

Academy of Aphasia 2010

Agentive versus Non-agentive Passives in Catalan Agrammatism

Anna Gavarró^{a,*}, Josep Romeu^b

^a *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona*

^b *Universitat de Lleida*

Introduction

The Trace Deletion Hypothesis of Grodzinsky (1990, 2000 and subsequent work) predicts that derived subjects present difficulties in interpretation for Broca's aphasics. This prediction is borne out for passives in a number of languages, amongst which Spanish (Beretta et al. 1996). But the TDH in itself is not sufficient to account quantitatively for the pattern of performance of agrammatic speakers (chance performance on the interpretation of actional passives); to account for it, Grodzinsky posits a Default Strategy. We investigate the predictions of the combined effect of the TDH and the Default Strategy for passives in Catalan, in a domain to our knowledge not previously investigated: that of agentive vs. non-agentive passives.

Method

We tested four agrammatic speakers (all male, age range 34–70, mean age: 50, varied etiology, diagnosed as mild to moderate Broca's aphasics) in the comprehension of actional passives with and without an agentive *per* 'by' phrase (1), together with active control sentences.

(1) El nen és pentinat (pel pare).

The boy is combed (by the father)

Each subject was tested with 90 items, 30 per sentence type, by means of a truth conditional task with picture support. Passives with an agentive complement are expected to be interpreted at chance level, assuming the deletion of traces left by the displacement of the object to subject position, and the consequent interpretation based on the Default Strategy, as in (2).

(2) a. [El nen] és pentinat ~~[H]~~ [pel pare] TDH

b. [El nen] és pentinat [pel pare]

AGENT AGENT default thematic assignment

Non-agentive passives are also subject to trace deletion, but by the Default Strategy should be interpreted below chance, as in (3). Surprisingly this kind of structure has not been previously investigated.

(3) a. [El nen] és pentinat ~~[H]~~ TDH

b. [El nen] és pentinat default thematic assignment

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: anna.gavarro@uab.cat.

AGENT

Results

The results appear in Table 1. Active canonical sentences were interpreted well above chance by all agrammatic speakers. However, when we turn to passives, the predictions of the model are not fulfilled: agrammatic patients fail with passives as expected from Trace Deletion (the difference between actives and passives is statistically significant, Chi-Square value = 23.2, $p < .0001$), but the contrast predicted by the Default Strategy between the two types of passives is not found. Patients fail equally in agentive and non-agentive passives (there is no statistically significant difference between the two passive sentence types).

	active	agentive passive	non-agentive passive
incorrect	25	53	59
	20.8%	44.2%	49.2%
correct	95	67	61
	79.2%	55.8%	50.8%

Table 1: Interpretation of active, agentive passives and non-agentive passives

This result is consistent with the TDH, but casts doubt on the Default Strategy. Furthermore, this is not an isolated case, but rather one of a family of cases in the crosslinguistic literature for which the Default Strategy makes erroneous predictions.

References

- Beretta, A., C. Hartford, J. Patterson, M. Piñango (1996) 'The derivation of postverbal subject: evidence from agrammatic aphasia'. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory*, 14, 725–748.
- Grodzinsky, Y. (1990) *Theoretical Perspectives on Language Deficits*. MIT Press, Cambridge.
- Grodzinsky, Y. (2000) 'The neurology of syntax. Language use without Broca's area'. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 23, 1–71.