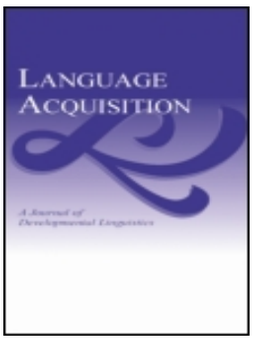

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Capturing the Evasive Passive*

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In the 1980s, researchers in child language devised several new experimental techniques to assess children's emerging linguistic competence. Innovations in methodology were needed to bridge the apparent gap between the expectation of rapid language acquisition, based on linguistic theory, and the protracted acquisition that was being witnessed using the tools and tasks available at the time. This article discusses the use of elicited production in charting the course of development of verbal passives, a linguistic structure that was thought to be late developing (e.g., Borer & Wexler 1987). We compare the findings from an elicited production study with the findings from other tasks. We conclude that verbal passives emerge earlier in children's grammar than had been previously recognized, thereby bringing data from experimental studies of child language more in line with the expectations of linguistic theory.

In response to the many critics of President Reagan's handling of the Iran-Contra affair, he offered the following concession: "Mistakes were made." In the press, the form of Reagan's concession was referred to as the "evasive passive." Linguists, of course, refer to it in less pejorative terms, as the truncated or reduced passive. In several recent experiments, we have investigated the acquisition of this form of the passive, as it relates to the full verbal passive. Our primary interest is in the full verbal passive, since this form is so often evaded in research on language acquisition. There seems to be a general consensus among acquisitionists that preschool children, like President Reagan, have great difficulty using full verbal passives. Given that the theory of generative grammar postulates innate linguistic constraints on grammar formation, children should be expected to produce and comprehend a host of linguistic constructions on the basis of little, if any, environmental evidence. Thus, the acquisition of the passive can be

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regarded as a test case for the theory. We can compare its predictions with the outcome that would be expected according to other approaches, e.g., ones that would characterize the course of language acquisition in learning-theoretic terms. We will present evidence that children, at least, have complete mastery of the passive. The results from the elicitation study therefore provide strong support for the precepts of generative grammar.

Here is how we will proceed. First, we will sketch out the learnability issues surrounding the acquisition of truncated and full passives. In setting out the issues, we closely follow the discussion presented in Borer and Wexler's (1987) article "The Maturation of Syntax," which contains a clear and insightful statement of alternative accounts of the acquisition process in general, and the acquisition of the passive in particular. Then we turn to three experiments we have conducted, which attempt to pin down more precisely the course of acquisition of the full verbal passive. Since our experimental results are not consistent with the current picture of the acquisition of the full verbal passive, we then try to explain the disparity between our data and those of earlier research on which the current picture is based. We present evidence that at least one of these methodologies—the act-out = toy manipulation paradigm—seriously underestimates the linguistic competence of young children. We believe that this is also true of other methods of assessing acquisition that have been used in past research, including children's spontaneous productions and their descriptions of pictures. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings. We argue that our findings support a simple version of the innateness hypothesis which supposes that children have early knowledge of many grammatical facts, which far outstrips what they could be expected to have mastered on the basis of their linguistic experience. More specifically, we argue that our data call into question the common assumption that children proceed through a stage of acquisition at which children's grammars can generate reduced passives (or possibly, only adjectival passives) but not full verbal passives with 'by-phrases.' This assumption of stepwise acquisition is critical for several theoretical proposals about the acquisition of syntax, as we now show.

One of the central goals of language acquisition research is to explain the course of language development. Since language takes several years to grow, we must explain how child language changes over time. Of course, the explanation that is offered must also be responsive to other facts about the acquisition process; in particular, the fact that every child rapidly converges on a grammatical system that is equivalent to everyone else's, despite a considerable latitude in linguistic experience—indeed, without any relevant experience at all in some instances. Innate formal principles of language acquisition are clearly needed to explain these basic facts. But despite the recourse to innate principles within which children construct their grammatical system, some structures appear later in the course of acquisition than others. For instance, much research suggests that truncated passives appear before full verbal passives. Resolution of this dilemma is especially important when the late emerging structures involve putatively universal principles of grammar. In the case of passives, it is generally assumed that the ability to form A-chains is innate. Since rapid and direct acquisition would seem to be anticipated by current linguistic theory, the fact that acquisition takes the form that it does presses for an explanation. And several accounts for the slow acquisition puzzle have been offered.

