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Variation in the Early Comprehension of Periphrastic Passive in Romance Languages

A Comparative Analysis of Italian, Spanish and Catalan Children

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Abstract This study is motivated by cross-linguistic differences in the acquisition of periphrastic passive in Italian, Spanish, and Catalan. Maturational theories explain why children initially resort to the adjectival strategy instead of the verbal one. However, Italian data seem to diverge from those of languages such as Catalan and Spanish, suggesting competence with verbal passives as early as 4 years of age. These conflicting acquisitional data represent an opportunity to examine the specific linguistic features underlying these results. Particular attention is devoted to the role and properties of auxiliaries.

Keywords Language acquisition. Argumental movement. Verbal passive. Adjectival passive. Event structure.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Cross-Linguistic Comparison. – 3 Event-Structure Properties of Verbal Passives. – 4 The Study on Italian Passives. – 5 Comparison among Italian, Catalan, and Spanish Data. – 6 Discussion. – 7 Conclusions.

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1 Introduction

The present study investigates the comprehension of passive sentences in preschool typically developing Italian-speaking children and compares their data with previous studies on Catalan- and Spanish-speaking children (Gavarró, Parramon 2017; Oliva, Wexler 2018).

Over the years, cross-linguistic research has reported contrasting findings on the acquisition of the passive.

Empirical findings from diverse languages indicate a delay in passive sentence acquisition (see Armon-Lotem et al. 2016 for a comprehensive review). Pioneering studies asserted that the acquisition of passives is semantically constrained (Maratsos et al. 1985), claiming that children's comprehension of passive sentences is limited to actional verbs. On the other hand, the A-Chain Deficit Hypothesis (ACDH, Borer, Wexler 1987) posits that a syntactic constraint prevents children from comprehending verbal passives before age five, allowing them to access only adjectival passives. Accordingly, they would interpret *broken* in (1a) as an adjective rather than a verb.

(1) a. The window is broken.
b. The window is broken by the wind.

Such a possibility lies in the English-specific feature of homophony between verbal and adjectival passives. Homophonous passives (1a) allow a double reading: namely, stative (the verb denotes a state of the subject) or eventive (the verb describes an event). The addition of a *by*-phrase clarifies ambiguity (1b). However, children would often read any passive participle as an adjective.

Wexler (2004) and Hirsch and Wexler (2006) built upon these premises, claiming that children's early passives are adjectival (either purely stative or resultative), with eventive interpretations emerging later.[1] Wexler (2004) accounts for this pattern by proposing the Universal Phase Requirement (UPR), which restricts children to resultative adjectival passives. Derivations in children's grammar fail

1 The interpretation conveyed by the passive is analyzed as a continuum ranging from stative to eventive readings, resulting from a cognitive operation of decoding. Embick (2004) proposed an account of passive interpretation based on the alternation of eventivity and agentivity. In his analysis, these concepts alternate in a parametric fashion to yield three distinct passive interpretations: stative, resultative, and eventive. Since all the studies in this work employ short passives in which the agent is not structurally present, the distinction between stative and resultative passives would originate from pragmatic inference that does not interfere with the acquisitional predictions. This is not to be confused with the lexical flavour of resultant state that is inherent to certain verbs, which are discussed in Section 6.

because the internal argument cannot access a higher phase to check its phi-features at the Tense level (Hirsch, Wexler 2006).[2] In other words, under the UPR, passives are ungrammatical in immature systems, which develop the ability to process this structure around age six.

Borer and Wexler's (1987) hypothesis was supported by Gavarró and Parramon (2017) and Oliva and Wexler (2018), who tested Catalan-speaking and Spanish-speaking children, respectively, on their comprehension of adjectival and verbal passives. Oliva and Wexler (2018, 64), observing that children perform better with passives of actional verbs that imply a resultant condition, labelled "children's use of an adjectival interpretation to understand verbal passives" as the Adjectival Interpretation Strategy (AIS).

Italian acquisitional data show a different pattern. Italian children appear to master verbal passives earlier than their Spanish-, Catalan- and English-speaking peers, as early as age four (Volpato et al. 2016; Belletti, Manetti 2019).

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 describes the characteristics of short passive sentences in Catalan, Spanish, and Italian, and how their interpretation changes depending on the auxiliary verb. Section 3 shows how eventivity affects verbal passives. Section 4 describes the study on the comprehension of short passives in Italian, presenting participants, materials, and results. Section 5 compares these results with those reported in studies on Spanish and Catalan. Section 6 discusses all the data, and Section 7 offers some concluding remarks.

