

## On Semantic Coercion in Children's Raising and Passives

**Introduction:** In their account of why the *be*-passives of certain non-actional verbs such as (1) are dramatically delayed in children acquiring English, Snyder & Hyams (2015) (henceforth S&H) adopt an idea from Gehrke & Grillo (2009) (henceforth G&G): for the non-actional verbs that children still fail to passivize even at age 5, the problem is that the children cannot yet perform a step of "semantic coercion" that these verbs require before they can passivize. S&H propose that semantic coercion is also needed in raising-past-experiencer (RPE) constructions with the verb *seem*, and that this is why Orfitelli (2012) found a tight correspondence between any given child's ability to comprehend the passives of *remember*, *see*, *hear*, and *love*; and the same child's ability to comprehend a sentence like (2).

Yet, if one looks at the G&G story carefully, it is unclear how to extend it to the cases in Orfitelli (2012). Like Collins (2005b), G&G assume that a passive cannot be derived by moving the object directly past the verb's external argument, because that would violate Relativized Minimality (RM; Rizzi 1990, 2004). G&G propose that passive Voice<sup>0</sup> instead attracts into its specifier a VP shell that denotes a *change of state* (and also contains the object); from there the object moves into subject position without violating RM. Transporting the object inside a VP shell is a version of the smuggling account proposed by Collins (2005b). In cases where the verb to be passivized is stative, and therefore lacks the requisite change-of-state semantics, G&G propose that this can sometimes be solved by applying a form of semantic coercion that introduces a BECOME operator, and thereby converts a simple state into a change of state.

**Problem:** Simply extending G&G's account to the sentences studied by Orfitelli fails, because at least in the cases of *see*, *hear*, and *love*, the passive forms are no less stative than the corresponding actives; no BECOME operator is present. Furthermore, it is not immediately clear how to relate the G&G story to RPE. Yet, the idea that smuggling is somehow a critical link between passives and RPE is bolstered by Collins (2005a), who argues that RPE faces much the same RM problem as passives, and solves it in much the same way - through a form of smuggling, as shown in Fig. 1.

**Proposal:** Here we propose an alternative version of G&G's account, based on ideas from Pinker (1989). Pinker argues the "core" of the English passive is the direct object's thematic role of Patient. Moreover, when the verb's object is not a Patient, a version of semantic coercion (translating 'agent-patient' over to non-actional fields) sometimes allows the object to be construed as a patient, and participate in the passive. Pinker extends this to passives like (3a), strikingly similar to RPE as in (3b); we propose (3a-b) depend on the same type of semantic coercion.

Since S&H (2015) have proposed that children have trouble with semantic coercion until around age 5, our proposed alternative account can explain the experimental finding that the non-actional verbs whose passives are acquired the latest (Orfitelli 2012; Maratsos et al. 1985; Messenger et al. 2009) are also the verbs that require Pinker's type of coercion in order to passivize. Furthermore, on the view that a very similar type of semantic coercion is necessary when raising past an experiencer, we can explain Orfitelli's (2012) results: children are delayed in raising-past-experiencers, and also on the passives of stubbornly stative verbs, because they are late to master semantic coercion.

### Examples:

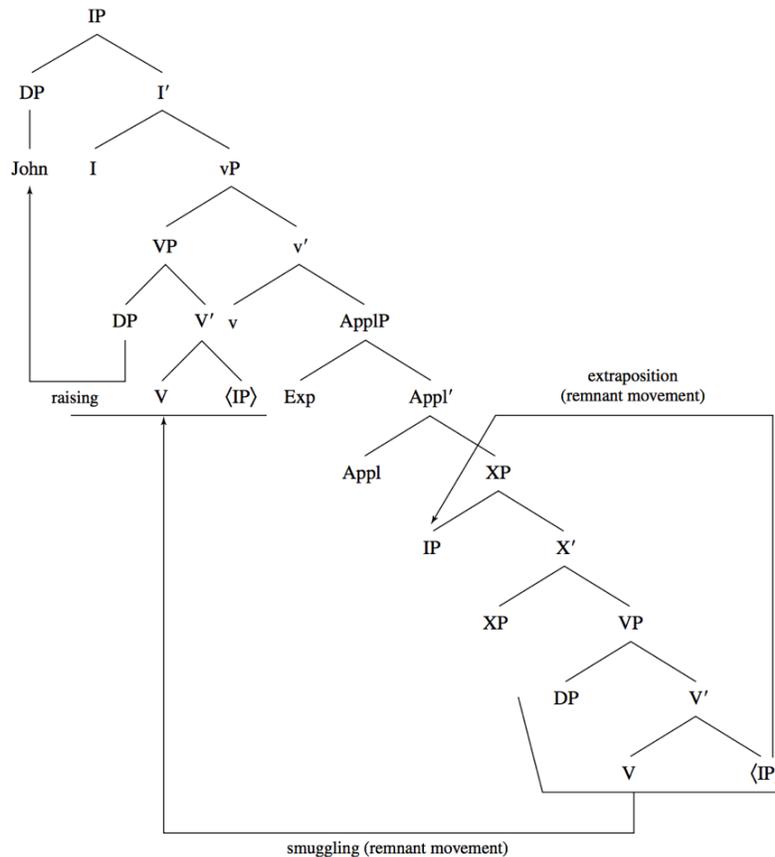
(1) John was loved by Mary.

(2) The dog seems (to him) to be purple.

(3a) John<sub>1</sub> is [VP t<sub>1</sub> considered [t<sub>1</sub> to be a fool]] [by his friends].

(3b) John<sub>1</sub> [VP t<sub>1</sub> seems [t<sub>1</sub> to be a fool]] [to his friends]

**Figure 1. Smuggling in RPE (Collins 2005a).**



### Selected References:

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