SYNTACTIC DIAGNOSTICS FOR REFERENTIALITY MARKING IN EARLY NULL OBJECTS: EVIDENCE FROM ITALIAN

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1. Introduction

Ellipsis of internal arguments is an issue which has long attracted a large number of analyses and still continues to feed a heated debate, not only when the phenomenon is regarded in its various attested constructions across (adult) languages but also when its apparently deviant manifestations are looked at in child language.

As for the first point, cross-linguistic comparison clearly shows that no such a clear-cut generalization as a null object parameter is accountable by linguistic analysis. Let us compare the following constructions, in which the internal object is missing, although its properties are not amenable to a unifying account:

(1)   A Maria disse que o João viu _   (Raposo, 1986)
        Maria said that João saw _
(2)   A painter disturbs _ much less than a writer   (Goldberg, 2001)
(3)   La buona musica riconcilia _ con se stessi   (Rizzi, 1986)
        Good music reconciles _ with oneselves

What is paramount here is that only in the example (1) the null object refers to a specific antecedent, whose reference must be retrieved from the discourse. Lack of specificity in the examples (2) and (3) suggests that such feature is at stake in determining the appropriate conditions for the object to be omitted. That is, in a language as Italian, the features on the null object are arbitrary, not inherited from the discourse but rather under agreement with a licensing head. In such a case, we are faced with a parametric option – which is confirmed in comparison with the English example in (2), where the generic argument appears to semantically saturate the verb without playing any role in syntax.

These are distinctions which we need to keep in mind if we want to give an account of zero objects and the properties of such syntactic – if ever projected –

empty category. Narrowing the focus of our attention on null objects with a [+specific] antecedent, we would like to maintain that discourse-anchoring is ensured by movement.

In the spirit of recent speculations on the syntactic means by which a pronoun comes to inherit reference from its antecedent (Kayne 2005; Belletti 2009), the idea that the edge of the left periphery is where a pronoun must end up, in order to look for its antecedent, is endorsed. If the null object construction precisely arises when a highly salient topic is given in the discourse, thus allowing the recovery of the content of the empty category, the analysis just hinted suggests that such linking can only be obtained by means of movement to a peripheral, hence discourse-related position.

That said, we would like to propose that the syntactic and discourse conditions for a null object to be interpreted as referential are made available by UG and recruited to some extent by limited-resourced populations as a case of computation which may be less costly than cliticization. A case in point is language acquisition.

The question is not trivial as to whether children omitting a direct object are actually marking specificity on it or rather producing a generic zero object somewhat more freely than adults do. Although no uncontroversial uniformity as to what to count as object omission has ever been reached in analyses on child language[1], it is commonly assumed that there is omission whenever a specific object, that is to say, a pronoun, would be required to be overtly expressed.

Since the phenomenon has traditionally been reported to be significant in the acquisition of Romance languages but basically absent in languages with weak/ strong pronouns, the special status of object clitics has generally been evoked in most analyses of early object omissions.

We have utilised an adaptation to Italian of Costa et al.'s (2007; 2008) experiment within the COST Action 33, aimed at investigating "cross-linguistically robust stages of children's linguistic performances" at age 5 (see also Varlokosta et al. – to appear). The purpose of the present study is to try out the hypothesis that a construction which is not found in the input – computing a variable rather than producing an overt clitic – can be favoured nonetheless at the early stages.

If syntactic diagnostics for movement are borne out in children's responses – as it turned out in the last analysis, with island contexts drastically reducing the

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[1] The question has been recently raised by Pirvulescu (2006a) with respect to the discrepancies which have been generally reported to hold between data coming from spontaneous speech and elicitation studies. In actual fact, spontaneous speech analysis retains a methodological degree of subjectivity in what to count as a transitive context, that is, the syntactic context in which an object would be obligatory. The author individuates the "clitic context" as the most homogeneous indicator of object omission in [+specific] discourse conditions.

availability of null objects – the datum can be taken to support an alternative analysis of clitic omission, which does not need to resort to linguistic failure in cliticization or pragmatic deficit. At least in some contexts, a discoursally-bound variable can be arguably be discarded from deviant clitic omission.

