A corpus study of the acquisition of French “se faire” passives

Adèle Hénot-Mortier (MIT)

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University of Nova Gorica (Slovenia)

Background

Reflexivized causatives

- In French, reflexivized causative structures such as (1) & (2) can be assigned a **passive-like meaning**.
- These constructions we dub **se faire passives** (**SFP**) involve:
  - at the matrix level: a **causative verb** (*faire*) combining with a **reflexive pronoun**;
  - at the embedded level: an **infinitival clause** combining with an **optional by-phrase**.[1]

(1) Jean **s'est** **fait** mordre (par le chien).
Jean REFL-is made bite.INF (by the dog).
'Jean got bitten (by the dog).'

(2) Jean **s'est** **fait** soigner (par un médecin).
Jean REFL-is made treat.INF (by a doctor).
'Jean got treated (by a doctor).'

[1] The same kind of *by*-phrase is found in both passive structures and causative structures in French. We'll come back to this.

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Comparison with get-passives

- Cross-linguistically, SFPs have been compared to *get*-passives such as (3) (Gaatone, 1998; Reed, 2011), given that *get* can also express causation, as in (4).

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(3) Jean got bitten by the dog.

(4) Jean got the dog to bit the bone.

Various approaches to SFPs

- It remains controversial whether SFPs are:
  - (i) *faire-par*-causatives (Kayne, 1975) whose passive meaning is derived *via* pragmatics, especially when the meaning of the main verb is adversative (Derivational analysis, Gaatone, 1983);
  - (ii) constitute an alternative realization of a generalized causative meaning (Underspecification analysis, Kokutani, 2005);
  - (iii) are synchronically independent from causatives and closer to standard passives in terms of their argument structure (Homonymy analysis, Kupferman, 1995).
- Let's quickly go over those analyses.

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The Derivational Analysis (Gaatone, 1983)

- The idea is that (1) is analog to the *faire-par* causative (5) except *the bone* gets replaced by a reflexive referring to *Jean*.
- Therefore (1) literally means that Jean caused the dog to bit Jean.
- Due to the weirdness of this meaning, it is assumed that *Jean*'s role as a CAUSER gets pragmatically mitigated.
- This predicts that passive-like meanings are more likely to surface with adversative embedded predicates; and also that SFPs should pattern like causatives in most respects.

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(5) Jean a **fait** **mordre** l'os par le chien.
Jean has made bite.INF the-bone by the dog.
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The Underspecification analysis (Kokutani, 2005)

- The idea is that reflexivized causative predicates have an underspecified meaning, which can surface as (among others):

(6) "Dynamic" :
Fais-toi vite vomir c'est du poison!
Make-REFL quickly throw-up.INF it-is some poison!

(7) "Benefactive" :
Je me ferai représenter à la réunion par mon secrétaire.
I REFL make.FUT represent.INF at the meeting by my secretary.

(1) "Causative-unpleasant" :
Jean **s'est** **fait** mordre par le chien.
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(8) "Spontaneous" :
Une nouvelle voix se fait entendre dans la politique.
A new voice REFL makes hear.INF in the politics.

- All those readings express some flavor of causation or (in)voluntary triggering of an event by the matrix subject, and as such should relate to the more "basic" causative construction.

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The Homonymy Analysis (Kupferman, 1995)

- The idea is that SFPs just superficially look like causatives, but behave like passives such as (9)...
  - They select perfective, agentive predicates with an internal argument, and assign them an imperfective interpretation;
  - They have an impoverished argument structure (no external argument); their matrix subject is the internal argument of the embedded predicate.

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Research question

- SFPs have been investigated on adult speech corpora (Raineri, 2012), showing mixed-evidence in favor of a unified account following the Derivational or the Underspecification hypothesis.
- Yet, **the acquisitional timeline of those constructions remains understudied**.
- **How do SFPs compare to standard causatives and passives regarding how early they occur in child language corpora?**

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Hypotheses

- If the Derivational analysis is accurate, we expect **SFPs to appear after "pure" (non reflexivized) causatives**, due to them requiring additional pragmatic reasoning.
- if the Underspecification analysis is accurate, we expect **SFPs to occur around the same time as pure causatives**, due to the two structures stemming from the same underspecified semantics.
- if the Homonymy analysis holds, **SFPs should pattern more like passives than causatives**.

