THE ACQUISITION OF PASSIVE IN L2 ITALIAN:
EVIDENCE FROM COMPREHENSION AND PRODUCTION

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Introduction

The passive morphology implies a redistribution of the arguments of the transitive verb, which are associated with different grammatical functions. Contrary to active sentences (1), in passive ones the patient turns out to be the subject of the clause, wherein the agent can be optionally expressed with a by-phrase (2).

(1) The dog bites the nurse
(2) The nurse is bitten by the dog

Italian periphrastic passive can be both expressed with the auxiliary essere (to be) and with the auxiliary venire (to come):

(3a) Il enfermier vi wound [d谈话者]
(3b) Il enfermier wounds [d谈话者]

Production study

As for Italian, an adult-like comprehension of actional passive is reached around age 4-5; however, at that age, children have not yet mastered the non-actional passive (Manetti 2012, Volpato et al. 2011).

A production study (Manetti 2012) revealed that children around age 3-4 tend to avoid the passive, relying instead on clitic left dislocations. However, under certain experimental conditions as syntactic priming, children aged 3-4 can correctly produce passive structures (Manetti 2012, Manetti & Bellotti 2014; see also Volpato et al. 2012 for similar results using a picture selection task).

Objectives

The aim of the present study is to investigate the acquisition of the Italian passive in the adult L2 population through a comprehension and an elicited production task adopted from previous studies. Results were analyzed in the light of the evidence from L1 acquisition studies above quoted.

Methods

Participants

47 students of Italian of a US college aged 18-22; 20 Italian native speakers aged 18-23 from different social backgrounds.

The L2 group presented different L1s and levels of proficiency:

- Elementary (19) • L1 English (34)
- Intermediate (14) • L1 Spanish (6)
- Advanced (14) • L1 Other (17)

Materials

Comprehension has been tested through a Picture Matching Task (adapted from Manetti 2012) consisting of 24 items, active and passive sentences. Across the experiment, the passive auxiliary was manipulated (venire to come vs essere to be).

Elicited production was conducted using a Picture Description Task (adapted from Manetti 2012) consisting of 24 pictures by asking L2 learners to describe the transitive actions under three types of questions:

Results

Comprehension study

Table 1: % of correct responses for the L2 learners and Italian native speakers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>L2 Learners</th>
<th>Italian Native Speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Passive</td>
<td>90.4%</td>
<td>99.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td>99.5%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Production study

Table 2: % of L2 learners’ productions after each question type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>L2 Learners</th>
<th>Italian Native Speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SVO</td>
<td>85.1%</td>
<td>91.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ProVO</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
<td>8.87%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results in detail

Table 4: types of structures produced after the patient oriented question according to levels of proficiency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient-Oriented</th>
<th>(S)/O-Active</th>
<th>Passive</th>
<th>Dislocation/ Pronoun</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- 15/23 have been produced by L1 Spanish speakers (3/19)
- 8/23 have been produced by L1 English speakers (14/19)

(S)/O-Active after the agent-oriented question: Overt vs. Null subject

Table 5: % of SVO vs. ProVO responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>L2 Learners</th>
<th>Italian Native Speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SVO</td>
<td>71.7%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ProVO</td>
<td>28.3%</td>
<td>93.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion and final remarks

L2 learners do not have difficulty in comprehending actional passive (in line with results from children Manetti 2012 and Volpato et al. 2013). L2 learners struggled in producing passives relying on (S)/O-actives and other responses. They also relied on object clitic constructions contrary to the control group who preferred to produce passives (Table 2 and 3) (in line with results from children Manetti 2012). However, the production of passives increased with L2 proficiency.

Object clitic constructions have mostly been produced by L1 Spanish and English speaking participants of the elementary group (Table 4). Productions of this type were totally predictable by Spanish speakers in contrast with English speaking learners of the less advanced level.

In a pro-drop language like Italian, an expected answer to an agent-oriented question would be a ProVO structure; however, L2 learners tended to produce SVO actives with lexical subjects in contrast with Italian native speakers (Table 5). Regardless of the null subject nature of their L1, instead, Spanish speakers omitted the subject only in 37% of the cases.

Some questions raised by the results:

1. L2 learners fully master the comprehension of actional passive; further studies are needed to determine whether they have difficulties in comprehending non-actional passive as children do;
2. Object clitic constructions seem to be resorted to more than passive by L2 learners with an elementary level of Italian. This result led to suggest that in terms of morphosyntax, Cliticization (from Kayne’s 1975 analysis on) may involve a different kind of complexity compared to passive (following Collins’ 2005 analysis);
3. Although both Italian and Spanish are pro-drop languages, null subject appears to be used differently.

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References