2. Background analysis

For the ease of the descriptive analysis, we can borrow the definition of variable from the inventory of empty categories theorised by the Binding Theory (Chomsky, 1981). Variables are A'-bound. This implies that they cannot be coindexed with any matrix argument. Rather, they look for their antecedent at the periphery of the matrix clause. Huang (1984) captured such derivation by postulating that Chinese-like null objects inherit their reference from topics which are salient in the discourse, regardless of their overt or covert presence in the clause:

(4)   [$_{Top}$ neige ren$_i$], Zhangsan shuo Lisi knanjian e_i le
        That man,   Zhangsan says Lisi has seen

Movement to the left periphery is a crucial step of the interpretive chain connecting the empty category and its antecedent. In other words, if the internal object did not leave the VP, it could not properly look for its antecedent hence failing to be interpreted as referential. We would like to maintain the following analysis from Belletti (2009), which crucially captures the interpretive properties of (silent) pronouns reconciling traditional binding principles with new cartographic insights. Basically, the derivation through which a pronoun recovers its content always involves movement of a silent pronoun to the edge of the complementizer. The landing site must be an edge position, which avails itself of a privileged status and functions as "hook" to the topic. This is true for clitics, and a traditional Principle B effect as the following one finds easy explanation:

(5)   Maria$_i$ dice [che tutti la$_{i/k}$ conoscono
        Maria says that everyone her knows

Let us assume the direct object, generated in VP-complement position, is doubled by a silent demonstrative, which reaches an unpronounced edge position from whence it anchors to its antecedent. Then, the matrix subject *Maria* will act as the antecedent if the landing site of such silent pronoun is the edge of the embedded complementizer. However, the pronoun might well refer to an antecedent in the discourse, salient enough to make use of the clitic felicitous. This is the case when the silent pronoun lands to the main CP edge, looking outside.

For the present analysis of null objects, we assume that, instead of a computation involving a topic, a (resumptive) clitic and a silent pronoun mediating the link at the interface level, a more economical derivation allows a pronoun to reach a discourse-

related position without overt functional material inside the clause[2]. For a variable to be discoursally-bound, it must reach the edge of a matrix CP: in fact, typical Principle C effects ultimately follow from the same reasoning. Namely, null objects are ruled out inside islands because they cannot move to the main edge CP to license their referentiality; likewise, null objects display Strong Cross Over effects, due to the fact that they need to look outside the matrix subject to recover their content. The ambiguity reported in (5) for the interpretation of the clitic would not hold in the following sentence in Portuguese:

(6)   A Maria$_i$ disse [que o João viu e$_k$
       Maria said that João saw _

The variable must move to the main CP to recover its content, which is set by the context. That is to say, a salient topic must be available in the discourse for a null object construction to be appropriate.

3. The experimental rationale

Under the conditions thereof, it follows that a null category is licensed under referential interpretation only if it is allowed to reach a discourse-related position in syntax.

If continuity is a warranted paradigm to account for child behaviour, and the options children select during the course of language acquisition are crucially recruited from UG, the proposal we want to advance is the following: the early system favours a null object construction at the first stages, as a case of option which is effort-saving and compatible with the performance limitations of the early system.

Italian is a case in point since no such parametric option is available in the input. Indeed, several studies have shown that object clitics emerge by the third year of life and no deviancy is attested as to clitic placement. Rather, a certain degree of optionality is retained over development. We would like to maintain that such optionality is (at least partly) caused when the competitive availability of a null object construction wins over – until positive evidence consistently indicates otherwise and the option is abandoned.

If children's null objects are discourse-linked, the same restrictions on the derivation of such empty category should hold. Put it differently, if children mark referentiality, in the discourse condition in which a salient topic is prompted as an

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[2] The alternation between null objects and pronouns so proposed cannot fully capture the status of overt pronouns outside islands – where, in principle, movement would be possible hence systematically preferred. Nevertheless, it well accounts for resumption in contexts where pronouns "save" impossible extraction. In this sense, doubling is compatible with the idea of movement as copy + (partial) deletion which is a tenet of the minimalist thesis.

antecedent, precise syntactic tests can allow us to see in more clarity whether children comply with Principle C.

Two conditions were designed in the present test. The first condition set a felicitous discourse context for an object clitic to be elicited (after Schaeffer 2000):

(7) Experimenter: Che cosa sta facendo il cane al gatto?
                    What is the dog doing to the cat?
    Child: ...lo lecca
                  …him licks

Such task was assumed as a sort of baseline, to measure children's mastery of clitics and level of omissions in root contexts. Data were then compared with findings coming from the same subjects on a second task, prompting a response inside an island, as in Costa et al. (2007; 2008)[3]. Such syntactic condition was individuated as a reliable cut-off between variables and omissions.