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Methodology

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- We gathered causatives, passives, and SFPs from 14 French CHILDES corpora (MacWhinney, 2000).

Corpus	Number of lines collected	Age range	Reference
Champaud	3781	1;9 – 2;5	Champaud, 1994
Geneva	6482	1;8 – 2;6	Hamann et al., 2003
GoadRose	7079	1;0 – 4;0	Rose, 2000
Hammelrath	15202	3;6 – 5;6	Hammelrath, 2006
Hunkeler	2416	1;6 – 2;6	Hunkeler, 2005
Leveillé	15071	2;1 – 3;3	Suppes et al., 1973
Lyon	99756	1;0 – 3;0	Demuth and Tremblay, 2008
MTLN	32478	2;0 – 4;0	Le Normand, 1986
Palasis	8687	2;5 – 4;0	Palasis, 2009
Paris	100050	0;7 – 6;03	Morgenstern and Parisse, 2007
Pauline	5437	1;2 – 2;6	Bassano, 2000
VionColas	12430	7, 9, 11	Colas and Vion, 1998
Yamaguchi	13059	1;11 – 4;03	Yamaguchi, 2012
York	30868	1;9 – 4;3	Plunkett, 2002
Total	352796		

Age distribution of the child utterances

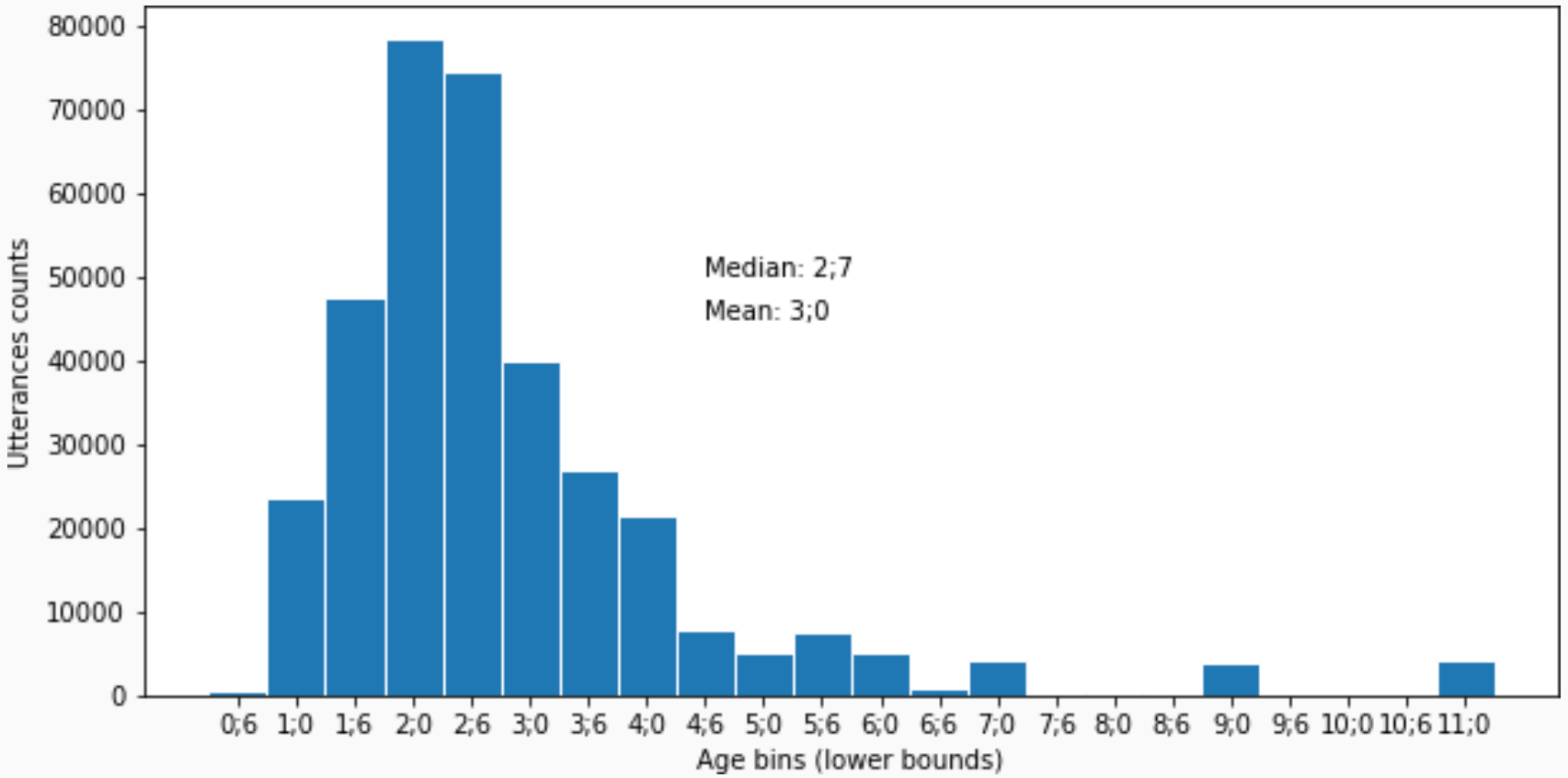

Figure 1: Distribution of the ages associated to the utterances across corpora (6-month binning).

Collecting SFPs

- For SFPs, we automatically retained **utterances containing faire** (cf. Table 1) and a **reflexive cluster** (cf. Table 2).[2]
- This generated 335 utterances we manually filtered to retain 55 SFPs.

Infinitive	faire
Participle	fait, faite, faites, faits, faisant
Present	fais, fait, faisons, faîtes, faites, *faisez, font, *faisont
Future	ferai, feras, fera, ferons, ferez, feront
Past	faisais, faisait, faisions, faisiez, faisaient
Subjunctive	fasse, fasses, fassions, fassiez, fassent
Conditionnel	ferais, ferait, ferions, feriez, feraient

Table 1: Causative forms used for the search (* indicates common mistakes)

1.SG	2.SG	3	1.PL	2.PL
je me/m’	tu te/t’	se/s’	nous nous	vous vous

Table 2: Reflexive clusters

[2] Some idiomatic expressions involving *faire* were also automatically excluded, cf. Appendix.

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- This generated 2150 lines we manually filtered to retain 500 pure causatives.

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Methodology: passives

- For passives, we implemented 2 strategies:
  1. targeting only **long passives** by matching all utterances containing *par* ('by');