2 Cross-Linguistic Comparison

This study compares Italian, Catalan, and Spanish, which share the auxiliary alternation that encodes either stative or eventive interpretations in periphrastic passives, although they differ in how they do so.

2 An anonymous reviewer pointed out that, in resultative passives, the subject is still interpreted as the internal argument of the verb and therefore it has to move to a higher position, as in eventive passives. However, following Embick (2004), resultative passives involve different underlying syntax compared to eventive passives, where an argument raises from a low object position. In resultative participles the theme is merged higher, at the edge of vP. As a consequence, although it is still interpreted as the theme, it is more accessible to higher operations, which explains why such structures are not ruled out under UPR.

Catalan passives select either auxiliary *ser* (2) or *estar* (3)[3] together with the passive participle of the main verb. The former conveys an eventive reading, whereas the latter conveys a stative reading. Therefore, the different readings hinge solely on the auxiliary employed. Gavarró and Parramon (2017) exploited the non-syntactic homophony of verbal and adjectival passives to test Borer and Wexler's (1987) A-Chain Delay proposal by assessing Catalan-speaking children. Their stimuli contained 8 actional verbs (*afaitar* 'shave', *eixugar* 'dry', *alimentar* 'feed', *rentar* 'wash', *pentinar* 'comb', *dibuixar* 'draw', *tapar* 'cover', *pintar* 'paint') to provide direct evidence of children's adjectival interpretation.

(2) El germà petit és pentinat. (eventive passive)
The little brother is (being) combed.

(3) El germà petit està pentinat. (stative passive)
The little brother is combed.

Using the same task as in Gavarró and Parramon (2017), Oliva and Wexler (2018) assessed Spanish-speaking children's interpretation of adjectival and verbal passives to provide further empirical support for Borer and Wexler's hypothesis. The verbs were the same as in the study on Catalan, except for the verbs 'dry', 'feed', and 'paint', which were replaced by *mojar* 'wet', *besar* 'kiss', *golpear* 'hit'. Spanish periphrastic passives alternate an eventive reading through auxiliary *ser* followed by a past participle (4), and a stative one through auxiliary *estar* with a past participle (5).

(4) El niño es peinado. (eventive passive)
The boy is (being) combed.

(5) El niño está peinado. (stative passive)
The boy is combed.

In Italian, passive sentences encode stative and eventive interpretations differently. In short passives with auxiliary *essere* (be), both interpretations are possible (6). Using the auxiliary *venire* (come), the interpretation is unequivocally eventive (7). When both

3 Both auxiliaries are translated with English 'be'. However, auxiliary *estar* was rendered with the English correspondent of verb 'be' due to the lack of a more precise translation as indicated in Gavarró and Parramon (2017).

(6) and (7) are interpreted as eventive, the implicit external argument is systematically inferred to be disjoint from the patient.

(6) Il fratellino è pettinato. (eventive or stative passive)
The little brother is combed.

(7) Il fratellino viene pettinato. (eventive passive)
"The little brother comes combed"
The little brother is combed.

The comparable (yet different) language-specific properties of Catalan, Spanish and Italian in auxiliary alternation paved the way to convert the testing material to pursue a cross-linguistic comparison in Section 5.

3 Event-Structure Properties of Verbal Passives

The minimal pair of short *essere*- (6) vs. *venire*- (7) passives in Italian demonstrates how eventivity unambiguously emerges in the latter structure, but not in the former (Gallardo 2024). Gallardo (2024) built on Biggs and Embick's (2022) proposal for English 'be' and 'get' passive auxiliaries.

Biggs and Embick (2022) argue that *get*- and *be*-passives differ in their underlying event structure, a contrast they motivate through a comparative analysis of *get*-passives (8a), *be*-passives (8b), and *get*-causatives (8c).

(8) a. Mary got arrested by the police.
b. Mary was arrested by the police.
c. Susan got Mary arrested by the police.

Biggs and Embick's proposal is based on two preliminary observations. First, the verbal structure that characterizes auxiliary *get* (9a) is semantically eventive, unlike its stative counterpart with *be* (9b). This observation is supported by applying McIntyre's (2012) analysis of adjectival phrases.

(9) a. Mary got sick.
b. Mary was sick.