(8) Experimenter: Il cane lecca il gatto e ora il gatto è contento. Perché il gatto è così
                    contento? Il gatto è contento [*perché ...*
                    The dog is licking the cat and now the cat is happy. Why is the cat
                    so happy? The cat is happy because the dog...
    Child: …[perchè il cane lo lecca
                  ...because the dog him licks

At a closer look, there are two strong constraints on the availability of a variable in such sentence. The DP [il gatto] is given in the prompt as the unique relevant antecedent for the expected clitic. The unavailability for an empty category to appear inside the island stems from the impossibility to reach its antecedent – the only way it would inherit referentiality. In fact, as the adjunct CP qualifies as an island for extraction, no silent pronoun can be postulated which moves to the matrix CP edge to link to the discourse. For the sake of our theoretical analysis, let us compare the entire derivation of a null object in the two conditions[4]:

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[3] This experiment was conceived as an adaptation of Costa et al.'s (2007; 2008) within the COST Action A33, aimed at investigating "cross-liguistically robust stages of children's linguistic performances" (see also Varlokosta et al. – to appear). The authors' study on European Portuguese was intended to tease out target-like null objects from clitic omissions. For this purpose, root and island contexts were controlled in elicitation, yielding two main findings: first of all, there is a prolonged omission stage in EP (contrary to UCC's predictions); secondly, children have knowledge of the syntactic conditions for referential null objects, since they tend to "save" island constraints by producing more DPs.

[4] In detailed steps, we have represented movement of the (silent) pronoun through the vP edge. For interpretive requirements, we assume in fact that VP arguments also pass through the right periphery to be interpreted as topics or foci (Belletti 2004).

(9) $[_{CP}$ Il gatto$_i$ … $[_{CP}$ ~~lui~~$_i$ $[_{IP}$ lecca $[_{vP}$ ~~lui~~$_i$ $[_{VP}$ V ~~lui~~$_i$
        $[_{CP}$ ~~lui~~$_i$ Il gatto$_{*i}$ è felice $[$~~lui~~$_i$ perché il cane lecca $[$ $_{vP}$ ~~lui~~$_i$ $[$V ~~lui~~$_i$

Not only movement is ruled out past the adjunct, but also coreference with the matrix subject [il gatto] is impossible, since Strong Cross Over arises – as mentioned above. In such a configuration, presence of an overt pronoun is obligatory across languages, as it has been abundantly shown in the literature – see the classical analyses on Chinese (Huang 1984) and European Portuguese (Raposo 1986).

In the following sections, our findings will be presented showing that children acquiring Italian appear to reduce omissions in the second condition: a result which only finds a coherent explanation if we assume omissions to be accountable – at least in part – as variables exploited in the proper syntactic and pragmatic conditions.

4. Data

4.1 Subjects

The experiment was administered to children in preschool age, who were ideally divided into three age groups for further analysis in developmental perspective. 43 children participated in the first condition, divided as follows: 18 three-year-olds (mean 3.6); 14 four-year-olds (mean 4.5); 11 five-year-olds (mean 5.7). 53 children were tested in the second condition: the youngest group amounted to 19 subjects (mean 3.7); four-year-olds to 14 (mean 4.5); five-year-olds to 20 (mean 5.6).

As said, the same children were selected when possible in order to render comparisons between conditions as much reliable as possible.

4.2 Items

Materials consisted of 14 pictures, portraying two characters performing a transitive action, along the lines of the examples mentioned in (7) and (8). The same pictures served the two testing condition. In addition, 5 fillers were inserted which prompted either a different clitic (two items represented a self-oriented action) or an (optional) lexical DP. In the latter case, the prompt did not mention the object directly ("what is X doing?"), such that a non-specific object was targeted.

5. Results

5.1 Results in the root condition

The following categories were controlled in children's responses: clitics (the expected answer); full DPs; strong pronouns; omissions. Specifically, use of clitics

and full DPs and their presumed trade-off has always been a matter of debate in the analyses on children's spontaneous and elicited productions (Jakubowicz et al. 1998).

