

(Reflexive) *Si* as a route to passive in Italian.*

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1. Introduction

The present article explores the hypothesis that some Italian sentences involving the reflexive clitic *si* may represent a possible route to access the passive computation in the course of acquisition. This hypothesis builds on results from experimental studies on the acquisition of passive carried out in collaboration with Claudia Manetti, which indicate that young children in the age range 4;1 – 5;11 sometimes respond with a reflexive construction to questions that typically give rise to a (copular or *venire*) passive answer in Italian speaking adults. For instance, a sentence like (1)A can be produced as the answer to the patient oriented question (1)Q, asking what happens to the elephant in a picture in which the bear is washing it:

- (1) Q: Che cosa succede al mio amico l'elefante?
what happens to my friend the elephant
A: Si lava
it washes itself (Olmo, 4;1 y.o.)

Similarly, in a slightly different discourse condition involving two topic patients an answer like (2)A can be produced referred to a picture in which the cat is washing the dog and the rabbit is dressing/drying the bear:

- (2) Q: Che cosa succede ai miei amici il cane e l'orso?
what happens to my friends the dog and the bear
A: Il cane si lava e l'orso si sta asciugando
the dog is washing itself the bear is drying itself (Leonardo, 4;2 y.o.)

In both cases the answer refers to a transitive action not to a reflexive action. The external argument of the verbs (*wash* and *dry*) is thus suppressed in the answers that are provided. Answers of this type were produced by the children of the younger 4 year-old group tested in up to 9% of the cases.¹ I will refer to these structures here as reflexive passive.

As discussed in previous work (Contemori and Belletti 2014, Belletti and Manetti 2016, Belletti forthcoming), in elicitation experiments² young children's first passive type productions in Italian are realized in the form of a causative passive involving reflexive *si* and the causative verb *fare* in a *fare-da* causative; (3) offers an example from the same experiment in which (1)A and (2)A have been found; (3) answers the patient-oriented question referred to a picture in which the cat is washing the dog; answers of this type were produced by the children of the 5 year-old group in up to 17% of the cases:

¹ The preferred answer provided by children of both 4 and 5 year-old groups in this experiment contained either a pronoun or a Clitic Left Dislocated/CLLD structure (up to 52%; see also Volpato et al. 2015 for similar results). This aspect of the results is discussed at length in Belletti and Manetti (2016); I will not address it here, as it would diverge the attention from the focus of the present discussion.

² Similarly in the priming experiments discussed in Manetti and Belletti (2015), utilizing the priming technique adapted to Italian by Manetti (2012, 2013) from the design first created by Messenger et al. (2008).

(3) Il cane si fa lavare dal gatto
the dog - makes itself - wash - by the cat (Neri, 5 y.o.)

Sentences like (1)A and (2)A produced as the answer to patient-oriented questions (what happens to the DP?), are less and less present (only up to 5%) in older children's responses after age 5, in favor of the causative passive of the type in (3), which is in contrast seldom present (only up to 2%) in the productions of the younger group before age 5 (copular passive is completely absent and *venire* passive is also virtually absent in the two groups of children investigated, 4;1 – 4;11 and 5 – 5;11, an interesting fact *per se*, which cannot be addressed here). For detailed discussion and precise presentation of the relevant experimental results and some of their implications, the reader is referred to Belletti & Manetti (2016). In this article, I will concentrate on some basic aspects of a possible (morpho-)syntactic analysis, which makes explicit the common properties shared by the *si*-causative passives of the type in (3) and the reflexive passive sentences of the type in (1)A,(2)A, also involving *si*. The latter can thus be viewed as a first possibly explored route to access the passive computation, paving the way to the *si*-causative passive, in which all arguments of the lexical verb are expressed, including its external argument through a *by*-phrase. *Si*-causative passive can in turn be seen as a further step toward productive access to the passive computation (involving passive auxiliaries, e.g. in Italian the copula and *venire*).³

2. On the derivation of reflexive passive and of *si*-causative passive

A crucial assumption of the analysis defended here is that the clitic *si* present in both (1)A -(2)A and in (3) is indeed the same reflexive clitic, much in the spirit of the unified analysis of the diverse *si*'s of Italian first developed in Manzini (1986) (Cinque 1988 for a comprehensive analysis of different types of Italian *si*, consistent with this view). In a (originally) "kaynian" perspective, I assume *si* to be an external argument in both reflexive passive and *si*-causative passive structures. As such, it fills the specifier position of (a) little *v*.⁴ Let us now consider the reflexive passive structure first.

