A corpus study of the acquisition of French "se faire" passives

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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).

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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 or argument structure (HOMONYMY
        analysis, Kupferman, 1995).

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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.

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

(5) Jean a **fait mordre** l'os par le chien.
Jean has made bite.INF the-bone by the dog.
'Jean makes the dog bite the bone.'

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 it-is some poison!

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

(8) "Spontaneous":
Une nouvelle voix se   fait   entendre dans la politique.
A   new   voice REFL makes hear   in   the politics.

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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.

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

 'Jean got bitten (by the dog).'

(9) Jean **a été mordu** (par le chien).
Jean has been bitten (by the dog).

 'Jean was bitten (by the dog).'

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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§ 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?**

- ∮ 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.

Methodology

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

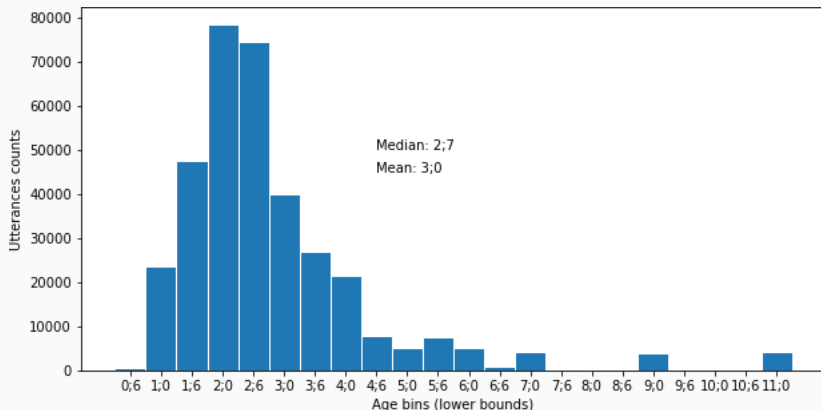| Corpus	Number of lines collected	Age range	Reference
Champaud	3781	1;9 – 2;5	Champaud, 1994
Geneva	6482	1;8 – 2;6	Hamann et al., 2003
GoadRose	7079	1;0 – 4;0	Rose, 2000
Hammelrath	15202	3;6 – 5;6	Hammelrath, 2006
Hunkeler	2416	1;6 – 2;6	Hunkeler, 2005
Leveillé	15071	2;1 – 3;3	Suppes et al., 1973
Lyon	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		

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

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

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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 before, cf. Table 3 in Appendix) followed by a past participle (tagged with MElt).

§ 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.[3]

§ We controlled for any overlap between the 2 Strategies.

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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 difference, and 4/4 with a 7-months tolerance (cf. Appendix).

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§ 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
          'I make you laugh.'   Tim, 1;11, Lyon

      b. ah   l'a   fait   tomber
          INTERJ it-has made fall
          'Someone/I made it fall.'   Julie, 2;0, MTLN

      c. c'est dur   faire   rouler tout seul   la   voiture
          it-is hard make   roll   all alone the car
          'It's hard to make the car run by oneself.'

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§ 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-6<.05) with a small effect (.1<r=.21<.3). This is in line with the DERIVATIONAL HYPOTHESIS.
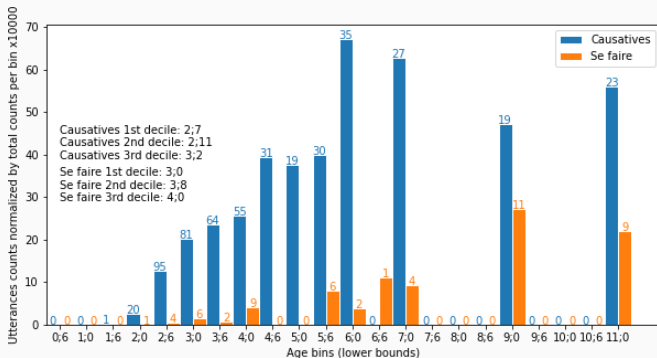