  2. targeting **all passives** by matching utterances containing the verb *être* (same inflectional paradigm as with *faire*, cf. Table 3 in Appendix) followed by a past participle (tagged with MElt).[3]
- Strategy 1 generated 980 matches, narrowed down to 19 long passives, all occurring after 3;2.
- Strategy 2 generated 4481 utterances; we chose to focus on those occurring before 3;6 (2624 of them), that we narrowed down to 1600 utterances potentially containing a verbal passive.[4]
- We controlled for any overlap between the 2 Strategies.

[3] Unaccusative forms were automatically ruled out, cf. Appendix.

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  1. targeting only **long passives** by matching all utterances containing *par* ('by');
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- Strategy 1 generated 980 matches, narrowed down to 19 long passives, all occurring after 3;2.
- Strategy 2 generated 4481 utterances; we chose to focus on those occurring before 3;6 (2624 of them), that we narrowed down to 1600 utterances potentially containing a verbal passive.[4]
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SFPs vs. causatives

SFPs: qualitative analysis

- For SFPs, the lowest age of production was 2;5 , followed by another utterance at 2;9. 5 instances were identified before the age of 3, 4 of them being clear cases of SFPs involving adversative predicates.

(10) a. vais me faire voler!
will REFL make steal!
'I will get ripped off!' Tim, 2;5, Lyon

b. lui il va se faire casser la figure
him he will REFL make break the face
'He'll get beaten up.' Jean, 2;9, MTLN

- From a cross-linguistic standpoint, and based on data from Gotowski, 2016, SFPs seem to surface around the same age as the *get*-passives from 2/4 English CHILDES corpora (with a 1-month tolerance), and 4/4 if we allow for a 7-months tolerance (cf. Appendix).

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Causatives: qualitative analysis

- For causatives, the lowest age of production was 1;11...
  - 20 instances (i.e. 4% of all causatives) were produced before the age of 2;5 (the earliest age for which a SFP was observed);
  - 65 instances (13% of all causatives) before 2;9.