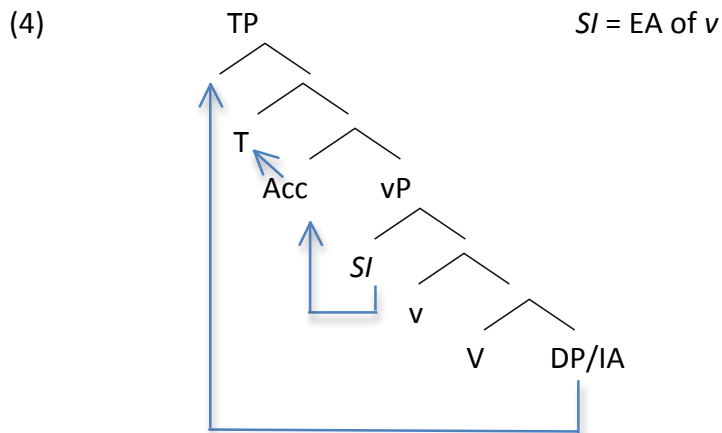
2.1. Reflexive passive

The schema in (4) illustrates the essential ingredients of the analysis: *si* is the external argument of the lexical verb (*wash* or *dry* of the examples above), filling the specifier position of the functional little *v* head, the introducer of the external argument. The computation then runs as follow: *si* head-moves to the head which participates in the assignment of accusative Case in the clause functional structure, which I label Acc for clarity; *si* further moves to the head hosting clitics, which, simplifying the picture, I identify with T in (4). Since Acc has been taken by *si*, little *v* cannot participate in the assignment of accusative Case to the direct object DP, in the internal argument (IA) position. Thus, as a consequence of the morphosyntax of *si*, the DP/IA cannot be assigned Case as a direct object. It then moves into the subject position. In this position nominative is available. The result is a well-formed structure. This derivation shares two crucial properties with passive: lack of Accusative for the direct object internal argument and its promotion as a subject, a preverbal subject in the derivation illustrated in (4). *Si* is consequently co-indexed with the DP

³ In Belletti (2016) a hypothesis is put forward as to why the *si*-causative passive could have this possibly privileged status in terms of labeling. A presentation of this proposal here would take the present discussion too far afield and will not be pursued.

⁴ D'Alessandro (2008) on related analysis of impersonal *si*.

subject, with which it enters agreement. This would yield the reflexive interpretation in the adult grammar. Presumably, in the young children’s early productions of the type in (1)A and (2)A this interpretation is not necessarily triggered, as children appear to understand the pictures proposed to them, in which the depicted action is transitive and not reflexive. Thus, *si* appears to be exploited as a way to eliminate the external argument of the verb and the availability of Accusative case for the object. In this way, presence of *si* is what allows promotion of the internal argument into subject position through a derivational mechanism shared with structures involving Burzio’s (1986) so called “ergative” *si*, and more generally with structures involving so called “middle” *si* (Cinque 1986; Ruwet 1972 for French):



