The (Non)-Effects of Pragmatics on Children’s Passives

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Introduction

• Our study examines a pragmatic effect reported by O’Brien, Grolla, & Lillo-Martin (2006).

• Are English-speaking children better at long passives when the by-phrase is informative?

1. Previous Literature

• Many studies have found that children are delayed in their comprehension of verbal passives (Bever 1970; de Villiers and de Villiers 1978; Horgan 1978; Maratos et al. 1985).

• But others report early comprehension (Fox et al. 1995; O’Brien et al. 2006).

• O’Brien, Grolla, and Lillo-Martin (2006) found that 3- and 4-year-olds showed adult-like performance, even on long non-actional passives, if the by-phrase was informative.

• The present study seeks to replicate this finding.

Pragmatic felicity of the by-phrase

• Crain and Fodor (1993): Long passives are rare in adult speech.

• They are marked forms, used in special discourse situations.

• Children’s poor performance might result from the use of pragmatically infelicitous contexts.

• This aspect of experimental design could be masking children’s competence.


Method: Truth Value Judgment Task (Crain & McKee 1985)
Exp. 1: (11) 4-year-old children (4:0-4:10, M = 4:04)
Exp. 2: (7) 3-year-old children (3:02-4:02, M = 3:04)
Verbs: 2 actional verbs (chase, hug) & 2 non-actional verbs (like, see)
OGL presented stories with different numbers of characters:
• Three-character stories included a Patient/Theme, a potential Agent/Experiencer, and an actual Agent/Experiencer.
• Two-character stories included only the Patient/Theme and the actual Agent/Experiencer.

Results:
• 2-character stories – At chance
• 3-character stories – Above chance

Conclusion:
Felicity matters.

3. The Experiment

• Aim 1: Replicate OGL’s central effect.

• Aim 2: Fill a gap in OGL’s data, by testing for an effect of 2- vs. 3-character stories on four-year-olds’ comprehension of long passives.


• Participants: 20 preschool-aged children (3:06-6:01, MA = 4:06, SD = 0:34),

• Verbs: (2) actional verbs (chase, hug) & (2) non-actional verbs (like, see).

• Design: (2) testing sessions, with training before experimental: - Experimental session with (16) stories: (4) active controls, (6) 2-char. stories, (6) 3-char. stories.
- Blocked design: 2-character before 3-character stories.

Predictions

(1) If 4-year-old children exhibit the ‘OGL effect’, - then there will be an effect of story type.
(2) If children are adult-like on long passives, - then there will be no effect of story type, and children will perform significantly better than chance.
(3) If children are not affected by 4 of agents/experiencers, - then they may still exhibit a main effect of actionality (as reported in the literature).

4. Results

• Four-year-olds’ performance was NOT affected by the presence/absence of an additional agent/experiencer.

• Regardless of story type, children were significantly better at actional than non-actional passives.

5. Power Analysis

• Based on the group means and the one-sample t-scores from OGL’s study, we calculated a minimum sample-size for detecting, with (1-β) = 90% power, a contrast between 2- and 3-character stories.

• Even for purposes of a group comparison (viz. a between-subjects t-test), a sample of just 14 subjects would be expected to yield significance (i.e., 2-tailed α < .05) based on the OGL numbers. This is far fewer than the 20 subjects in our study.

• Furthermore, for detecting a contrast within the non-actional items, a minimum sample of just 11 subjects should yield a significant contrast. This is considerably fewer than our 20 subjects.

6. Discussion

• Adding a third character did not improve children’s performance.

• Despite this, children were still trending with the literature, performing better on actional passives than non-actionals.

• One possible concern is that our participants were older than OGL’s.

• But based on previous findings, we should still expect children to exhibit the OGL effect at least in the domain of non-actionals.

7. Future Directions

• Testing a prediction of Snyder & Hyams (2015): Better performance if the derived subject bears a discourse-related feature such as [+Topic].

• Testing younger 3-year-olds. OGL had children as young as 3:02, while ours started at 3:06.

Final Remarks

• Young English-speaking children are not fully adult-like on verbal passives.

• A previous study suggested that children perform better if the by-phrase is informative.

• But the current study failed to detect the predicted effect.

• Pragmatic felicity may benefit children’s performance, but by itself, the presence of a second potential agent/experiencer did not yield adult-like performance.

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