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Comprehension of Active and Passive Sentences in Portuguese and English: The Prototypicality Effect

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Abstract

There have been several investigations into the acquisition of passive constructions, most based on empirical data from English children. These have thrown up a variety of theories regarding the nature of the strategies underlying passive acquisition. However, is it reasonable to assume that in different languages children use the same strategies to learn the passives? Will passives in all languages demand the same cognitive skills from the language learner? Or, in each language will children show a different pattern of development?

Slobin (1981) states that in each type of language, children initially isolate and generalise basic sentence forms. According to Slobin, prototypical events and canonical sentence forms constitute a nucleus for the growth of language. For the purpose of the research reported here, it is important to specify the meaning of *basic sentence form*, *prototypical event* and *canonical sentence*. The former combines structural and typological characteristics, and will show some variation depending on the number of constituents requested by the verb as well as the frequency of a given structure in a language. The second is defined in conceptual terms, following Hopper & Thompson's (1980) Transitivity Hypothesis. A more prototypical transitive event will present two or more participants, an action, an actor high in potency, and an affected non-actor. Lastly, a canonical passive sentence resembles Givón's (1990) 'promotional passive' or Maratsos *et al.*'s (1985) 'typical passive', embodying three important features. First, a non-agent will be the pragmatic topic of the sentence, placed in the syntactic subject position. Second, the semantic agent will optionally appear in a special oblique case. Finally, an actional verb will be coded in a more stative form (be/get + past participle). We hypothesised that order of acquisition of sentences structures will follow Slobin's (1981) prediction: first children will acquire the more prototypical and basic sentence forms and only later will children be able to generalise to less prototypical sentence forms.

In order to investigate this hypothesis, two studies were designed, testing comprehension in four different types of active and passive sentences: more prototypical transitive scenes (irreversible, reversible) and less prototypical transitive scenes (dative and locative). Subjects from Study 1 are all monolingual English speakers residing in UK whereas subjects from Study 2 are all monolingual Portuguese speakers living in the south of Brazil. In both studies participants were children (aged 3 to 10) and adults. The results show a prototypicality effect on the acquisition of passives in both languages. More prototypical passive sentences as well as more prototypical actives were understood at younger ages than less prototypical sentences. This cross-linguistic similarity might indicate that the process of pattern formation is an important cognitive strategy for the language learner.

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