

Advantages of corpus-based longitudinal analyses on experimental tasks: a case study on the acquisition of the passive in L1 Italian

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The present study provides a complementary approach to experimental studies for understanding young children's ability to master passive structures in Italian as their L1.

Early works focused on L1 English suggested a delay in passive acquisition even until the age of 6 or 7 (Baldie, 1976), leading to a first maturational account (Borer and Wexler, 1987), while recent cross-linguistic research has shown that children can derive passive clauses around the age of three (Pinker et al., 1987; Demuth, 1989; Fox and Grodzinsky, 1998) this also applies to Italian as a native language (Manetti, 2012; Volpato et al., 2013, 2014). However, several elicited production and comprehension tasks (Pinker et al., 1987; Crain et al. 1987(2009); O'Brien et al. 2006) have been criticized for facilitating children's mastery of passive derivation before the age of four (i.e., making the internal argument the topic of discourse): without any facilitation, children's ability to master passive derivation is believed to "mature" until that age (Snyder and Hyams, 2015).

To address this debate, the present study conducted an analysis based on longitudinal corpora, the CHILDES Italian subsection (MacWhinney, 2000), focused on the spontaneous production of passives by 18 L1 Italian children aged 1;04 – 3;04, younger than the participants of the experimental tasks on the same topic. The CHILDES longitudinal data are less susceptible to possible manipulation of the production context since they are acquired by recording children in a natural setting.

The results showed that participants were able to spontaneously produce all types of passive structures in Italian around 2 years of age. Moreover, the context of production has been analyzed, and contextual clues that may have facilitated children were found in half of the structures considered: in such cases, as in (1) and (2)¹, the internal argument bears a [+WH] or [+Topic] feature, thus it may elicit the production of a passive structure instead of an active one, as claimed by Snyder and Hyams (2015).

(1) Mother, talking about a toy (Cipriani et al., 1989):

non riesci a toglier=le la testa?

neg can-2sg to remove-inf=3sg.f.dat the.sg.f head.sg.f

'can't you remove her head?'

(2) Marco, 2;05:

no, perché è tenut-o drento [//] dentro.

neg, because be-3sg hold.ptcp.pst.sg.m [wrong spelling] [//] inside.

'No, because it is kept inside'.

On the other hand, the example in (3)² pertains to the other half of passive structures produced without any facilitation: while further research on a larger amount of data is needed for more general claims, these occurrences may suggest that children's ability to master passive structures is acquired earlier than previously thought.

(3) Diana, 2;06 (Tonelli et al., 1998):

e quetti [: quest-i] vanno sciugiti [:asciugat-i] bene.

and these.pl.m go-prs dry-ptcp.pst.pl.m well.

'And these need to be dried well.'

In conclusion, these findings contribute to the growing body of cross-linguistic research that suggests children's early acquisition of passives and highlights the advantages of corpus-based longitudinal analyses over experimental tasks.

Notes

1. Despite the lack of agreement in (2) between the gender of the internal argument and the past participle ("the head" in Italian is feminine, but the child uses the masculine form of the past participle), the passive structure is clearly referred to the discourse topic.

2. The passive auxiliary "andare" implies the presence of an external force that starts the action and has a deontic modal nuance. It is not clear what is the contextual referent of "these", but it is certainly not the discourse topic.

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