As illustrated in (4), I assume that movement of the DP/IA takes place directly from the vP-internal position. In current analyses of copular-type passive inspired by Collins (2005) *smuggling* approach, movement of the internal argument into subject position does not take place directly from the vP-internal position, but is preceded by movement of a chunk of the vP containing (at least) the verb/past participle and the internal argument. The chunk is attracted by some component of the passive voice. This derivation allows extraction of the DP/IA from the position where the verbal chunk has moved and no locality violation is produced; a violation of Relativized Minimality (Rizzi 1990, 2004) would otherwise occur, as it is always the case when extraction of an internal argument crosses the hierarchically higher intervening external argument. In (4) I assume, instead, that no intervention problem is created by presence of *si* in the movement of the internal argument crossing it. The reason for this is that *si* does not count as an intervener for movement of DP/IA as it has a reduced internal structure, lacking e.g. a D layer, along the lines recently proposed in Holmberg and Roberts (2013). The reduced structure makes it dissimilar in the sense relevant in the computation of intervention for the moved full DP/IA; since the attracted element in the A-chain is a DP, only an intervening DP would determine a locality violation. Hence no *smuggling* is needed in this case, in contrast with, e.g., copular passive. Let us now turn to *si*-causative passive.⁵

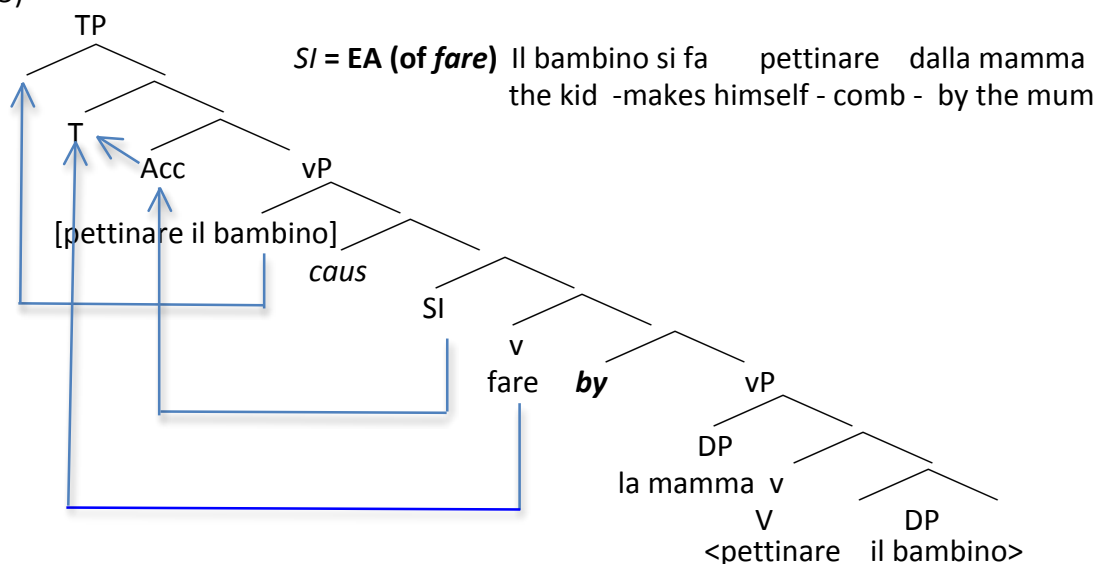
2.2 *Si*-causative passive

Si-causative passive can be analyzed along the lines in (5). As in (4) illustrating the reflexive passive, also in (5) *si* is an external argument. In this case, however, it is the initiator (Ramchand 2008; Folli & Harley 2007 for related ideas) external argument of the semi-functional verb *fare*,

⁵ On *si*-causative passive with respect to *smuggling*, see the following discussion in 2.2.1.

which I assume to be selected by a causative voice (Belletti 2016 for detailed discussion). The morphosyntactic computation of *si* is exactly the same in (5) as the one in (4). In the derivation in (5) I illustrate the hypothesis that the causative voice attracts into its specifier a chunk of the verb phrase containing the verb and its internal argument (Belletti & Rizzi 2012; Belletti 2016). This is an instance of the *smuggling* operation overtly moving a chunk of the verb phrase, as extensively discussed in the references quoted. As *si* blocks assignment of accusative Case, the DP/IA moves and is promoted as the subject of the clause; as such, it agrees with the (third person) reflexive *si*.