At first cut, the proposals can be divided into linguistic and nonlinguistic accounts. One linguistic explanation involves intrinsic ordering of linguistic principles, or linguistic modules. Following Borer & Wexler (1987), we will pass over this solution on the grounds that it

lacks empirical support, and because current linguistic theory has abandoned the ordering of principles. Another linguistic solution invokes maturation. This proposal, which is favored by Borer & Wexler (1987), maintains that some aspects of syntactic knowledge, while innate, are yet undeveloped at birth, and may take some years to mature. Specifically, they propose that the principle of A-chain formation that underlies verbal passives undergoes maturational change. They maintain that before a critical level of maturation is reached, children will be unable to produce verbal passives. At earlier stages their productions should be limited to adjectival passives. While we do not question the logic behind the maturation hypothesis, we have found empirical grounds to question it, which we will present shortly.

But first we should consider the nonlinguistic accounts of the order of acquisition of syntax. These explanations suppose that children come equipped at birth with all of the principles of universal grammar (UG), but that the appearance of certain linguistic principles is delayed by extraneous factors. One nonlinguistic factor that could delay acquisition is the availability of the data that are needed to advance beyond the current stage of acquisition. Both the empirical facts and the logic of the situation weigh against this, however. We can question this proposal from a logical point of view since, if the data were not readily available, then they would not suffice to ensure that every child will eventually converge on the adult system (Lasnik & Crain 1985).

Finally, there is a nonlinguistic counterpart to the maturation hypothesis advanced by Borer & Wexler (1987). It could be proposed, for instance, that all of the principles and parameters of UG are innate, and even present at birth, but held in check until some nonlinguistic cognitive system matures. One candidate for such a nonlinguistic mechanism is the verbal working memory system, which is known to increase in efficiency during the course of language acquisition. The difficulty with this proposal is that it isn't obvious to see how the maturation of a general purpose device such as working memory can explain the specific details of language development.

All of the proposals we have just sketched presuppose that child language acquisition proceeds in a stepwise fashion, beginning at the earliest stages with the mastery of a set of constructions and gradually extending this set to include ones that were unavailable, for one reason or another, at earlier stages. We have found reasons in our previous research to question this assumption in several cases. We will give evidence in this paper that the passive construction is not acquired piecemeal.

While we concede the point made by Borer & Wexler (1987) about nonlinguistic maturation, we believe it is important to take seriously the role of nonsyntactic performance factors. We have demonstrated previously (e.g., Hamburger & Crain 1982, 1984) and will demonstrate again here that these cognitive processes play a substantial role in determining the outcome of assessments of children's linguistic competence. For instance, we have shown that, in act-out tasks, it is crucial to pay attention to the satisfaction of presuppositions and to the formation of an action plan in response to the linguistic construction under investigation. Both of these cognitive processes are involved in an act-out task, in addition to the assignment of syntactic structure. This means that these cognitive processes may be the source of children's comprehension failures in certain circumstances.

For several syntactic constructions, we have obtained evidence that the difficulties children encounter are attributable to nonsyntactic factors. The evidence is this: when care is taken to make sure that these factors do not present a source of difficulty for children, their failure rates

drop dramatically. These findings are not anticipated and cannot be explained on accounts that attribute children's comprehension failures to a lack of grammatical competence. Instead, what appeared to be a lack of grammatical competence was shown to receive a better accounting in terms of the nonsyntactic demands that these structures impose in certain tasks.