(11) a. j(e) te fais rigoler toi
I you make laugh you
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b. ah l'a fait tomber
INTERJ it-has made fall
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c. c'est dur faire rouler tout seul la voiture
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SFPs vs. causatives: qualitative analysis

- The acquisitional delay of SFPs vs. causatives was confirmed by a two-sided Mann-Whitney U-test on the distributions of utterance ages ($p=1.27e\text{-}6<.05$) with a small effect ($.1<r=.21<.3$). This is in line with the Derivational Hypothesis.

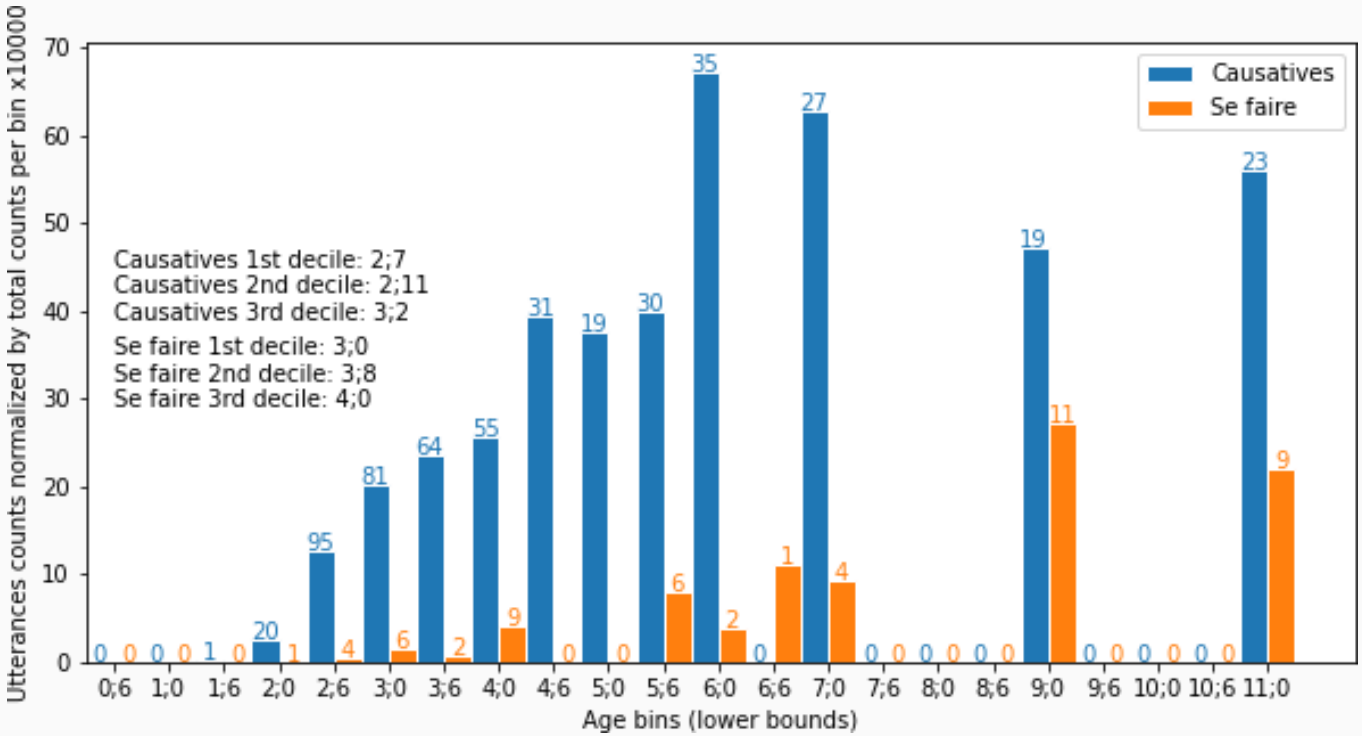
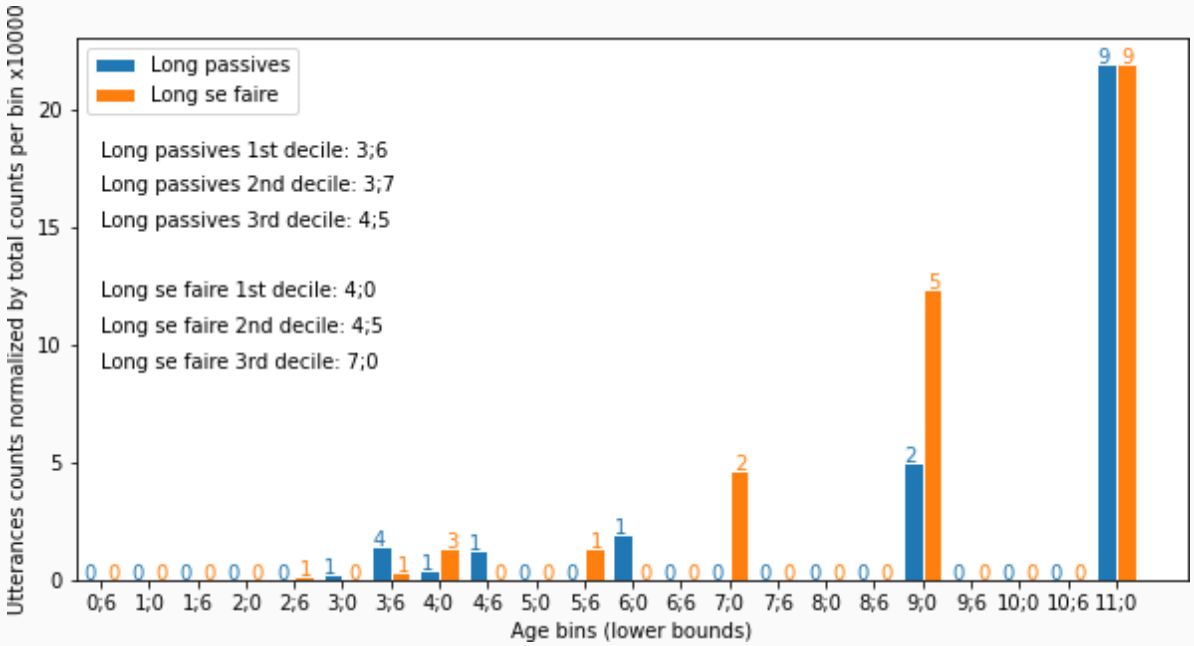