(5)



In sum the derivation proceeds as follows:

1. V+DP/IA chunk is *smuggled* into Spec-caus voice
2. *Si* moves to Acc (the functional head participating in the assignment of structural accusative), thus blocking availability of accusative for DP/IA; *Si* moves to T, as any clitic
3. DP/IA moves into subject position

The properties in 2 and 3 are shared with other types of passives: lack of accusative, movement of the internal argument into subject position. Step 2. is shared with reflexive passive above.

2.2.1 On the status of the *by*-phrase in *si*-causative passive and movement of the verbal chunk

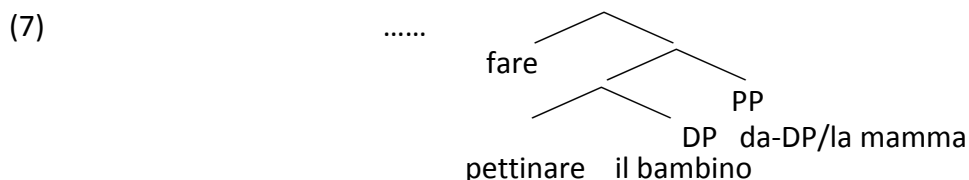
In (5) *by* is analyzed as an expletive preposition, much as it is in copular passive. Indeed, as in copular passive *by* does not contribute to the thematic interpretation of its DP complement and the *by*-phrase has exactly the same interpretation as the external argument/subject in the corresponding active sentence containing the same verb, a fundamental property of the active-passive alternation. In this respect, the same preposition *by* has a different status in *si*-causative passive than in active *fare da* causatives where it contributes to a strongly agentive interpretation of its DP complement. As a way to account for this property, in Belletti (2016) I have proposed that in (active) *fare da* causatives the preposition incorporates (head to head) the *caus* head, whence its agentive interpretation clearly illustrated by the incompatibility of *fare da* causatives with psych-verbs involving an experiencer non-agentive external argument (6b below). In (5) it is assumed that this process does not take place in *si*-causative passive: *by* stays low in the *si*-causative passive and does not incorporate the *caus* voice; it thus preserves its expletive status, whence its compatibility with a non-agentive external argument (6a below), in contrast with the active *fare da* causative construction. The contrast in (6) illustrates the ungrammaticality of the

active *fare da* causative with a psych predicate whose external argument is an experiencer and the possibility of the same verb in the *si*-causative passive, with the experiencer complement of preposition *da/by*:

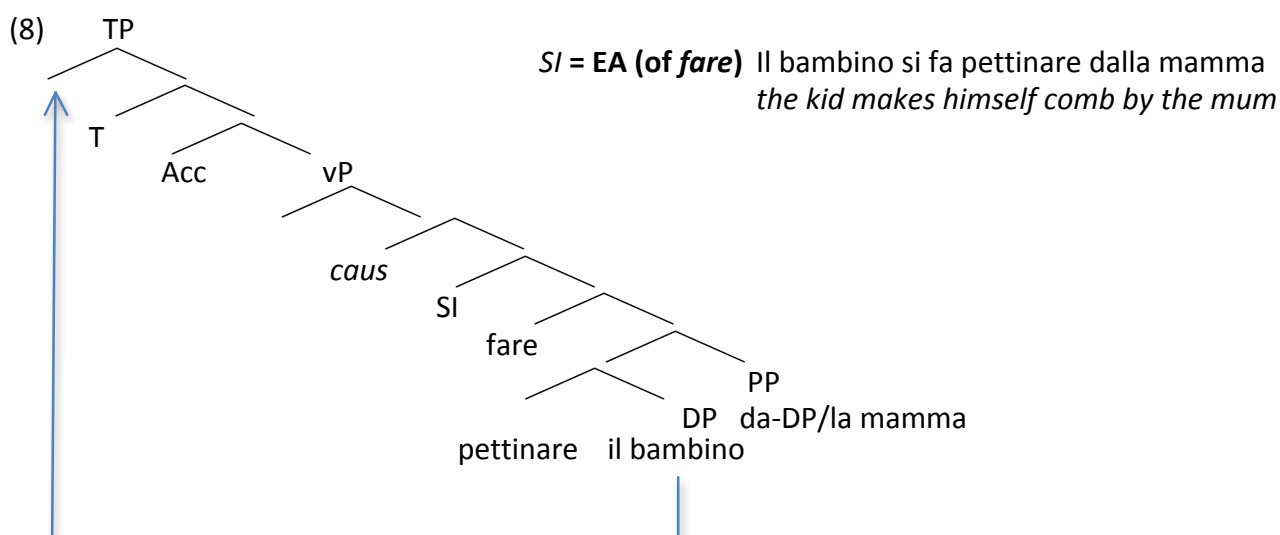
- (6) a Maria si fa capire da tutti
 Maria - makes herself - understand - by everybody
- b * Questa spiegazione ha fatto capire il problema da tutti
 this explanation - has made - understand - the problem - by everybody