Data obtained from children's spontaneous productions is open to similar criticisms. For example, the main source of data that are invoked in support of the claim that young children master adjectival passives before verbal passives is the absence of full passives (with 'by-phrases') in their spontaneous speech and in their descriptions of pictures (Horgan 1978). But this is clearly not incontrovertible evidence that children's grammars are incapable of generating full passives. Full passives are rare in adult speech too, but their paucity in this case is not interpreted as revealing a lack of grammatical knowledge. Instead, it is attributed to 'performance factors' weighing in favor of the reduced form or an alternative construction that is permissible in the same discourse settings. In short, the absence of full verbal passives in adult speech is probably a consequence of the fact that situations in which the full passive is uniquely felicitous are quite rare. But the same logic that explains why adults produce so few full passives would seem to apply to children. Perhaps they too have mastered the linguistic prerequisites for using this construction, but will fail to evince mastery except in circumstances that uniquely demand the full verbal passive.

To test for this possibility, we designed a simple experiment to elicit full verbal passives from preschool children. Thirty-five children participated in the experiment, which involved them in a game in which one experimenter asked them to pose questions to another experimenter. The child was asked to help teach one of the experimenters English, and to test her understanding of various "stories" which were acted-out with toys. The methodological innovation in this study was to control the pragmatic context in such a way that a question with a full passive would constitute a felicitous response. Here are examples of two protocols illustrating the basic elicitation technique.

(1) Exp: *OK, there is this big heavy bus, and it's coming along and it crashes into one of the cars. You ask Keiko which car.*
Child: *Which car gets crashen by the big bus*?

(2) Exp: *In this story, there are two soldiers and an alligator. And the soldiers are standing in the water and they can't see the alligator. And the alligator goes up and bites one of the soldiers. You ask Keiko which one.*
Child: *Which one is getting bited by the alligator?*

Often, these simple contexts sufficed, but when they didn't evoke the right response, we introduced a more complex context in which the 'by-phrase' was needed. The following protocol illustrates the more complex elicitation technique.

(3) Exp: *See, the Incredible Hulk is hitting one of the soldiers. Look over here. Darth Vader goes over and hits a soldier. So Darth Vader is also hitting one of the soldiers. You ask Keiko which one.*
Child: *Which soldier is getting hit by Darth Vader?*

Using these techniques, we were able to elicit full verbal passives from nearly every child we tested, including ones as young as 3;4. Appendix 1 contains sample data from 32 children.

Twenty-nine of these children produced at least one full verbal passive, and 24 of them produced three or more full passives. It is worth noting also the high frequency of the auxiliary verb "got" in the data, the occasional appearance of prepositions other than "by," and a number of passive participles formed with "-en" such as 'riden,' 'crashen.' But the main point is that we were successful in eliciting full passives in exactly the right circumstances, i.e., ones that are pragmatically appropriate for the passive construction. It is evident, then, that elicited production studies yield critical information about children's pairings of sentences and meanings. In this study, we tried to create situations in which the meaning corresponding to the full verbal passive was uniquely felicitous in the circumstances. The fact that children produced the appropriate sentences in these circumstances constitutes compelling evidence of their grammatical competence with this syntactic construction. Children's consistently adult-like combinations of words is unlikely to have come about by accident, since there are so many ways to combine words incorrectly.

We also tested the same children who participated in the elicited production task using two standard comprehension measures, an act-out task and a picture verification task. We gave half of the children the elicited production task first, and then the two comprehension tasks. The other half received them in the opposite order, so they were given the comprehension tasks first. The results of the picture-verification are consistent with the findings from the elicited production technique. However, the act-out task resulted in much poorer performance from the child subjects, as compared to the picture verification task and the elicited production task. The comparison of overall performance on the act-out task and the picture verification task is provided in Table 1. This table shows that the act-out task, like the data from children's spontaneous production, severely underestimates children's knowledge of the passive. More detailed findings from both tasks are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

We also conducted a study using a truth-value judgment task to test children's knowledge of the passive. Ten child subjects were tested using this technique, with an average age of 4;7. The experimental materials included reversible passives, as in (4) and (5).

(4) Passive sentences ("Yes" Trials)
   a. The Incredible Hulk was kicked by the guard.
   b. The zebra was kissed by the giraffe.
   c. The car was pushed by the bus.

(5) Passive sentences ("No" Trials)
   a. The guard was kicked by the Incredible Hulk.
   b. The giraffe was kissed by the zebra.
   c. The bus was pushed by the car.