Biggs and Embick use this minimal pair to show how *get* contributes to eventive meaning even without a verbal participle. Transitivity

alternations originate in the core projection VoiceP, following Kratzer (1996) and Alexiadou et al. (2015). Second, Biggs and Embick argue that the passive participle can be eventive independently of its embedding element. Building on this, they claim that *get*-passives involve two eventive components: one at the auxiliary level and one at the participle level. This double sub-eventive structure helps distinguish *get*-passives from *be*-passives, which present one eventuality at the participle level.

Gallardo (2024) extends this analysis to Italian auxiliary alternation, suggesting that auxiliary *venire* encodes an unambiguous eventive interpretation due to its unique event structure.

This proposal makes specific predictions for acquisitional data. The unambiguously eventive nature of auxiliary *venire* might facilitate comprehension of passive sentences.

4 The Study on Italian Passives

4.1 Participants

The participants in the Italian study were 51 monolingual and typically developing preschoolers (3;3-6;5 years). Children were divided into three age groups: G1 (n=20, mean age=4;2), G2 (n=18, mean age=5;5) and G3 (n=13, mean age=6;2). A group of 12 adults (20-25 years) was also included in the study (G4).

4.2 Materials

The Italian test was adapted by Rech (2020) from the test used in the Catalan study. It consisted of 14 passive sentences containing the following verbs: *rasare* (shave), *coprire* (cover), *asciugare* (dry), *truccare* (put make-up on), *lavare* (wash), *pettinare* (comb), *disegnare* (draw). The original study included one additional verb in Catalan: *alimentar* (feed), which was excluded from the present material, since its Italian translation sounded unnatural. Each verb was presented with auxiliaries *essere* and *venire*, forming 7 ambiguous sentences and 7 verbal passives. None of the sentences contained a *by*-phrase, so the interpretation of the passive could only be guided by the auxiliary. All characters were animate (*il nonno* "the grandpa", *la mamma* "the mom", *il fratellino* "the younger brother", *il fratello maggiore* "the elder brother", and *la sorella maggiore* "the elder sister"). Each picture represented two characters, corresponding to the agent and the patient in the case of a dynamic interpretation.

A sample of an experimental picture is shown in Figure 1. The participants had to select one of two pictures that matched a sentence read by the experimenter. One of the pictures portrayed an event, whereas the other represented a result state. Ambiguous short passives with auxiliary *essere*, such as *Il nonno è rasato* (The grandpa is shaved), could be associated with both pictures. In fact, both stative and eventive interpretations are felicitous with this construction. Only sentences with auxiliary *venire* (*Il nonno viene rasato* the grandpa comes shaved, "The grandpa is being shaved") could cause a mistake, if interpreted as stative, given their uniquely eventive reading.



Figure 1 Sample of the experimental picture for Il nonno è/viene rasato. Pictures adopted from Gavarró and Parramon (2017, 19)

This feature constitutes a crucial difference between Italian and Catalan. In Italian, only 'true' verbal passives with auxiliary *venire* can be misinterpreted as stative. Consequently, the present task evaluates Italian children's preferred reading of short *essere*-passives rather than their accuracy levels. Accuracy levels are only available for *venire* verbal passives. Conversely, Catalan passives are either verbal (auxiliary *ser*) or adjectival (*estar*), yielding unambiguous eventive and stative readings, respectively.

4.3 Results

Table 1 shows the participants' interpretation of short passives with auxiliaries *essere* (verbal or adjectival passive) and *venire* (verbal passive).

Table 1 Interpretation results per age group: percentage (%) and standard deviation (SD) of cases of stative reading in essere-passives and accurate eventive comprehension in venire-passives

Age Groups	Auxiliary *essere* preferred stative interpretation	Auxiliary *venire* eventive interpretation
	% (SD)	% (SD)
G1: 4-year-olds	51% (0.50)	64% (0.48)
G2: 5-year-olds	56% (0.49)	79% (0.41)
G3: 6-year-olds	86% (0.35)	85% (0.36)
G4: adults	92% (0.28)	100% (0.00)

Table 1 shows children's preferred reading of Italian short ambiguous *essere*-passives. An interesting trend emerged: from 4 to 5 years, children seem to assign equal percentages of eventive and stative interpretation to ambiguous *essere*-passives. Instead, the older group of children (G3) prefer a stative reading at a much greater rate. As for *venire* verbal passive, four-year-olds already show early and robust comprehension, which increases with age, reaching 85% accuracy by age 6.