The present findings partly show similar rates of clitics and omissions at age three as compared to Schaeffer (2000)[5]:

Age	Clitic	DP	Omission	Strong	Other
5 year-olds	**87.01%** (134/154)	**5.84%** (9/154)	**4.54%** (7/154)	**0.59%** (1/154)	**1.94%** (3/154)
4-year-olds	**88.77%** (174/196)	**3.57%** (7/196))	**5.10%** (10/196)	**1.53%** (3/196)	**1.02%** (2/196)
3-year-olds	**71.82%** (181/252)	**5.95%** (15/252)	**15.87%** (40/252)	**1.58%** (4/252)	**4.76%** (12/252)

Table 1: Results in root contexts

However, omission levels depart from the datum reported by the author that the phenomenon ceases at age 4. In actual fact, a certain optionality in clitic use is retained in development, which is not fully target-like still at age 5. On the other hand, it appears that clitic use is mastered at target-like levels from age 4, with values approaching 90%. Not so in the youngest group, with a rate of clitic production around 70%, which indicates that a developmental difficulty in mastery of cliticization is at play. Focussing on this age span, it can be observed that a crucial window is that before age 3.5:
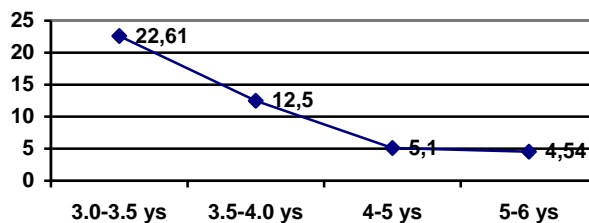

Table 2: Developmental rate of omissions in root contexts

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[5] The following rates of omissions are reported in Schaeffer (2000): 64% at age 2; 15% at age three; virtually disappearing from age 4.
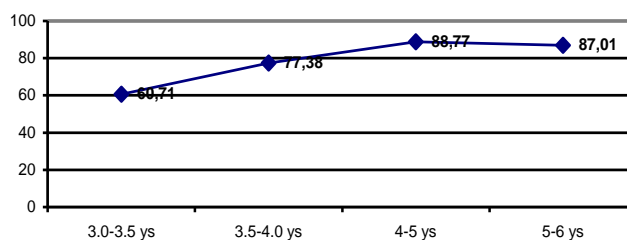
Table 3: Developmental rate of clitics in root contexts

Crucially, a developmental trend is detected between the third and the fourth year of life, with omissions almost halving after age 3.5 and clitic production converging very soon towards the target values.

Figures in DP production do not yield a linear trend. In this respect, the hypothesis that children might favour production of full lexical DPs in place of deficient clitic pronouns is not consistently supported by our data. Prono-minalization of the object in such experimental setting appears as the most natural choice even at the youngest age, and the most common inconsistencies reported are omissions. Along the avenue pursued throughout the experiment, we asked how many omissions among these – if any – were amenable to an analysis in terms of topicalization without clitic resumption. Hence comparison with a different testing condition, designed to render a variable impossible to be licensed, was the second step of the analysis.

5.2 Results in the island condition

Prompting a clitic inside an adjunct clause, introducing a causal relation between the characters mentioned by the experimenter, enhanced clitic production and constrained omissions, across all age groups.

Overall, a trade-off was detected between clitics and zero objects. Rates of lexical DPs were not influenced by the testing condition, which is a datum we will come back to.

Age	Clitic	DP	Omission	Strong	Other
5 year-olds	**91.78%** (257/280)	**3.21%** (9/280)	**2.85%** (8/280)	**0.71%** (2/280)	**1.42%** (4/280)
4 year-olds	**91.83%** (180/196)	**3.06%** (6/196)	**3.57%** (7/196)	-	**1.53%** (3/196)
3-year-olds	**79.32%** (211/266)	**4.88%** (13/266)	**8.64%** (23/266)	**1.87%** (5/266)	**5.26%** (14/266)

Table 4: Results within islands

The testing condition was administered in the form of a sentence completion task and involved elicitation of the whole adjunct CP (eg. …*perché lo lecca*) such to ensure that the child were computing a full clausal structure. Overall, due to the very neutral nature of the sentential choice, children encountered no difficulties in interpreting theta roles appropriately. However, the higher syntactic complexity probably resulted in higher number of non-responses in the youngest group (yet, crucially, not in higher number of omissions).