TABLE 1
Frequency (and Percentage) of Correct Responses in Act-Out and Picture Verification Tasks
(N = 35, Mean Age = 4;4)

Act-Out Task	*Picture Verification*
197/280 (70.3%)	159/175 (90.9%)

TABLE 2
Act-Out Task ($N = 35$, Mean = 4;4)

Number of Trials Correct	*No. of Children, % of Children*
8	9 (25.7%)
7	3 (8.6%)
6	8 (22.9%)
5	4 (11.4%)
4	6 (17.1%)
3	3 (8.6%)
2	1 (2.9%)
1	1 (2.9%)
0	0 (0%)

The sentences in (4) were presented following situations that conformed to their meanings, but the sentences in (5) were incorrect descriptions of the situations acted out by the experimenter. That is, Kermit said the wrong thing. Children gave correct "yes" responses to the sentences in (4) 93% of the time, and they correctly rejected the sentences in (5) 77% of the time. Only one child was systematically overaccepting; the other nine children correctly rejected at least 2 of the 3 false test sentences in (5). Using the elicited production data as a benchmark for comparison, the data from the three comprehension measures suggest that picture verification and truth-value judgment tasks are reasonably sensitive measures of children's linguistic competence, whereas data from the act-out task, and the data from children's spontaneous production, seriously underestimate children's linguistic competence.

It is time to take stock. We have considered a number of proposals that attempt to explain why language acquisition appears to take so long and why children appear to acquire certain constructions piecemeal. The results of our elicitation study show that the appearances are misleading, at least in the case of the passive. This invites the inference that, like President Reagan, children evade the full passive unless they are pressed hard enough. In our experiment, we pressed children by presenting them with circumstances which required them to indicate the agent of the action. If we can generalize from these data, this raises the possibility that young children may have a lot more syntactic knowledge under their belts than they exhibit in spontaneous production or in their performance on certain comprehension measures, e.g., the act-out task. We'll discuss this point in more detail later.

TABLE 3
Picture Verification Task ($N = 35$, Mean =4;4)

Number of Trials Correct	*No. of Children, % of Children*
5	25 (71.4%)
4	4 (11.4%)
3	6 (17.1%)
2	0 (0%)
1	0 (0%)
0	0 (0%)

First, let us return to the acquisition puzzle we began with: why acquisition appears to take so long and to take so many wrong turns. We saw that a promising solution that was adopted in the case of passives invoked linguistic maturation. One of the virtues of this hypothesis is that it allows us to continue to adhere to the innateness hypothesis. As Borer & Wexler (1987) correctly point out, gradual acquisition and even wrong turns that do not appear to respect universal principles, do not constitute disconfirmation of the innateness hypothesis. A linguistic principle might be innately encoded in the human brain and yet inaccessible to a child in the early stages of language acquisition. Like aspects of physical developments of the body (e.g., the secondary sex characteristics), linguistic principles may lie dormant for many years, biologically timed to become effective at a certain maturational stage.

We suspect that it will eventually turn out that the innateness hypothesis must be augmented by maturation in certain cases. But, insofar as this introduces additional degrees of freedom, the empirical claims of the innateness hypothesis are somewhat weakened. Unless some motivated predictions can be made about exactly when latent knowledge will become effective, these approaches are compatible with a much wider range of data than the simplest and strongest version of the innateness hypothesis—viz. that children abide by universal principles at all stages of language development. The strong innateness position is surely the one to adopt in the absence of counterevidence.

The results of the present study undercut the evidence that has been offered in favor of the view that there is a stage at which children can generate adjectival passives but not verbal passives. We have not proven that there is not such a stage, but we have shown that this stage is not characteristic of 3- and 4-year-old children. This obviates the need to invoke maturation, allowing us to retain the strong innateness hypothesis. Moreover, if these findings on the passive are representative of the extent of young children's grammatical knowledge, then an appeal to maturation might be dispensed with in other places as well.

