English-speaking children's early passives: what can syntactic priming show us?

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Comprehension studies of children's early passives suggested that they are acquired late and are semantically constrained: children tend to perform badly with passives before the age of 5, but comprehend actional verb (e.g. *hit*) passives better than non-actional verb (e.g. *love*) passives (see e.g. Maratsos et al. 1985). More recent production studies have shown contradictory results: Children as young as 3 or 4 years old produce passives following training (Brooks & Tomasello 1999) or priming (Huttenlocher et al. 2004), though actional and non-actional verbs were not compared. Some corpus research has suggested that children's early passives tend to contain 'get' rather than 'by' as the auxiliary (see e.g. Budwig 1990).

We studied children's early passives using a syntactic priming experimental paradigm: Studies with adults suggest that syntactic priming taps into a level of abstract structural representations. Priming studies with children have shown similar effects as with adults, suggesting that children have abstract syntactic representations for some structures from a young age (Branigan et al. 2006). Syntactic priming also appears to facilitate the production of infrequent or difficult constructions for non-proficient language users, such as aphasia patients (Hartsuiker & Kolk, 1998) and, we suggest, children.

We propose that if children do acquire an abstract representation for the passive at an earlier age than previously demonstrated, it should be possible to elicit passives through priming; if this representation is constrained by verb type (actional) as suggested by early studies we would not expect priming from non-actional verbs. If the acquisition of the passive is not semantically constrained we would expect priming from actional and non-actional verbs. Further, if children have an early preference for the 'get' auxiliary rather than 'be', we would expect them to be less likely to produce 'be' passives when not primed to.

We report two studies that tested these hypotheses in a picture-description task: the first manipulated Prime Structure (active vs. passive) and Verb Type (actional vs. non-actional); target pictures showed an actional transitive event.

Prime: a bear is patting/frightening a girl
a girl is being patted/frightened by a bear
Target: a frog tickling a fairy

Participants heard a prime description then described their own picture. We found a strong and reliable structural priming effect for children (28%) and adults (20%), and a prime by group interaction (marginal by participants, $p < .07$). but no effect of Verb Type. The second study compared active primes, 'get' passive primes and 'be' passive primes; target pictures again showed an actional transitive event.

Prime: a bear is patting a girl
a girl is getting patted by a bear
a girl is being patted by a bear
Target: a frog tickling a fairy

Preliminary results with children showed reliable priming of 'get' passive responses following 'get' and 'be' passive primes but only reliable priming of 'be' passive responses following 'be' passive primes, (adult results in progress).

The results of our first study show comprehension to production priming from both verb types, that is, after hearing a passive structure, the participants were more likely to produce this structure in describing their own picture. The results of the second study showed priming of passives from both auxiliaries, but priming of 'be' passives only following 'be' passive primes. We suggest therefore that children acquire an abstract syntactic representation for the passive early on which appears to contain a preference for the 'get' auxiliary; that there was no effect of Verb Type on the participants' descriptions suggests that this representation is not necessarily semantically constrained.