Thus, the *si*-causative passive appears to be only partly related to the active *fare da* causative: the status of the *by*-phrase is very different in the two cases. This may suggest that early access by children to the *si*-causative passive may not be directly linked to a possible early access to the *fare da* active causative (e.g. accessed earlier than *fare a*, Guasti's 2016 conjecture, discussed and confirmed in Borga and Snyder 2016).

Borga and Snyder (2016) have recently suggested that active *fare da* does not (necessarily) involve *smuggling* in its derivation, moving the relevant chunk of the verb phrase. Rather, the lexical vP may be reduced in *fare da* and only involve the verb and the DP/IA with the external argument introduced as an adjunct PP; this analysis is inspired by the original proposal in Guasti (1993). A related proposal has been put forth in Folli and Harley (2007), in which the reduced constituent is analyzed as a nominal constituent; this gives further plausibility to the introduction of the external argument as a PP adjunct by directly assimilating the process to the one operative in derived nominals (Sheehan and Cyrino 2016 for a recent cross-Romance overview). Details aside, according to this hypothesis the relevant portion of the structure of *fare da* causatives would be as in (7) (same sentence as in 5):



If the *fare da* portion in (7) is embedded below the *caus* voice as in the *si*-causative passive in (5), this would open up the possibility of a derivation in which the DP/IA could move directly from the object position into the subject position of the clause; recourse to *smuggling* would not be necessary, with movement of the chunk of the verb phrase illustrated in (5). This is precisely the hypothesis suggested in Borga & Snyder (2016), based on similar data from French. The relevant structure and the direct movement of the DP/IA are schematically illustrated in (8) (all other processes remain the same as in (5) and are not illustrated in (8) for clarity):



Given the different status of the *by*-phrase in active *fare da* and in *si*-causative passive clearly illustrated in (6), I leave it as an open question whether the better representation of the derivation of *si*-causative passive should be along the lines in (5) or along the lines in (8). If (5) is assumed, the conclusion must be drawn that young children between age 4 and 5 can access the process of *smuggling* moving a chunk of the verb phrase, at least to some extent (Snyder and Hyams 2015 for a partly different view); if (8) is assumed, as no *smuggling* is involved this would be compatible with the stricter hypothesis that the young children tested either still do not smuggle the verbal chunk or have an extended freezing effect, so that the DP/IA could not be extracted from the smuggled position (Snyder and Hyams 2015); yet they could access the *si*-causative passive because it does not require *smuggling* altogether. In the latter view, an explanation should be found as to why the status of the *by*-phrase is different in *si*-causative passive and in *fare da* causative, given that the latter structure is assumed to be part of the former in (8).