Following Jaeger (2008) and Dixon (2008) and given the categorical (dichotomous) nature of the dependent variable, a repeated-measures logistic regression analysis was conducted in R Core Team (v4.2.1; 2022). 'Group' and 'Accuracy' were the independent and dependent variables, respectively. Subject and Items were added as random factors intercepts. A group effect emerged from the analysis. First, the analysis was conducted on ambiguous *essere*-passives, treating the stative interpretation as the accurate one, forcing the dependent variable to be dichotomous. Considering the stative reading for *essere*-passives, G1 is significantly less accurate than G3 (Wald Z = 4.82, p <.01) and G4 (Wald Z = 5.346, p <.01). However, G1 does not differ significantly from G2 (Wald Z = 0.752, p =.452). G2 is significantly different from both G3 (Wald Z = 4.210, p <.01) and G4 (Wald Z = 4.848, p <.01). From age 4 to 5, preschoolers interpreted ambiguous *essere*-passive as stative/resultative or eventive. Significant differences in the assigned reading appear at age 6: a preferred stative/resultative interpretation in G3 suggests that older children resemble adults in the processing of ambiguous passives.

Finally, the analysis was conducted for eventive *venire*-passives. A main effect of group emerged. G4 performed at ceiling. G1 performed significantly poorer than G2 (Wald Z = 589.661, p <.001) and G3 (Wald Z = 906.903, p <.001). G3 outperformed both G1 (Wald Z = -906.955, p <.001) and G2 (Wald Z = -317.405, p <.001), which in turn outperformed G1.

At the item level, a quantitative analysis of response types is provided. Table 2 presents interpretation rates for each verb and

auxiliary, based on cumulative data from the entire sample of children.

Table 2 Distribution of children's eventive and stative readings for each verb, based on the auxiliary alternation. The asterisk indicates that the stative reading is incompatible with the passive construction containing the auxiliary *venire*

Items	*Essere*		*Venire*	
	Eventive	**Stative**	**Eventive**	**Stative***
1 – *rasare*	43%	57%	92%	8%
2 – *coprire*	24%	76%	75%	25%
3 – *asciugare*	43%	57%	57%	43%
4 – *truccare*	22%	78%	61%	39%
5 – *lavare*	37%	63%	84%	16%
6 – *pettinare*	35%	65%	84%	16%
7 – *disegnare*	63%	37%	72%	28%

Overall, when verbs are preceded by *essere*, the interpretation is predominantly stative. When they occur with *venire*, an eventive reading tends to prevail. However, certain verbs contribute more than others to a specific interpretation. Lexical semantics influenced the interpretation of *essere* passives. Certain verbs significantly increased the probability of stative interpretation: for instance, *coprire* 'cover' (Wald Z = 2.94, p =.003) and *truccare* 'make up' (Wald Z = 3.15, p =.001) yielded more stative readings compared to *asciugare* 'dry'. As for *venire* passives, *asciugare* 'dry' differed significantly from *coprire* 'cover' (Wald Z = 2.07, p =.039), *lavare* 'wash' (Wald Z = 3.21, p =.001), *pettinare* 'comb' (Wald Z = 3.21, p =.001), *rasare* 'shave' (Wald Z = 4.03, p <.001).

5 Comparison among Italian, Catalan, and Spanish Data

As pointed out in section 3, a further aim of our study is to compare the data obtained from the Italian-speaking participants with those collected from 120 Catalan-speaking children (3;1-8;11 years, Gavarró, Parramon 2017) and 60 monolingual Spanish speakers (3;0-6;11 years, Oliva, Wexler 2018). The comparison among these Romance languages is based on the assumption that auxiliary alternation encodes distinct interpretations in periphrastic passives. This pattern is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3 Auxiliary distribution in stative vs. eventive periphrastic passives across languages

Type of passive	Italian	Catalan	Spanish
Stative passive	*Essere*	*Estar*	*Estar*
Eventive passive	*Venire /Essere*	*Ser*	*Ser*

Table 4 reports the percentages of accurate eventive interpretations of short verbal passives. These constructions are formed using auxiliary *venire* in Italian, *ser* in Catalan, and *ser* in Spanish.

