

Passive delay: A view from Ibero-Romance

The reason for the delay in the acquisition of (at least some) passives is a long-standing issue; here we assess the predictions of the Universal Freezing Hypothesis (UFH: Snyder & Hyams, 2015) and those of the Universal Phrase Requirement (UPR: Wexler, 2004) compounded with the adjectival strategy of Borer and Wexler (1992), which is particularly relevant to test in Romance given its auxiliary distribution. The UPR holds that children are delayed for all passives, as all *v*Ps constitute strong phases in early grammar. The non-phasal, defective *v* of verbal passives becomes maturationally available around age 6. Children's adult-like results with passives of actional verbs are due to an adjectival passive analysis, which is unavailable for non-actional verbs given the lack of s-homophony between the two structures. The UFH, on the other hand, rests on the Smuggling account of the passive (Collins, 2005) and holds that children cannot smuggle the internal argument past the external argument until age 4; non-actional verbs require semantic coercion to passivize, as they lack a result state (Gehrke & Grillo, 2007), and this operation becomes maturationally available at age 6, invoking two maturational events.

We draw our results from three sentence-picture matching tasks carried out in Catalan and European Portuguese, which feature different auxiliaries for verbal passives (*ser*) and adjectival passives (Cat. *estar*, EP *ficar* and *estar*) (1–2).

- (1) a. O cão foi aleijado (pelo menino).
the dog Aux.event hurt by+the boy 'The dog was hurt (by the boy).'
- b. O cão estava aleijado.
the dog Aux.state hurt 'The dog was hurt.'
- c. O cão ficou aleijado.
the dog Aux.result hurt 'The dog was hurt.'
- (2) a. La nena és pentinada (pel pare).
the girl Aux.pass combed by+the father 'The girl is combed (by the father)'
- b. La nena està pentinada.
the girl Aux combed 'The girl is combed.'

Experiment 1 was carried out in EP (152 children, ages 3 to 8). This task comprised four test conditions crossing verb type (actional vs. perception) and length of the passive (short vs. long). All groups from 3 to 7 showed significant differences between actional and perception verbs, for both short and long passives (Fig. 1). Experiment 2 was carried out in Catalan (55 children, ages 4 to 9). This task tested actives with actional and perception verbs and passives with perception verbs. In Catalan, passive delay with perception verbs was also found and persisted until age 8 (Fig. 2). The contrast can be accounted for if we assume that children are resorting to an adjectival strategy in these two languages, despite lack of total s-homophony between verbal and adjectival passive, and this strategy is unavailable for the perception verbs tested.

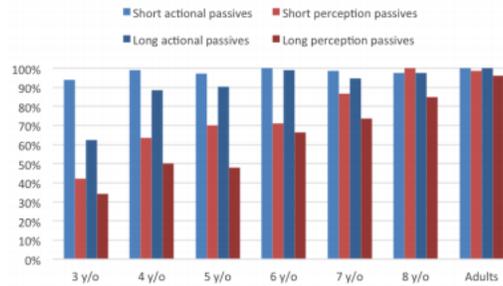


Figure 1: Percentage adult comprehension in EP (actional and perception V passives)

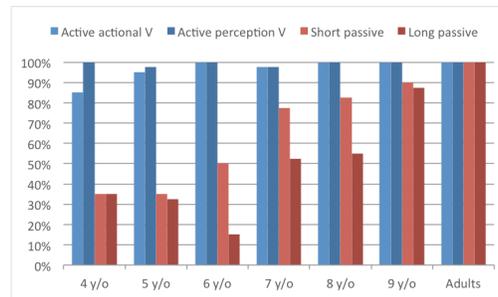


Figure 2: Percentage adult comprehension in Catalan (actives, and perception V passives)

Experiment 3 replicated the comprehension experiment of Gavarró and Parramon (2017) for Catalan and was conducted with 88 EP children (ages 3–6). This task required the child to choose between an on-going event picture and a result-state picture when hearing either a verbal passive, or an adjectival passive with *ficar*. The statistical analysis indicated that children were unable to distinguish between the two auxiliaries until age 6 and, under closer scrutiny, the results replicated those for Catalan with *pintar* ‘paint’, with experimental artifacts obscuring the results for other verbs. With *pintar*, children assigned an adjectival reading to verbal passive (3).

(3) Percentage of adjectival reading, Experiment 3

	3-y-o	4-y-o	5-y-o	6-y-o	adults
Verbal passive	82.5%	72.7%	93.3%	65.6%	65%
Adjectival passive	82.5%	72.7%	96.7%	90.6%	90%

We draw the following conclusions: (i) contra Snyder and Hyams, there is no maturational event at age 4, rather the development of passives (be it in terms of development of Freezing or Phase Defectiveness) takes place between ages 7 and 8; (ii) Catalan and EP children apply an adjectival strategy, despite the existence of different auxiliaries; this is at the source of the asymmetry between actional and perception verb passive miscomprehension.

References: Gavarró, A. & Parramon, X. (2017) On the adjectival interpretation of passives in acquisition. *Lingua* 185: 11–24. / Snyder, W. & Hyams, N. (2015) Minimality effects in children’s passives. In *Structures, Strategies and Beyond. Studies in Honour of Adriana Belletti*. John Benjamins, Amsterdam, 343–368. / Wexler, K. (2004) Theory of phasal development: Perfection in child grammar. *MIT Working Papers in Linguistics*, 48, 159-209.