001), the Universal Phase Requirement (Wexler, 2004), the Universal Freezing Hypothesis (Hyams and Snyder, 2005), and the Argument Intervention Hypothesis (Orfitelli, 2012), to name just a few. Other authors claim that passive is not universally delayed and that in fact it emerges early in languages with an abundant presence of passive in the input (see Demuth et al., 2010 on Sesotho – but also see the objections of Hirsch and Hartman, 2006; Crawford, 2008).

In the original analysis of Borer and Wexler (1987), passive delay was attributed to the inability of children to build A-chains (A-Chain Delay Hypothesis). Later developments, such as the VP-internal subject hypothesis (Koopman and Sportiche, 1991), as well as empirical findings on the acquisition of raising (Hirsch and Wexler, 2004) led to various reformulations of the delay; amongst those consistent with current linguistic theory, let us mention the Universal Phase Requirement (UPR, Wexler, 2004) and Orfitelli's (2012) Argument Intervention Hypothesis. The predictions of these two hypotheses are the same regarding the acquisition of passives; since here we only consider this construction, our conclusions do not bear on the evaluation of these two proposals.

Even though the A-Chain Delay Hypothesis is no longer tenable, many authors follow Borer and Wexler (1987) in an independent claim that they make, namely that (apparent) better comprehension of actional passives in English is due to the s-homophony of verbal and adjectival passives in this language, where s-homophony is defined as follows: 'A phrase α is an s-homophone of β if α and β have distinct structure but common pronunciation' (Babyonyshev et al., 2001:7). The s-homophony of verbal and adjectival passives is exemplified in (1).

(1) The door was closed.
  (i) Someone was closing the door.
  (ii) The door was in a closed state.

If we assume that children interpret verbal passives as adjectival, the contrast between actional and psychological passives follows from the general availability of adjectival passives with actional verbs (e.g. *comb*, *tear*), but not with psychological verbs (e.g. *see*, *like*), as illustrated in (2) and (3) (examples from Borer and Wexler, 1987). In child grammar, verbal passives of actional verbs can be construed as adjectival passives, but for psychological verbs that construal is unavailable.[1]

(2) a. the doll appears combed; the combed doll; combed though the doll was, Janie recombed her
  b. the doll appears torn; the torn doll; torn though the doll was, John decided to keep her

(3) a. *the doll appears seen; *the seen doll; *seen though the movie was, John decided to go again
  b. *the doll appears liked; *the liked doll; *liked though the doll was, John did not keep it

Independent indirect evidence for the adjectival interpretation of passives by young children comes from the observations of spontaneous speech made by Horgan (1978): 'The children's use of truncated passives differs in important ways from the adult's use. (. . .) Truncated passives seemed to be almost exclusively an after-the-fact observation on the state of things. Most of the passives used the verb 'broken', which children also used as an adjective, or a stative, as well as a verb.' The examples provided by Horgan include those in (4), produced by children between 24 and 48 months of age.

(4) tree is blowed down tree is broken
  the tree's smashed the window's breaked again

The proposal by Borer and Wexler (1987) that English-speaking children interpret verbal passives as adjectival passives was consistent with the evidence above on production in English, but was not directly tested. However, indirect evidence in support of the proposal has been found in two other languages, Greek and Russian.

Terzi and Wexler (2002) tested passive comprehension in Greek by means of a two-picture sentence matching task. Greek is a language in which verbal and adjectival passives are not s-homophones, as shown in (5). While the verbal passive (5a) involves a verb with non-active morphology (and raising of the object to subject position), the deverbal

[1] The correspondence is not perfect, however, as shown by Hirsch and Wexler (2006a), who point to the well-formedness of *a remembered poem*, with a psychological verb, and the degraded character of *a held letter*. They hypothesise that the relevant divide is between verbs with good resultative passives (in Embick's 2004 terms), i.e. that involve a target state, and verbs that do not have good resultative passives because they lack such a target state. Actional verbs involve target states more often than psychological verbs.