Table 4 Accuracy of Italian, Catalan and Spanish children in short verbal passive comprehension

Age Groups	Italian	Catalan	Spanish
	venire	***ser***	***ser***
3-year-olds	-	38%	27.5%
4-year-olds	64%	35%	37.5%
5-year-olds	79%	23%	35.0%
6-year-olds	85%	28%	40.8%
7-year-olds	-	90%	-
8-year-olds	-	92%	-

Italian children show earlier access to eventive passives than Catalan and Spanish children. Moreover, comprehension of Italian eventive passive increases gradually with age. In Catalan, children show poor initial comprehension, which surprisingly decreases at ages 5 and 6, followed by a marked improvement at age 7. Spanish children show a more linear increase in comprehension. Nonetheless, accuracy percentages are substantially lower than those in Italian.

Table 5 reports the percentages of resultative interpretations of adjectival passives formed with *essere* in Italian and *estar* in Catalan and Spanish. Italian short *essere* passives are preferentially interpreted as stative/resultative, though they may receive an eventive reading. For this reason, this analysis assesses participants' preference for stative/resultative versus eventive readings.

Table 5 Percentages of stative/resultative interpretation of the three languages in short adjectival passives

Age Groups	Italian	Catalan	Spanish
	essere	***estar***	***estar***
3-year-olds	-	63%	68%
4-year-olds	51%	70%	72%
5-year-olds	56%	83%	81%
6-year-olds	86%	81%	83%
7-year-olds	-	95%	-
8-year-olds	-	99%	-

Italian preschoolers' resultative interpretation of ambiguous *essere* passives appears uncertain in the first stages of language development. Conversely, the percentages of resultative interpretations in the Spanish and Catalan *estar*-passives are already relatively high in the early stages and increase over time.

6 Discussion

This study provides some experimental evidence on the acquisition of stative/resultative and eventive passives by preschool children. Using a task originally developed to investigate these properties in Catalan, short passives containing auxiliaries *essere* and *venire* were tested with Italian-speaking children aged 3 to 6 years. Italian data showed that children are sensitive to morpho-syntactic cues both when ambiguity and non-ambiguity are encoded. Two distinct developmental trajectories in the acquisition of these structures were identified. Ambiguous *essere*-passives are interpreted in a balanced way, with equal frequency of stative or eventive interpretations. Significant differences in the resolution of *essere*-passive were detected between children and adults. Stative and eventive interpretations are equally used until a preference for the adult (stative) reading emerges around the age of 6. In the case of *venire*, verbal passive comprehension is active early on and improves progressively over time. The non-ambiguous auxiliary guides development: a gradual consolidation of verbal passives appears, thanks to the lexico-aspectual cues of *venire*-passive. The notion of agentivity might also be needed to account for the alternation of *essere* versus *venire* when aspectual features are marked. The agentive trait is relevant in passive alternation, since it is deemed to

operate at the level of VoiceP (Kratzer 1996; Alexiadou et al. 2015).[4] The unique role of *venire* as a marker of eventive interpretation allows for direct measurement of verbal passive comprehension in Italian, providing insight into A-Chain competence. The results on early acquisition of verbal passives replicate previous findings on Italian children (Volpato et al. 2016; Belletti, Manetti 2019), supporting the claim that non-ambiguity facilitates access to this structure and movement of an argument from theme position to subject position. Taken as a whole, new and existing Italian data argue against previous maturational approaches.

Apart from new Italian data, this study presented a cross-linguistic comparison with findings from previous studies on Catalan (Gavarró, Parramon 2017) and Spanish (Oliva, Wexler 2018) that used the same experimental design. Therefore, some language-specific factors should account for the divergent results obtained across the three languages. In the study on Catalan, children's adjectival strategy holds until 7 years of age. Nonetheless, the authors observed that the distinctive function of *ser* and *estar* is not particularly prominent. Such a difference is further obscured by the possibility of Catalan adjectival decausatives to derive alternatively with one or the other auxiliary (*La porta està/és oberta* "The door is open").[5] Oliva and Wexler (2018) claim that their data on Spanish comply with the UPR. Children would interpret verbal eventive passives as resultative ones. Accordingly, Spanish-speaking preschoolers would not compute the syntactic derivation of verbal passives. Children resort to the adjectival strategy at 6 years, in line with the Catalan results. Their comprehension would be dependent on the degree of resultativity of the passivized verbs. However, since all experimental studies adopted actional telic verbs, the cross-linguistic difference among Italian, Spanish, and Catalan cannot be attributed to the interpretation that those verbs convey. In other words, if children uniformly applied a stative strategy, similar results would have been expected across languages.