Figure 2: Proportions of causatives/SFPs normalized per age bin (raw counts given on top of each bar, proportions×10000 for readability)

SFPs vs. passives

Long SFPs vs. long passives

- Long passives unsurprisingly occurred later on than (long or short) SFPs (3;2 vs. 2;5).
- But comparing long passives and long SFPs did not yield a significant delay either way (cf. Fig. 3).



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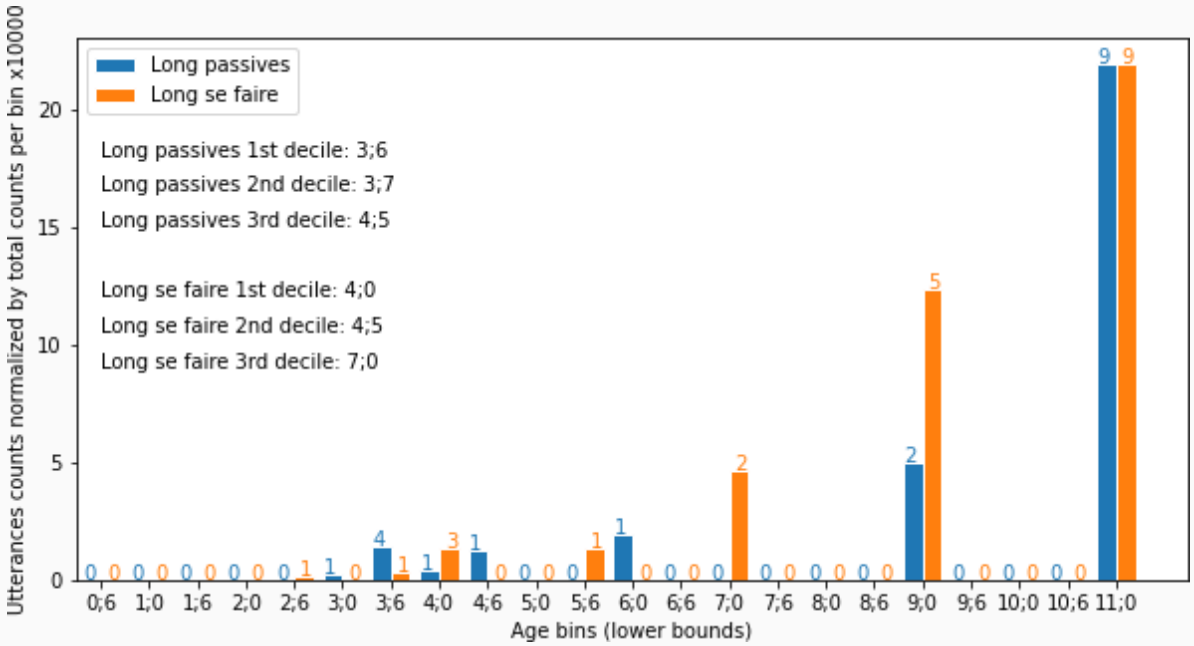