Of course, we are still a long way from giving a complete solution to the acquisition puzzle, but the form of the solution we propose should be clear. As far as children's comprehension is concerned, we have seen that interpreting children's linguistic development is complicated by the existence of a variety of potentially confounding factors. In addition to the assignment of syntactic structure, normal sentence comprehension involves lexical, semantic, pragmatic, planning, and inferential abilities. The failure of any one of these may be responsible for children's poor comprehension. Until we have an empirical means to distinguish these various factors, however, we must be cautious in drawing the inference from children's imperfect performance that they are ignorant of the grammar of their target language.

We have also seen that other cognitive processes which are intertwined with syntax in production can explain why production data may make it look as if children go through stages in the acquisition of syntax, when in fact they don't. We have examined one case in point, showing that young children evince mastery of the full passive in experimental situations which are uniquely felicitous for this construction. This technique has been applied in other cases, with equal success. Henry Hamburger and Stephen Crain began by eliciting relative clauses (Hamburger & Crain 1984), and Crain (1982) did an elicited production study of temporal adverbials. Crain & Nakayama (1987) also used this approach to test Chomsky's claim that children would invariably adhere to structure-dependent principles when they began producing

yes/no questions that contained relative clauses. Currently, Jaya Sarma and Rozz Thornton are extending the technique of elicited production to even more complex constructions. Jaya Sarma is using it to investigate children's acquisition of *wh*-questions in main and subordinate clauses, to look at the interplay of *wh*-movement and subject-Aux inversion (SAI) in clauses of both types. And Rozz Thornton is using it to look at children's adherence to the empty category principle (ECP), and whether children, like adults, do not contract across a trace left by *wh*-movement. The goal of these studies is to provide a better chart of the course children take in the acquisition of syntax. We believe that, in doing so, we will provide further evidence in support of the strong innateness hypothesis.

It is important to interject a caveat, however. It may not be possible to push the innateness hypothesis too far, for reasons extraneous to syntax—having to do with nonlinguistic maturation. For example, the development of an efficient, verbal-working memory system may establish a ceiling on children's performance at early stages of acquisition. It may not be possible to reduce memory load below this ceiling, so that before the nonlinguistic system has matured to a certain point it may prove impossible to ascertain children's linguistic competence with whole classes of sentences—those that impose demands which exceed the capacity of the working memory system. So far, we have not found this to be the case.

It might be useful to conclude by comparing the position we advocate with that taken by Yukio Otsu in his investigations of subjacency (Otsu 1981). What Otsu argued was that the children in his studies who gave the appearance of violating innate constraints were children who had not mastered the syntactic structures to which the constraints apply; but that as soon as a child's linguistic analysis reached the level of sophistication at which a universal constraint becomes relevant, then the constraint was respected. The difference between our approach and his is that we believe that a good case can be made, as we saw, for laying the blame for slow acquisition on the fact that there are cognitive processes of major proportions, extraneous to syntax, that must be mastered as well. By exonerating syntax, we invigorate the precepts of current linguistic theory, which anticipates rapid and direct acquisition of syntactic principles on the basis of little, if any, environmental evidence.

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APPENDIX 1: PASSIVE ELICITATION TASK DATA

A sample of the full verbal passives produced by each child are listed. Some children produced many more than three. In those few cases where the child did not produce as many as three full passives, we have listed a sample of the truncated passives, or 'passive-like' structures, elicited.

Phoebe 3;4
1. She got knocked down by the Smurfie.
2. He was eaten by that ice cream.
3. They got eaten by this watermelon.

Rakiya 3;6
1. He's going to be dead.
2. They're getting married.

Todd 3;8
1. Which girl is pushing, getting pushed by a car?
2. Which one of those army guys is getting eat?
3. He got hurt by that guy.

Jessica 3;9
1. One dinosaur's being eated from the ice cream cone.
2. Which one is not being hit by the monster?
3. He's being flied over from that.

Kyle 3;9
1. Which car got pushed by a bus?
2. What spaceman got licked by the Smurf?
3. The car got flied over by that helicopter right there.

Michael 3;11
1. I said this guy got down by this guy.
2. Patrick got scratched by the trees two times and I got scratched one time.
3. It got pushed over by the bus, and the bus is bringing him to the "hostibul."

