

## Brazilian 3-4 year-olds discriminate the form of passive predicates

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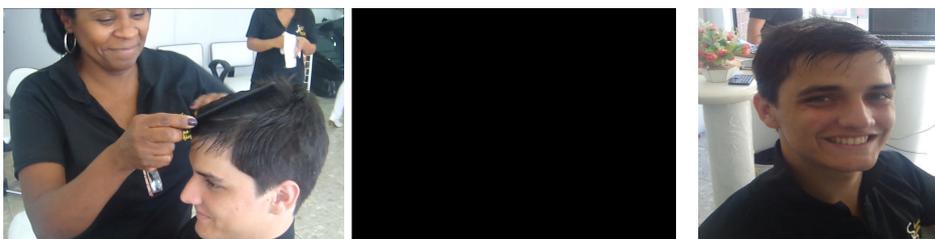
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This study investigates children's ability to distinguish passive predicates in Portuguese. The generation of eventive passives in children's grammar has been a matter of controversy. It has been traditionally argued on maturational grounds that children by the age of 4 could only interpret copula-like constructions (Borer & Wexler, 1987; Wexler, 2002) and the view that eventive passives cannot be derived by this age still prevails (Snyder & Hyams, 2015) despite the results of priming studies (Bencini & Valian, 2008; among others). In a study of grammaticality judgment with European Portuguese speaking children, Estrela's (2013) results reveal that, only at the age of 6, children start to distinguish the different passive predicates. It is hypothesized here that the sentential context provided in Estrela's task seems too semantically/aspectually subtle for a child to detect in order to reject/accept a sentence. The experiment reported here aimed at verifying (a) whether young children are sensitive to the form that enables the meaning of stative and non-stative predicates to be eventually distinguished; (b) the extent to which there is evidence that children consistently provide an adult interpretation to them. The working hypothesis is that the process of acquisition of passives requires infants/children to recognize the discontinuous dependency between an auxiliary and the participle morpheme. The participants were 24 children separated into two age groups (Group A, 3;4-4;4; Group B, 5-5;10). Two types of videos were created, which start with the same event (e.g.: *someone is combing someone else's hair*). In video type (i), the final scene corresponds to the result of this process (*The boy's hair is combed*) (compatible ending). In video type (ii), the final scene corresponds to result of action that undoes the effect of the process initially presented (*the boy messes up his own hair, which becomes uncombed*) (incompatible ending) (see Illustrations 1-2 below). Children were instructed to watch the videos and to answer the question following them. A truth-judgment task with YES/NO questions was used. Two types of questions were presented: eventive/stative question (1-2). The independent variables were *Age*; *Video ending*; *Question*. The dependent variable was *number of Yes answers*. The null hypothesis is that children do not distinguish the two predicate types. A similar number of YES responses to the two types of questions would be expected in the two video conditions, either with a prevailing stative interpretation, or at a random basis. If children distinguish the form of stative predicates from the form of non-stative ones, more YES responses should be given to (1) in the incompatible ending condition than to (2). If not only do children distinguish the predicate form but also consistently interpret eventive passives in relation to the process initially described, then a similar number of YES responses shall be given to (1), regardless of the video ending (adult's behavior). The results of a 2X2X2 ANOVA reveal a significant main effect of *question* and *video*. More YES responses were obtained to the eventive questions and were given to the video compatible condition. The effect of *Age* was not significant. A significant interaction between *question* and *video* supports the prediction that children are sensitive to the form of the auxiliary presented. A similar number of YES responses to the two questions in the compatible video condition was obtained. In the incompatible condition, though, children did not give YES responses to stative questions, as expected, but did so when the predicate was eventive. A significant difference between number of YES answers to the eventive sentences in the two video conditions (pairwise comparison) suggests that children do not consistently interpret this passive predicates as adults, in line with Estrela's (2013) results. It is possible, nevertheless, that the children were easily trapped by the task, which would require executive control to inhibit an immediate response based on the last scene of the video. In sum, the results are compatible with an acquisition procedure which predicts early sensibility to the pattern AUX-PART and to morphological differences that signal semantic/structural distinctions.

Relying on the information provided by the auxiliary SER seems to be beyond the abilities of 5 year olds, at least, when subtle semantic judgments (as in Estrela's (2013) study) or executive control abilities (as in the present task) are required. The extent to which achieving the adult state of knowledge concerning eventive passives is independent from the development of such linguistic and cognitive abilities is a matter for further research.

- (1) O menino foi penteado? [eventive passive]  
 The\_Masc\_Sing boy BE<sub>2</sub><sup>3rd</sup> P\_Sing\_past combed\_Masc\_Sing  
 Was the boy combed?
- (2) O menino está penteado? [stative passive]  
 The\_Masc\_Sing boy BE<sub>1</sub><sup>3rd</sup> P\_Sing\_present combed\_Masc\_Sing  
 Is the boy combed?

**Illustration 1. compatible ending;**



**Illustration 2. incompatible ending**



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