Putting the two conditions in perspective, the most striking datum is a fall-off in omissions. If four and five-year-olds already perform close to target-like in the root condition, inside islands omissions drop further. Rates of clitic production indicate that mastery levels are attained at age four and thence no linear trend emerges. Internal variability in the oldest group is to be addressed to explain the slightly lower performance in clitic production – albeit insignificant. Instead, linearity is undisputable in the developmental trend of null objects across age groups.

The youngest group offers the analysis new evidence that the syntactic context can circumscribe indeed the number of omissions. Such observation amounts to acknowledging that, to a certain extent, object drop obeys grammatical regularities. The present findings provide a percentage of clitic omissions estimated at 8% in island context, a datum for which there is no parallel evidence on early Italian available at present – yet a significant 15% in root clauses, not only yielded from the very same subjects who participated in this task, but also confirmed by Schaeffer (2000).

Again, narrowing the three-year-old group further, a developmental shift can be seen to occur at very fast rates. In actual fact, mean values risk to obscure that lower performances are observed in subjects younger than 3.5, while values improve significantly in the second half of the year eventually converging towards the near-mastery levels observed from age 4.
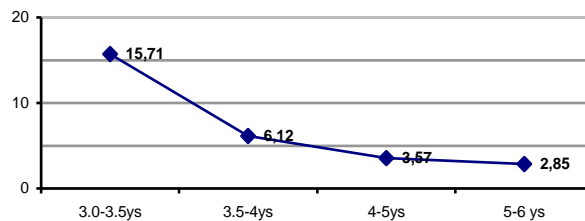

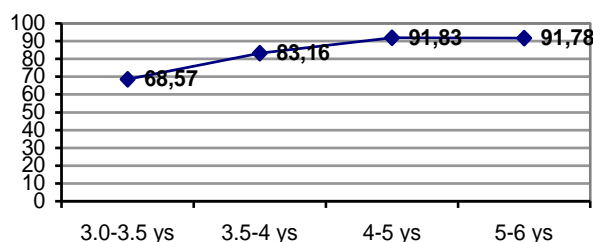**Table 5: Developmental rate of omissions inside islands**

Table 6: Developmental rate of clitics inside islands

Omissions drop in the course of the third year of age from 15% to almost one third reported on the oldest subjects, who start to track with the target value. Similarly, cliticization appears to be mastered from at least age 3.5, with values well above 80%. Comparing the two subgroups within the age span of concern, a rapid development can be observed to be in place. However, still in the youngest subjects clitics are produced at a rate close to 70%, which is fairly a better performance than that observed in the same subjects on matrix clauses. With respect to what reported in the literature, this datum adds important evidence that three-year-olds can indeed boost clitic production under proper syntactic conditions.

6. Animacy and the status of the empty category

Over and above, a subtler analysis revealed that most zero objects were elicited with inanimate antecedents. Three items out of fourteen in the test involved a transitive action carried out on an inanimate object for which, in principle, the intransitive form of the verb does not yield ungrammaticality. It is the discourse condition designed for the task that renders an object specified for the features [-animate; +specific] obligatorily expressed: hence a clitic pronoun. It follows from Cardinaletti and Starke's (1999) typology of pronouns that the structural properties of clitics are at the origin of their underspecification for animacy. Children are well aware of the semantic properties of overt pronouns, as confirmed in the present study by the exclusive use of strong pronouns with [+animate] antecedent and in deictic-like responses, that is, when the object was made salient by the child by pointing at the drawing.

Measuring children's performances across age groups according to the animacy feature of the objects in the items, it is rather interesting that not only inanimate items induce zero objects at higher extent overall, but also the asymmetry was enhanced in root clauses and more significant in the youngest group of children.
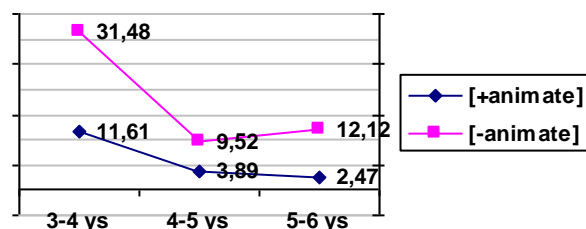
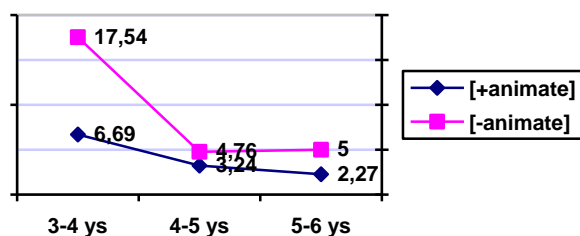**Table 7: Developmental rate of omissions in root contexts: [±animate] objects**

