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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

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Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 19(0)

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Publication Date

1997

Peer reviewed

Categorisation Processes in Language Acquisition: How Prototypes Can Predict the Acquisition of the English Passive

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The English passive has been treated under many different approaches with varying perspectives, all of which come up with different results and justify a range of rather specialized theories. If instead the acquisition of the passive is treated within a cognitive framework, in which the passive is viewed as a category which displays typicality effects, these separate psychological and linguistic findings can be integrated and a conceptual basis for the passive and its acquisition can be provided. Use of the prototype approach allows us to predict the order of acquisition of the passive and provides a more coherent image of how children acquire the English passive.

Neither children nor adults use the passive voice very often in their spontaneous utterances (Bloom, 1973; Brown, 1973; Pinker, 1987; Wells, 1979.) Nevertheless, children are able to learn the passive which gives rise to the following questions:

- When do children choose the passive voice?
- Which passives do children acquire first in comprehension and production?
- Which factors determine the children's acquisition of the passive?
- Which is the systematicity underlying a possible hierarchy of acquisition?

In order to address these questions I applied a prototype approach (Rosch 1978, Barsalou 1987) to language acquisition. I investigated the English passive as a category which possesses an internal and graded structure with the canonical action event as its prototype and other kinds of passives as more peripheral members. Because typical members of a category are acquired earlier than nontypical members (Rosch 1973, Anglin 1976), a gradual acquisition of the passive was predicted with children acquiring typical examples of the passive earlier than more peripheral ones.

This prototype approach makes use of semantic and conceptual factors which characterize the passive such as focussing, animacy of agent and patient, reversibility, probability of the action, and prototypical transitivity (Hopper/Thompson 1980, Corrigan 1986, Marchman, Bates, Burkardt and Goodman 1991). Special emphasis was laid on transitivity and on the underlying conceptual structure of transitive verbs (e.g. intentionality, result, duration, degree of activity of the action and direct physical contact during the action).

So far, these factors have mostly been investigated separately. By integrating them in one experimental design, not only can effects of single factors be stated, but also possible interactions between factors.

In order to determine the typical passive, the typicality of agent and patient, and the role of reversibility were explored, and a study was carried out to determine the underlying conceptual structure of verbs used in the main study.

The main study investigated the acquisition of passives by 35 English children of three age groups (2/3/4 years) and included younger children than usually addressed in passive studies. The before-mentioned factors formed the variables in the experimental design. The children were monolingual speakers of English from a middle-class social background.

Comprehension experiments were carried out using the acting-out-method. For production experiments I used a patient-focussing question (*What happened to the X?*) in order to elicit passives.

As predicted, typical passives were comprehended and produced earlier than more peripheral passives. The existence of a hierarchy in the acquisition of the category passive was confirmed and the chosen prototype approach was able to predict the course of acquisition successfully.

The empirical results also corroborated the determining influence of the above-mentioned factors on the acquisition of the passive. Especially the internal structure of the verb played a crucial role in the comprehension and production of the English passive.

The results of the production and comprehension experiments were highly correlated. The children were far more advanced in their comprehension skills than in their productive use of the passive.

Also, children of the three different age groups showed stability over typical and less typical examples in their acquisition of the passive.

In sum, typicality seems to be exploited by children acquiring language and must therefore be taken into account in all theories of language acquisition. General categorisation processes can be demonstrated *via* the occurrence of typicality effects even in a "syntactic" phenomenon such as the passive which suggests that children do apply general cognitive strategies in language acquisition.