Joey 3;11
1. Point to the car that's being crashed by the helicopter.

Sam 3;11
1. The girl's getting punched up by this guy.
2. He got picked up from her.
3. She got hitted by a car.

Jason 3;11
1. And this car comes along and got tripped up to the bus.
2. He got bleeded. (referring to pig)
3. It got turned over. (referring to car)

Peter 4;1
1. He's getting shoot by a car.
2. It's getting ate up from Luke Skywalker.
3. It might get shoot by him.

Lucas 4;1
1. Which one is getting killed by that guy that belongs in Star Wars?
2. Which guy, spaceman got flying around by the airplane?
3. (Which elephant) is getting "rid" by that girl?

Zachary 4;2
1. Which one got picked up by a monster guy?
2. Which one got crashed in by a Smurf?
3. Which one got shot by the army man?

Tracy 4;4
1. Which car's getting crashed by another one?
2. What one's getting pushed by the bus?
3. Which one's getting kissed by the Smurf?

David 4;5
1. He's getting pushed by the plane.
2. He's getting knocked by a gorilla.
3. She's getting kissed by the baby.

Scott 4;5
1. Which Gummi Bear was crashed by the car?
2. Which Gummi Bear was bite by the alligator?
3. Which kangaroo was shoot by the army man?

Lindsay 4;5
1. Which one was getting pushed by the car?
2. Which one is being kissed by Flash Gordon?
3. He's being knocked by him.

Kyle (M) 4;5
1. The hamburger gets eaten by Strawberry Shortcake.
2. The car is crashed in by the ice cream.
3. She gets crashed by the strawberry ice cream.

Adam 4;5
1. Which giraffe is getting flied over?
2. He's getting shooted on.
3. He's getting "biten."
   (Adam produced by-phrase if asked "by what?")

Danny 4;6
l. Which one is getting pushed by the bus?
2. Which soldier's getting bited by the brontosaurus?
3. Which one's getting kissed by the monster?

Nina 4;6
1. Which dinosaur's getting hit by the car?
2. Which spaceman's getting hit by the bus?
3. Which Gummi Bear's getting picked up by the Smurf?
   (Experimenter modeled sentences before Nina produced passive structure)

Matthew 4;6
1. Which one is getting shooted from this guy?
2. Which car is getting hit?
3. He got shotted and he got killed.

Tyler 4;7
1. Which brontosaurus got flew over by the airplane?
2. Which elephant got "riden" by the Smurf?
3. The Incredible Hulk got picked up by the guard.

Katie 4;7
1. Which car's getting pushed around by the bus?
2. Which guy's getting punched by the Smurf?
3. He just got jumped over by a kangaroo.

Alexandria, 4;7
1. Which girl is getting pushed by the car?
2. Which spaceman gets flew around with the airplane?
3. Which dinosaur gets bit by her?

Brendon 4;8
1. Which giraffe got bite by the tiger?
2. Which spaceman got picked up by that guy?
3. Which girl got pushed by the car?

Jimmy 4;9
1. The ice creams will be crashed.
2. It got crashed.

Chrissie 4;8
1. Do you know which spaceman is getting punched by the Incredible Hulk?
2. Point to the elephant who's getting licked by the Cabbage Patch.
3. Point to the spaceman who's getting standed on by the Smurf.

Megan G. 4;8
1. Which one's getting bite by the lion?
2. Which spaceman's getting kissed by the Smurf?
3. Which elephant's getting flied over by the plane?

Leyna 4;9
1. Which giraffe is getting flying over by the plane?
2. Which girl gets "huggen" by this gorilla?
3. Which car gets "crashen" by this big bus?

Danielle 4;11
1. Which girl is getting punched?
   (Danielle produced above only after experimenter modeled the test sentence)

Ananda 4;11
1. Which piece of fruit got eaten by the dinosaur?
2. Which ice cream got bitten by the monster?
3. Which princess got kicked by the mirror?

Kristen 5;0
1. He's being shoot by the spaceman or whatever it is.
2. It's being bite by the puppy.
3. Which spaceman's being licked by ____?
   (Kristen frequently left off the "by-NP" as in 3 above)