3. From reflexive passive to *si*-causative passive

Given the analysis developed in section 2, the crucial difference between reflexive passive and *si*-causative passive is that only in the latter can the external argument of the lexical verb be present, whereas in the former it is taken up by *si*. Another possible difference is lack of *smuggling* in reflexive passive and its possible presence in the computation of *si*-causative passive, depending on the considerations at the end of the previous section. Let us discuss the two properties in turn: from the resulting picture the way how (/the reason why) the reflexive passive could plausibly constitute a first route to passive should emerge.

Both the Case properties and the promotion of the internal argument to the subject position are properties which the reflexive passive shares with different types of passives in Italian, and cross-linguistically, as noted. Interestingly, the fact that the passive morphology may correspond to/contain the reflexive morphology is also a well-attested fact cross-linguistically. Hence, it is tempting to speculate that in the course of acquisition, Italian-speaking young children exploit a grammatical possibility, by entertaining the hypothesis that also Italian allows for a reflexive passive; as pointed out above, the hypothesis is also supported by other passive-like uses of *si* in Italian, such as in particular middle *si* and the *si* marker of several unaccusatives. Belletti & Manetti's (2016) results describe a developmental path from age 4;1 to age 5;11 according to which the reflexive passive option is abandoned by the children of the older group in favor of the *si*-causative passive. This path finds a natural explanation in the need to introduce a further

argument different from *si* expressing the external argument of the lexical verb (this was required in the elicitation condition of the experiment, as described in the introduction). Recall that in the *si*-causative passive an independent external argument of the lexical verb is present, which is expressed through the *by*-phrase in the way illustrated in (5). In the reflexive passive, in contrast, since the external argument of the lexical verb is *si*, no other external argument is possible hence no *by*-phrase is possible in turn. Thus, the possibility to introduce an external argument of the verb is available in the *si*-causative passive through the expression of a *by*-phrase, but it is not available in the reflexive passive, which typically does not allow for the expression of a *by*-phrase.⁶

But why should the reflexive passive come first? If the proposed characterization of the developmental path is on the right track, one should ask: why should children entertain the hypothesis that Italian allows for a reflexive passive to start with? As pointed out in Belletti (forthcoming, fn. 10) presence of the reflexive may in principle play some role in favoring this route, as reflexive anaphors are known to be mastered rather early by young children (Hamann 2011 for a general overview; Snyder and Hyams 2015 on French/Italian acquisition of reflexive clitics *se/si*). We can further speculate that, given the structure in (4) with *si* the external argument of the lexical verb, the proposed derivation could represent a less demanding path to directly promote the DP/IA into subject position, one crucial feature of the passive computation; specifically, blocking accusative Case through clitic *si* could constitute a more direct hence simpler way to access this aspect of the passive morphosyntax, the first necessary step to promote DP/IA as a subject.

In the analysis developed in (4) a further crucial property of the reflexive passive is that it allows for movement of DP/IA directly from IA object position without recourse to *smuggling*; no movement of a chunk of the verb phrase is needed as impoverished *si* does not count as an intervener, as suggested above. This aspect of the computation of reflexive passive could give a further reason as to why this type of passive should have a privileged status for young children. Following Snyder and Hyams (2015), *smuggling* is a costly operation for young children, who may be just unable to smoothly access it in early stages of acquisition (before age 5). Then, if a passive-type derivation can be put into work without any need of *smuggling*, it is not surprising that young children entertain this option first.

How about *si*-causative passive, the preferred option of older children (5;5;11)? It seems natural to propose that it may constitute a natural way to introduce the external argument of the lexical verb, while still implementing passive through *si*, which is the external argument of *fare* in this case according to the analysis in (5).

