Children’s Passives: The Role of Discourse Features

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1. The Derivational Approach to Passives

(1) The British sank fourteen battleships in the winter of 1941.

Demotion of the logical subject:

(2) There were sunk (by the British) fourteen battleships in the winter of 1941.

Promotion of the logical object ['<>’ marks an unpronounced copy]:

(3) Fourteen battleships were sunk (by the British) <fourteen battleships>.

The demoted subject of a passive(even if unpronounced) can still control PRO:

(4) The ships were sunk (by the British \[EC_1\]) [PRO_1 to protect the Channel].

The missing subject of an unaccusative cannot control PRO:

(5) The ships sank (*by the British) <the ships> [*PRO_1 to protect the Channel].

(cf. Roeper 1987)

2. Children’s Acquisition of the Passive


(7) The same seems to be true in children acquiring German (Mills 1985, Abbot-Smith & Behrens 2005), Dutch (Verrips 1996), Japanese (Sugisaki 1997, Murasagi 2000) and Serbian (Djurkovic 2005).

(8) Earlier acquisition of verbal passives has been claimed for Sesotho (Demuth 1987) and Inuuktitut (Allen & Crago 1996), but the evidence is controversial (Crawford 2004, Crawford & Hirsch 2008, Johns 1992).

(9) Grammatical Maturation Hypothesis (e.g. Borer & Wexler 1987, 1992; Babyonyshev et al. 2001; Wexler 2002, 2004): The immature grammatical system of a child younger than about five years cannot represent the passive construction.

3. Evidence for a Crucial Role of the Demoted Subject

3.1 The Romance Reflexive-Clitic Construction

(13) A near minimal pair is provided by the English passive and the Romance reflexive-clitic construction.

(14) Marantz (1984) argues that the HAVE/BE alternation in (15) (for French) reflects the unaccusativity of (15b).

(15) a. Je t’ai vu.  b. Je me suis vu <je>.

I you have seen I me am seen

‘I saw you.’ ‘I saw myself.’

(16) The surface subject Je in (15b) is an underlying direct object that raises into subject position.

(17) A reflexive morpheme renders the predicate reflexive, and triggers the presence of a reflexive clitic (me) as a form of agreement.

(18) The choice of BE as the past auxiliary is a reflex of unaccusativity.

3.2 Supporting Evidence


(20) In the French faire-causative, the embedded subject is preceded by à if and only if the head of the embedded clause is transitive.

(21) Il fera boire un peu de vin {à son enfant, *son enfant}.

He make-FUT drink a little of wine {at his child, his child}

‘He will make his child drink a little wine.’

(22) J’ai fait partir {Jean, *à Jean}.

I’PAST make leave {John, at John}

‘I made John leave.’
La crainte du scandale a fait tuer le juge, ‘Fear of scandal made the judge kill him.’

When the embedded clause is reflexive, its head behaves as an intransitive:

La crainte du scandale a fait se tuer le frère du juge, ‘Fear of scandal made the judge’s brother kill himself.’

Therefore, contrary to initial appearances, the reflexive clitic (se) is not functioning as the direct object. Marantz argues that the embedded subject (le frère du juge) is actually the underlying object.

3.3 Young Children Succeed

Snyder, Hyams and Crisma (1994):

Italian (Calambrone 1992) French (Suppes, Smith & Leveille 1973)

Diana (1;8-2;6) Philippe (2;1-3;3)
Guglielmo (2;2-2;11) Martina (1;7-2;7)

Method: Run a computer search for any child utterance containing a clitic, and hand-code the results.

Diana Guglielmo Martina Philippe
HAVE BE HAVE BE HAVE BE HAVE BE
NREF 10 1 12 0 3 0 27 2
REFL 0 23 0 35 0 4 0 104

(p<.001) (p<.001) (.143 NS) (p<.001)

P-values are for two-tailed Fisher Exact Test, except for Philippe ($X^2$).

New subjects from CHILDES (MacWhinney 2000):

French Italian
Max (1;9-3;2, York) Elisa (1;5-2;1, Tonelli)
Léa (2;8-3;5, York) Rafaello (1;7-2;11, Calambrone)

HAVE BE HAVE BE HAVE BE HAVE BE
NREF 17 0 45 0 15 0 10 0
REFL 2 4 2 13 0 4 0 2

(p=.002) (p<.001) (p<.001) (p=.015)

Examples: Elisa

Mi sono bagnata (2;1) L’ho mangiata (1;11)
myself am bathed it have eaten
’(I) bathed myself’ ‘(I) have eaten it’ (la pappa = the food)

Si e’ spo[r]cata (2;1) L’ho buttata li’ dentro (2;1)
himself e dirtied it have thrown there inside
’(He) dirtied himself’ ‘(I) threw it inside’

This success cannot be attributed to associating particular verbs or clitics with BE. Depending on the subject, and hence the (non-)reflexivity, the same verbs and (in the case of first/second person) the same clitics can take HAVE or BE.

