

Verbal passives in child English: Evidence from judgments of purpose phrases

Most maturational accounts for passive acquisition claim that the passives seen in early child speech are not adult-like verbal passives, but rather an adjectival construction with a simpler syntax (Borer and Wexler 1987, Babyonyshev et al. 2001). The Universal Phase Requirement (UPR, Wexler 2004) assumes children use resultative adjectival passive syntax (Embick 2004). The Argument Intervention Hypothesis (AIH, Orfitelli 2012) must assume that children's good performance on short and long actional passives is due to a syntax that does not have an intervening agent argument. Alternatively, Snyder and Hyams (2008) argue that children's syntax for verbal passives is intact, but passive movement will violate relativized minimality unless the context adds discourse features to one of the arguments to distinguish the chains (Rizzi 2004).

Verbal and adjectival passives in English can be disambiguated with purpose phrases (PPs). Verbal passives contain a syntactically represented implicit argument (IMP), which can license a PP (Roberts 1987). PPs are allowed with actives and verbal passives, but not with middle/inchoative constructions.

- (1) a. John is breaking the candy bar to share with friends
- b. The candy bar is being broken IMP PRO to share with friends
- c. *The candy bar is breaking to share with friends

PPs are also not acceptable with adjectival passives because they do not have IMPs to control PRO:

- (2) *The candy bar is unbroken to share with friends

If young children's passives are verbal, they should judge passives with PPs like (1b) as acceptable, just like they do (1a). If children's passives are adjectival and do not contain an intervening IMP, they should judge (1b) to be as unacceptable as (1c). As PP acceptability among the constructions is based on grammaticality judgment (GJ) data from adults, it seems appropriate to evaluate children's knowledge with a similar judgment task.

Twenty-one 4-6-year-olds participated in a targeted GJ task (Stromswold 1990, McDaniel and Cairns 1996, Hiramatsu 2000). After a training and pretest which focused on judging active and inchoative forms, children provided judgments for 5 verbs (*bake, break, grow, light, sink*) in 4 different constructions (active progressive, passive progressive, inchoative progressive, inchoative present). Each item was presented with a story emphasizing the object. Passives were the critical items. Paired *t*-tests showed children judged passives differently from both types of inchoatives (progressive inchoative: $t(1,20)=3.25$, $p=.004$, present inchoatives: $t(1,20)=5.59$, $p<.001$). A repeated measures ANOVA on all 4 constructions reveals a main effect of verb type (Greenhouse-Geisser $F(2.202,43.663)=33.660$, $p<.001$). Post-hoc pairwise comparisons (with Bonferroni correction) showed passives varied significantly from both types of inchoatives. The inchoatives did not vary significantly from one another. Like adult controls, passives also varied significantly from actives.

The results show that children use verbal passive syntax to comprehend passives, providing evidence against the UPR and AIH. The results provide preliminary evidence for Snyder and Hyams' proposal, though this account faces other challenges (Crawford 2012). Following Grillo (2008), I propose children's difficulties with passives may stem from constructing the complex event structure required for passives of activity and stative predicates.

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