In section 2.2.1 we have left open the question whether the *smuggling* operation is necessarily implemented in *si*-causative passive. If it is not, as suggested in Borga and Snyder (2016) according to which this passive contains a *fare da/faire par* causative (as in structure 8, for Italian), then in this respect the *si*-causative passive should be as accessible to young children like a reflexive passive is, the only difference between the two being the possible systematic presence of the external argument of the lexical verb in *si*-causative passive. We have pointed out in 2.2.1 a crucial clear difference in the nature of the *by*-phrase in the *si*-causative passive compared to active *fare*

⁶The possibility to express a *by*-phrase in a reflexive passive may be limited cross-linguistically to cases in which the reflexive is a grammaticalized marker of the passive voice. As noted in Cinque (1988, fn. 11) reporting observations by Lepschy (1986) for Italian and Ruwet (1972) for French, in special rhetorical registers the *by*-phrase is allowed to appear in some *si(/se)* sentences. As Cinque observes the examples mentioned in the quoted references were all cases of middle *si*, which could precisely count as a grammaticalized marker of the passive voice as suggested above or as “non-argument” *si* in the terms of Cinque’s typology of different types of Italian *si*. Interestingly, in Belletti and Manetti’s (2016) data only one child expressed the *by*-phrase in one reflexive passive sentence only once.

da: only in the latter is *by*-phrase strongly agentive, thus suggesting a different status of the *by*-phrase in the two constructions. However, from the available data and results we are not in a position to determine whether children at the relevant ages do make the relevant distinction between the *by*-phrases in the *si*-causative passive and in the *fare-da* causative. Since all the experimental sentences involved an agentive external argument of the verb phrase, they are compatible with both a reduced structure along the lines in (8), hence a derivation not implying *smuggling* of the chunk of the verb phrase, and a complete structure along the lines in (5) implying the *smuggling* operation along the lines described. It is impossible to tease apart what derivational option children would take on the basis of the available evidence so far.

It seems that the following scenario could fit the known results: the tested children are precisely in the age in which they start trying out *smuggling* more and more productively (as types of passive appear to be better mastered); at the younger age 4 they still have this possibility only marginally (Snyder and Hyams 2015 for similar considerations). Sometimes they fail, and resort to the reflexive passive, which unambiguously does not involve the *smuggling* operation. Later, at age 5, they abandon this construction, as they need to describe a transitive action not a reflexive one. They resort then to *si*-causative passive, which, in the experimental conditions (in which all external arguments are agentive) allows for both a derivation with no *smuggling* (as in 8) and one with movement of the verbal chunk (as in 5).⁷

4. Conclusion

In this paper we have explored the idea that Italian-speaking children adopt a reflexive passive route involving the reflexive clitic *si* as a step toward access to (other forms of) passive. We have speculated that this route may count as simpler for the younger children of the reported study (aged 4;1-4;11) both because it involves the reflexive clitic and because it does not involve the *smuggling* operation moving a chunk of the verb phrase. The reflexive passive is then abandoned in favor of a systematic access to the *si*-causative passive in the reported results from older children (5-5;11). The somewhat privileged status of *si*-causative passive in children confirms previous findings and can be interpreted as being due to the fact that this type of passive combines the reflexive passive computation with the causative computation, which allows for the introduction of an independent external argument of the lexical verb. Since the age between 4 and 5 is the one in which children get to properly master *smuggling* moving a chunk of the verb phrase, access to *si*-causative passive may be favored (at least in part, footnote 6) by the possibility of analyzing it either through a *smuggling* derivation or not; this possibility arises in the experimental conditions described since all relevant external arguments were agentive in the stimuli utilized, hence they were possibly realized either in a *by*-phrase of the active *fare da* causative type or in a *by*-phrase of the *si*-causative passive type. Digging more on this issue is one question left to future research.

⁷ Clearly, if *smuggling* is necessarily at work in *si*-causative passive also in children's grammar, then one can think that this extra step is what makes the *caus* passive a bit more complex and then come after the reflexive passive. Note however, that some causative passives are present also in the productions of the children of the younger 4 year-old group, but to a very limited extent, as noted (2%).

We can further speculate that *smuggling* through causative *fare* could be readily accessible to children - hence somewhat privileged by them - also due to the overtness of the moved chunk in Italian/French type causatives (Manetti and Belletti 2015 for a proposal along these lines).

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