The children’s level of success would be extremely unlikely if they lacked the adult grammar for reflexive clitics.

3.4 What’s Different?

On Lidz’s (2003) analysis of reflexive-clitic constructions, an external theta-role of Agent/Cause is implicit, but not assigned syntactically. If the underlying object is animate, it can be interpreted as Agent, but an impersonal or mediopassive interpretation is also possible.

Therefore, in contrast to the verbal passive, the logical subject is not grammatically represented.

Supporting evidence from French:

Jean s’est blessé pour toucher l’assurance.
‘John REFL is injured to collect the insurance’

Jean s’est blessé pendant la guerre.
‘John REFL is injured during the war’
Jean s’est blessé par l’ennemi.
John was injured by the enemy.

4. Evidence for a Crucial Role of Discourse Features


Specifically, a by-phrase is felicitous only if there is at least one alternative person who could have been the agent / experiencer, but was not.

Moreover, OGL show that the same children who succeed when the felicity conditions are satisfied, fail when the felicity conditions are not satisfied.

Story without felicity (OGL 2006:447)

EXP: In this story we have Santa and a naughty elf. The elf took a plate of goodies left for Santa and hid behind a wall so Santa would not see him.
ELF: Hee, hee. Santa won’t see me behind this wall, and I can have these treats all for myself.
EXP: What the elf forgot, though, is that Santa has super vision. That’s how he can see who is naughty and who is nice. He can see through anything, even a wall.
SANTA: Aha! I see you elf. I see you!!
EXP: Gobu, can you tell me something about that story?
GOBU: Well, let’s see. In that story, the elf was seen by Santa.

Story with felicity (OGL 2006:447)

EXP: Oscar is very grouchy. He doesn’t like anybody. I wonder if someone likes him, though? Here’s a Fancy Lady and a parrot. I wonder if the Fancy Lady likes Oscar?
FANCY LADY: Ew! Oscar stinks. I don’t like him because he lives in a garbage can.
EXP: Well, I wonder if the parrot likes him?
PARROT: Oh, yes, I like you Oscar. I don’t mind that he lives in a garbage can. I like you, Oscar.
EXP: Gobu, can you tell me something about that story?
GOBU: Well, let’s see. Oscar was liked by the parrot.

Problem: OGL’s manipulation also led to significantly improved performance on SHORT passives, where no by-phrase was present!

5. Proposal

Passives are difficult for young children because:
(i) they require the child to relate the surface subject to an underlying direct-object position, and
(ii) there’s another argument (the demoted logical subject) intervening between the two.

The adult can keep track of the logical subject versus the logical object in the passive because they have different types of case features. The demoted subject bears inherent case features (e.g. prepositional or dative), while the logical object bears structural case features (nominative).

For the child, structural and inherent case features are not yet “distinctive,” for purposes of keeping track of the arguments in a sentence.

However, even for the young child, arguments with interrogative, focus, or topic features are distinctive (cf. Rizzi 2004).

Therefore:
(i) The reflexive-clitic construction is unproblematic because there’s no demoted subject intervening between the surface-subject position and the underlying direct-object position.
(ii) The passive becomes unproblematic in OGL’s felicity condition because the surface subject bears a [+Topic] feature, and/or because the demoted subject (whether pronounced or not) bears a [+Focus] feature (cf. 64).

Note that the locus of the problem could be construed as part of the grammar proper, or as part of the processing system.

Either way, as the child matures we expect her to become better at distinguishing the raised logical object (bearing structural case features) from the demoted subject (bearing inherent case features).

The older child (and adult) will be able to relate the structural-case argument to its underlying position, despite the inherent-case argument that intervenes.
6. Concluding Remarks

(75) In order to handle children’s success on mismatch items in OGL’s felicity condition, we may need the discourse features to be established independently of the test sentence:
   a. [+Topic] = Topic of Discussion
   b. [+Focus] = Possible answer to Question Under Discussion

(76) Predictions:
   a. Improvement when test item is a wh-question (cf. Crain et al. 1987)
   b. Difficulties, and discourse-features will help, in:
      i. Raising Past Experience (cf. Hirsch et al. 2007)

Selected Bibliography


