

Minimality Effects in Children's Passives*

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“Tanti auguri per il tuo sessantesimo!”

In many studies of children acquiring English, adult-like performance on clear, unequivocal verbal passives is not reliably present until sometime after age 4;0 (Bever 1970 ; Horgan 1976 ; Maratsos et al. 1985 ; de Villiers & de Villiers 1985 ; Borer & Wexler 1987 ; Meints 1999 ; Orfitelli 2012). Yet, other studies find fully adult-like performance (O'Brien et al. 2005; Crain et al. 1987/2009; Pinker et al. 1987). In this paper we provide an explanation for these disparate results in terms of minimality (Rizzi 2004; Grillo 2008).

We assume that the English verbal passive requires A-movement (of the logical object) across an intervening A position (occupied by the logical subject), as in Collins 2005. Our hypothesis is that the general strategy (whatever it might be) that adult English-speakers use to overcome the resulting minimality violation is unavailable to young children.

In previous work (Hyams & Snyder 2005, Snyder & Hyams 2008), we followed Collins 2005 in assuming that adults escape a minimality violation through ‘smuggling’, and we proposed *The Universal Freezing Hypothesis*, viz. that young children are ‘frozen’, unable to effect the smuggling operation (either for maturational or processing reasons) (1) - (cf. also Nevins 2002 and Orfitelli’s 2012 *Argument Intervention Hypothesis*).

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- (1) *Universal Freezing Hypothesis (UFH)*. For the immature child (at least until age four), the Freezing Principle *always* applies: No subpart of a moved phrase can *ever* be extracted.

But what about the studies that find adult-like performance? In this paper we offer a new proposal, namely that the studies in which children succeeded are those where the experimental task introduced a discourse-related/quantificational feature, typically +Topic or +WH, on the derived subject. Under newer versions of Rizzi's Relativized Minimality (RM; Rizzi 2004; Starke 2001; Grillo 2008), this has the effect that the underlying object can move past another argument without incurring an RM violation. Our general idea is that children obey RM, but do not have smuggling. The UFH thus enforces a strict version of RM by blocking children from using smuggling as an escape hatch. So they do well on A-movement precisely when there is no RM violation.

A test case for our proposal is provided by certain formally reflexive-clitic constructions (FRCCs) found in French and Italian. In these languages many transitive verbs can be combined with a reflexive clitic to obtain a mediopassive or inchoative/anticausative meaning (2a). FRCCs form a near-minimal pair with the verbal passive (2b):

- (2) a. Les pommes se vendent bien ici.
 the-PL apple-PL REFL sell-Pres.3.PL well here
 'Apples sell well here.'
- b. Les pommes ont été vendues.
 the-PL apple-PL HAVE-Pres3PL BE-Perf sell-Perf.F.PL
 'The apples have been sold.'

The crucial difference between the FRCC and the verbal passive is that the former never has any form of overt or implicit external argument (viz. the FRCC can never take a 'by'-phrase, nor can it control into a purpose clause). As argued by Sportiche (2010, et seq.), FRCCs are clearly unaccusative. In (2b) the derived subject has to move past an implicit (PRO) subject, and without the benefit of smuggling (or whatever trick the adults are using), this should create a minimality violation. In contrast, the object-to-subject movement in (2a) does not cross over an implicit (PRO) subject, because there is none. We therefore predict that children should have no difficulty with FRCCs. This prediction is strongly supported by spontaneous-speech data from several children (cf. Snyder et al. 1995, Hyams & Snyder 2005): two-year-olds acquiring French or Italian are already using fully adult-like FRCCs, long before the age when a child would be expected to produce a verbal passive.

In summary, we propose that "immature" children do not have access to the smuggling strategy that adults use to avoid a minimality violation in passives (2b), and so for them the intervening argument reliably blocks object promotion. We further propose that children obey RM (cf. also Friedmann et al. 2009, Belletti et al. 2012). Hence, they do vastly better on passives when the moved argument bears a feature belonging to a class not present on the intervener, specifically, a +Topic or +WH feature, in other words, when movement does not violate RM.

In closing we briefly discuss languages such as Sesotho (Demuth 1990) and Zulu (Suzman 1997) in which children succeed on passives quite early in their grammatical development. Our explanation for this precocious development is based on the topic orientation of these languages and follows from our RM analysis.

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