

**THE ACQUISITION OF THE PASSIVE BY SESTWANA-SPEAKING
PRESCHOOLERS**

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Abstract

This in-depth study investigates the acquisition of the passive construction by Setswana-speaking pre-schoolers. My original contribution to knowledge is that Setswana-speaking preschoolers acquire the passive early on some tasks but not others. This shows that acquisition is a multifaceted task that needs to be fine-tuned. These are important facts that need to be considered by Speech-Language Therapists in order to accurately identify language-impaired children.

Setswana is the fourth most commonly spoken language in South Africa. However, only four linguistic studies have been conducted on Setswana since 2000 and none of these investigated acquisition of Setswana processes in children.

Setswana is a language that belongs to the South-eastern Bantu Zone of languages. Languages in this group are structurally closely related to one another and mutually intelligible. Studies of the acquisition of the passive in Sesotho and Zulu have shown that the passive develops much earlier (3 years) than in Indo-European languages (5 years).

More tools are needed to explore language acquisition and language impairment in South Africa. It is essential that these tools focus on issues of poverty and diversity. The research methods used should be suitable for the communities being explored and should inform the delivery of appropriate services. Endeavors should be made to provide information that improves scientific research in terms of language acquisition and access to speech-language therapy services.

The passive voice is considered to be one of the most well researched yet controversial linguistic structures. In Setswana the construction of the passive occurs when the subject of the active clause is expressed in the passive in the form of an agentive adverb with the prefixal formative *ké-* which forms an optional by-phrase. The verb is marked as passive using a passive extension by suffixing *-w* or *-iw*. How this is acquired is the focus of this study.

A total of 114 children divided into 3 age groups 2.6 – 3.5 years, 3.6 – 4.5 years and 4.6 – 5.5 years were the participants in this study. Their performance was compared to that of a group of 11 adult verifiers.

The aim of this study was to investigate Setswana-speaking children's comprehension and production of the passive in terms of age, passive categories and length variables. Tasks used to examine these variables were Comprehension 2 and 3 Character tasks and Elicited Production and Imitation tasks. The participants were divided into two different participant groups. There were 52 participants on the Elicited Imitation tasks and 62 on the Comprehension and Elicited Production tasks.

Participants were tested at 3 crèches in the peri-urban area of Pankop, Mpumalanga Province, South Africa.

On the Comprehension 2 character tasks significant differences between age groups (age group 1, 34% and 3, 49%) were noted. However, no significant developmental trends were found on Comprehension 3 character or Elicited Production tasks amongst the children.

On Elicited Imitation tasks there was a significant difference between the youngest group (69%) compared to the middle (83%) and oldest age group (81%).

The results showed much variability among tasks. The results for Comprehension 2 and 3 Character tasks were at above chance level. The Elicited Production task was unsuccessful as children found great difficulty with this task with 2.6 to 3.6 year old children scoring 7% and the oldest group 14%. However, the Elicited Imitation task was extremely successful and confirmed the diagnostic value of such a measure.

The type of passive did influence performance but this was task dependent. The participants' knowledge of the passive categories, for Comprehension 2 character and Elicited Imitation tasks followed the same order, with best performance on inanimate categories followed by negatives, reversible and then non-actional passives. On Elicited Production tasks children also scored the best on inanimate tasks. A weakness of this study is that Elicited Imitation tasks were not administered at the same time as the other tasks and therefore a different group of participants was used even though subject selection criteria was the same.

The impact of sentence length on performance also showed much variability. For the non-actional negative category on Set A Comprehension 2 Character tasks participants' scored significantly better for short sentences than long sentences and vice versa for Comprehension 3 Character tasks. On Elicited Production tasks children scored better on long passive sentences. On Elicited Imitation tasks short sentences were easier than long passives.

The results of this study confirms the important effect of task-type in assessing passive comprehension and production. Also, the results of this study suggest that the passive is not an early acquired structure in Setswana with the exception of the Elicited Imitation task. The results therefore support the A-chain Deficit Hypothesis, i.e., that the passive is a late acquired structure with difficulties with non-actional categories except when an Elicited Imitation task was used. Explanations may link to the complex sociolinguistic context of developing children in South Africa.

This study confirms the important effect of task when testing child language, and the potential value of Elicited Imitation as a viable and relevant measure of assessing language in the South African context.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own, unaided, independent work. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at this or any other academic institution, or has it been published in any other form.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my beloved daughter Maya Thandi Bortz

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I thank my daughter Maya Thandi Bortz whose enthusiasm in life gave me the inspiration to complete this dissertation. I am also greatly appreciative to her for having the patience to put up with time I could not spend with her.

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Terminology used in this study

Terminology used in this study	Alternative Forms used in the literature
Children/participants	Subjects/respondents
Creche ¹ /ECD	Pre-school/nursery schools
Inanimate	Non reversible, irreversible
Long passive	Full passive, by phrase,
Negative affect	Malefactive. Adversive
Non-actional	Psychological, mental
Picture selection	Picture identification
Short passive	Truncated

¹ This is the term used in Pankop

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