Figure 2: Proportions of causatives/SFPs normalized per age bin (raw counts given on top of each bar, proportions×10000 for readability)

SFPs vs. passives

- Long 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).
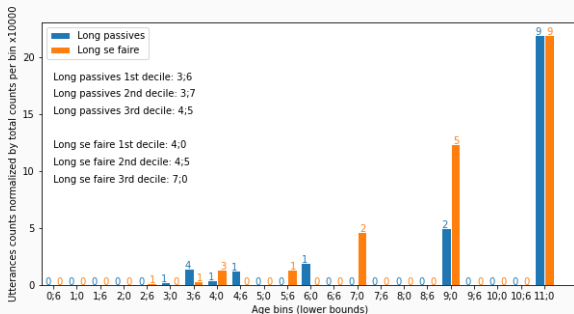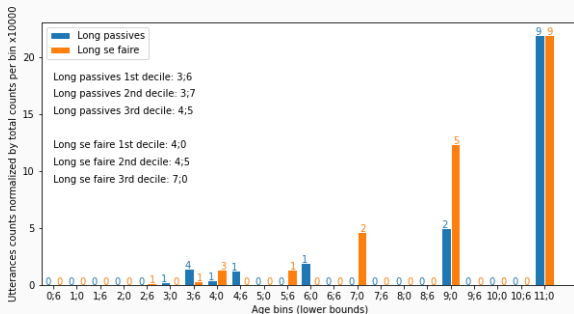

Figure 3: Proportions of long passives/SFPs per age bin, same conventions as Fig. 2. A 2-sided Mann-Whitney U test did not reveal a significant difference in production times (p=.81)

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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.
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      '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**.
            The door is   very open.

   2. possibility of noun modification:

      (14) La **porte ouverte** est jolie.
            The door open   is pretty.

   3. embedding under the French equivalent of *seem* (Borer and Wexler, 1987; Huddleston and Pullum, 2002):

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§ This left us with only a few verbs, e.g. *voir* ('see', cf. (16)) and *tromper* ('mislead', cf. (17)).

(16) oh c'était pas vu!
INTERJ it-was not seen!
'It was not seen!'
Adrien, 3;0, Yamaguchi

(17) on est pas trompé!
we are not mislead!
'We were not mislead!'
Madeleine, 2;5, Paris

§ The contexts of those utterances however, did not suggest that a passive meaning was in fact intended.[4]

§ 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).

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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).

♧ This suggests that SFPs are distinct from passives and derived from causatives *via* extra pragmatic reasoning.

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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.
     'Jean was beaten by Marie.'

(19) Jean **s'est   vu** battre   par Marie.
     Jean REFL-is seen beat.INF by Marie.
     'Jean was beaten by Marie.'

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

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.

Acquisition of get-passives (Gotowski, 2016)

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

Jean se lave ==¿ Jean lave Jean Jean s'achete un sac ==¿ Jean achete un sac a Jean Jean se fait mordre ==¿ *Jean fait que Jean mord/ *Jean fait que Jean est mordu Jean le fait mordre =¿ Jean fait que "le" mord Jean le fait mordre par un chien ==¿ Jean fait que "le" est mordu par un chien

gaatone: it's unlikely that someone would cause themselves to undergo an unpleasant event; hence the passive reading

intentioanlity/causation vaies in flavor: depends on valence of the embedded verb Jean s'est ?deliberement fait ecraser Jean s'est deliberement fait soigner

roland s'est fait arreter/*relacher

*inanimate subject, so some causation seems to remain *les recoltes se sont faites detruire les recoltes on ete detruites

freeer arg structure: not only object (as opposed to passives) les dames se sont faites voler leur bijouxs *les dames on ete volees leurs bijoux

Appendix: benefactive uses of se

(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.'

*Jean s'est fait arreter avant sans emprisoner Marie dit que Jean est stupide Jean s'est fait dire par Marie

idioms?? *la croute s'est faite casser