The overall trajectory emerging from the cross-linguistic comparison is an early access to verbal passives in Italian. Assuming that these three languages derive verbal passives through verb movement, the question of why one language allows earlier access to this instance of verb movement remains unresolved. The reason may

4 Agentivity plays a relevant role if the interpretation that can stem from passivization is assumed as a continuum and Embick's (2004) definition of passive readings is considered.

5 While most Catalan participles are selected by *estar* to convey stativity, *ser* may also appear in typical stative readings, as reported in the IEC Catalan grammar (2016: §22.3.1). This characteristic explains the partial ambiguity in sentences such as *El germà petit és pentinat*, which are supposedly eventive but affected by the temporal-aspectual features of *ser*, leading to a non-dynamic disambiguation.

lie in the event structure of auxiliaries. Italian verbal passives might be mastered already at 4 years of age, because the eventive nature of *venire* would offer a semantic bootstrap mechanism. In a certain sense, Spanish and Catalan *estar* passives resemble the acquisitional trajectory of Italian eventive passives. The mirror-image patterns of Italian verbal passives and Spanish and Catalan adjectival passives support the idea that unambiguous features are mastered earlier. The double valency of *essere* is disambiguated later on, as the statistical analysis confirmed. Italian 3- to 5-year-olds adopted significantly different strategies compared to 6-year-olds and adults: ambiguity is reflected in young children's aleatory interpretation. One possible explanation for these findings may lie in the semantic strength of the auxiliaries encoding stative/resultative or eventive passives. In a cross-linguistic perspective, *venire*-passives may be considered as unambiguous as Catalan and Spanish *estar*-passives. Italian *venire* leads even younger speakers to a dynamic reading, unlike Catalan and Spanish *ser*. Conversely, Italian *essere* misleads preschoolers' interpretation in a similar fashion to Catalan and Spanish *ser*. In sum, children's development is affected by the degree of ambiguity of the morphosyntactic cues. A light verb-based approach (Gallardo 2024) explains the variation in access to verbal passives. Assuming an extra aspectual phrase in the derivation of *venire* could account for the mastery of Italian verbal passives. Such an eventive structure could be the responsible factor guiding young children's comprehension of dynamicity rather than stativity or resultativity. On the contrary, Catalan and Spanish *ser* seem to lack this inherent aspectual feature and are therefore misunderstood by children.

From a lexico-aspectual standpoint, the verbs employed in the three experimental studies encode actionality and telicity. Under the lens of *Aktionsart* (Vendler 1967), most of these verbs are classified as accomplishments: dynamic and durative processes comprising a result state endpoint. A few exceptions to this definition are found in the Spanish study. Oliva and Wexler (2018) included *besar* 'kiss' and *golpear* 'hit', which can hardly represent a result in the sense of a change of state once the dynamic process is over. These two verbs are telic and punctual, at least considering the passivized structures here observed. They lack durativity and are classified as achievements. Crucially, their passive interpretation excludes a visible change of state in the patient of the predicate. The same rationale can be applied to Catalan *alimentar* 'feed', which was omitted from the Italian adaptation. These are the only differences across the experimental designs of the Italian, Spanish and Catalan studies. Although the use of (largely) the same verbs across the three languages reduces potential effects of lexical aspect, it does not control for the distinction between resultative and non-resultative verbs, which may influence the data interpretation. Therefore,

although auxiliary verbs remain the plausible source of variation in this study, their role should be considered alongside these aspectual factors in future research.

7 Conclusions

This study contributes to the debate on passive sentence acquisition. Variation in the developmental curves was grounded on the description of syntactic and semantic features of auxiliaries. The cross-linguistic perspective suggests that the acquisitional trajectory of the passive is not determined solely by syntactic complexity. Crucially, it is shaped by semantic and aspectual properties. This conclusion was reached by comparing data from Italian, Spanish and Catalan-speaking children. The Italian eventive auxiliary *venire* offers unambiguous semantic cues. This feature would facilitate early access to the Italian verbal passive, compared to the Spanish and Catalan counterparts. Italian *venire* is claimed to exhibit an inherent eventive structure, which allows for the correct interpretation of short eventive passives in the absence of further linguistic cues typically associated with a dynamic interpretation, such as overt agentivity or aspectual progressiveness. The conflicting acquisitional data presented here offer insights into the linguistic features that increase the complexity of verbal passives in Catalan and Spanish.

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