The comprehension of passive sentences and wh-questions with action and non-action verbs by children acquiring Brazilian Portuguese

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Abstract

Our main aim was to study the comprehension of passive and interrogative wh- sentences by children acquiring Brazilian Portuguese (BP) using a psycholinguistic experiment to assess their knowledge.

Key words: Language Acquisition, Passive voice, Wh-questions.

Introduction

Children acquiring English do not show any difficulties with A-bar movement in subject (Who saw the rabbit) and object (Who did the rabbit see t) wh- questions; however, they do show difficulties with structures that involve A-movement, such as the verbal passive (The rabbit was seen t). This was dubbed the A-chain Deficit Hypothesis (Borer & Wexler, 1987). In order to test this hypothesis and assess Brazilian children's comprehension of the passive sentence, a comprehension experiment was applied to 24 subjects 3;5 to 5;7 years-old.

Results and Discussion

The differences found between comprehension of short and long passive sentences with action verbs and short and long passive sentences with non-action verbs were not statistically significant. It is thus not possible to adopt the hypotheses proposed by Borer & Wexler (1987) and Hirsch & Wexler (2006), that there would be a deficit in the A-chain formation from the object position to the subject position. It cannot be said that the comprehension of short passive sentences with action verbs by the children examined here took place via adjectivization strategy, since BP is not a language in which verbal and adjectival passive sentences are homophones (the verbal passive O menino foi penteado/The boy was combed vs the adjectival passive O menino está penteado/The boy was combed).

The presence of the by-phrase does not appear to interfere with the comprehension of passive sentences with action verbs; however, the results for passive sentences with non-action verbs were worse when compared to the ones with actionverbs, especially with long passive sentences, but there is no evidence that children cannot understand this kind of verbs, as observed in the experiment which tested the comprehension of interrogative sentences.

Our results also show that the children's difficulty lies mainly in long passive constructions with non-action verbs especially among the younger groups tested (3;5 to 4;2 years-old), which supports Grodzinsky and Fox's hypothesis (1998). Considering the results just pointed out, two options can be entertained: (i) that children, indeed, do not do well with long passive sentences with non-action verbs or (ii) that the methodology employed was not appropriate to assess their knowledge, considering they did not display the same effect when tested with wh-sentences also containing non-action verbs.

Conclusions

On the other hand, such results also show that children's difficulty with passive sentences with non-action verbs cannot be related to the semantics of the verbs, as proposed by H&H (2006). Finally, the presence of the by-phrase is also not a factor, considering it did not interfere in the comprehension of the passive sentences with action verbs. Thus, our results do not support the A-chain Deficit Hypothesis.

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