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The issue with short passives

- The result for long SFPs and passives is more in line with the HOMONYMY analysis at first blush (although: very small sample sizes!)... but what about the short variants?
- The picture becomes more intricate when considering "short" SFPs and passives as many of the latter (especially those involving action verbs, cf. e.g. (12)) remain ambiguous with adjectival passives (Borer & Wexler, 1987).

(12) La porte est ouverte.
The door is open.
'The door has the quality of being open.' (adjectival reading)
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Disambiguating short passives

- To determine if the participles used in our 1600 potential passive forms uttered before 3;6 were unambiguously verbal, we used 3 tests (supposed to diagnose adjectival passives):
  1. intensification (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002):

     (13) La porte est **très ouverte**.
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  2. possibility of noun modification:

     (14) La **porte ouverte** est jolie.
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(17) on est pas trompé!
we are not mislead!
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- The contexts of those utterances however, did not suggest that a passive meaning was in fact intended.[5]
- We conclude that verbal passives barely occurred before 3;2 (age of the first long passive) if at all – consistent with previous research (Bever, 1970; de Villiers and de Villiers, 1973; Hirsch and Wexler, 2006; Maratsos, 1985).
- Crucially, this shows that **(short) SFPs may precede passives** – supporting the idea that the two structures are fundamentally different, contra the HOMONYMY analysis.

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- We conducted a relatively large corpus study showing that **SFPs have a distinctive acquisitional timeline**, differing from that of causatives (produced earlier) and unambiguously verbal passives (produced later). The big caveat here remains the small sample sizes, especially for SFPs.
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Thank you!

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Two other reflexivized constructions whose meaning seems passive-like...

(18) Jean **s'est** **laissé** battre par Marie.
Jean REFL-is let beat.INF by Marie.
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(19) Jean **s'est** **vu** battre par Marie.
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Expressions involving faire (and its inflections) that we automatically ruled out

- *faire mal/bobo* (‘hurt’);
- *faire belle/beau* (‘makes oneself pretty’);
- *faire le/la/l’/les/un/une/des/du/de X* (‘play/make the/a X’)
- *faire pipi* (‘urinate’), *faire caca* (‘defecate’);
- *faire attention/gaffe* (‘be careful’);
- *faire dodo* (‘sleep’);
- *faire.* (no embedded sentence).

Paradigm for être ('be') in passives and unaccusative participles we filtered

Infinitive	être
Participle	été, étant
Present	suis, es, est, sommes, êtes, sont
Future	serai, seras, sera, serons, serez, seront
Past	étais, était, étions, étiez, étaient
Subjunctive	sois, soit, soyons, soyez, soient
Conditionnel	serais, serait, serions, seriez, seraient

Table 3: Forms of *be* used for the search of passive constructions.

Unaccusative forms: allé, arrivé, devenu, entré, mort, né, parti, rentré, retourné, passé, resté, sorti, tombé, venu, monté, descendu, demeuré, revenu, mouru

Acquisition of get-passives (Gotowski, 2016)

Corpus	Age of first occurrence
Weist	2;6
Providence	1;11
Suppes	3;0
Braunwald	2;6

Benefactive uses of se without faire

(20) Hier Jean s'est mangé une pizza entière.
Yesterday Jean SE-is eaten a entire pizza.

'Yesterday, Jean ate an entire pizza by himself/for his own enjoyment.'

(21) Hier Jean s'est regardé un film.
Yesterday Jean SE-is watched a movie.

'Yesterday, Jean watched a movie by himself/for his own enjoyment.'

(22) L'an passé Marie s'est construit(e) une cabane dans son
The-year past Marie SE-is built.F a hut in her
jardin.
garden.

'Last year Marie built herself a hut in her garden.'