Table 8: Developmental rate of omissions inside islands: [±animate] objects

As for the youngest children, considering only inanimate objects raises percentages above 30%, which is strikingly higher but nonetheless aligns to the figures reported by other studies (see Pérez-Leroux et al. 2007 on French[6]; Castilla et al. 2007 on Spanish[7], who crucially made use of inanimate items in the tests). Such asymmetry suggests that the [-animate] feature of the object plays a pivotal role in inducing preference for ellipsis.

Pérez-Leroux et al. (2007) have called the attention on the far from clear-cut distinction between argumental and pronominal omissions. When ellipsis concerns generic inanimate objects, driving preference for an intransitive use of the verb in the first place, what is missing is a lexically saturated argument, but not an empty category in the sense of Chomsky (1981).

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[6] In Pérez-Leroux et al. (2007) French children were reported to omit the clitic at a rate of 34% at age 3, which is significantly higher than the 15.7% reported in Jakubowicz and Nash (2001).

[7] Castilla et al. (2007) reported 37% clitic omissions at age 3, dropping in development but maintained at a level of 15% up to age 5.

When the missing object is marked in syntax as [+specific] the empty category belongs to a different typological status, which we assumed from a long generative tradition to be defined as a variable. In this case, animacy may not be at play, rather the referential interpretation of the variable. Therefore, [+specific] variables should be illicit inside islands regardless of the [±animate] feature of their antecedent. In actual fact, the children in the experiment tend to align [±animate] null objects inside islands from age 4. This might be taken as evidence that the plunge in omissions in the island condition follows from them being true variables in the root condition. In matrix clauses dropping of inanimate objects appears rather free and less tied to age.

Three-year-olds halve omissions in the adjuncts but a considerable discrepancy holds in both conditions between [±animate] null objects. In development, it seems that the testing condition constrains dropping of inanimate objects from age 3.5. Children younger than 3.5 provided lower omissions with [+animate] objects inside islands but similar rates with inanimate items, regardless of the matrix vs. adjunct nature of the clause.
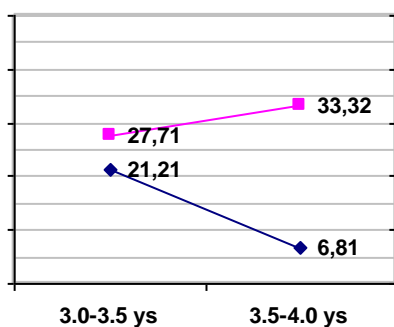

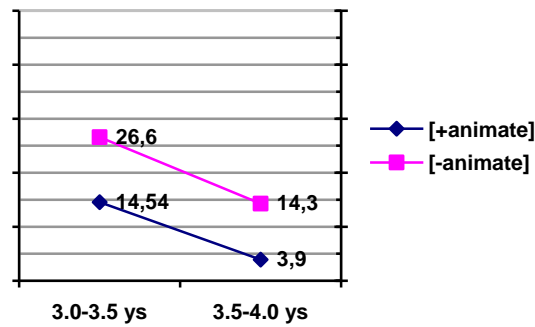**Table 9: Three-year-olds: omissions in root contexts**

Table 10: Three-year-olds: omissions inside islands

7. *What types of null objects in early grammar*

The frame captured by the present analysis is far from neat. The complex interplay of animacy and specificity in children's zero objects suggests that typological differences as for the status of the missing object must be taken into consideration when interpreting child data.

As a starting point for reflection, the hypothesis was borne out that object omissions are reduced in an illicit syntactic environment for an operator-variable construction to arise.

This is true across all the developmental span analysed but to uneven extent and with asymmetrical levels of preference for inanimate objects.

Moreover, development is confirmed once again to occur at incredibly fast rates. The exploration of child phenomena at the interface is confronted with an interplay of factors whose concomitant emergence in typical development is hard to unfold, affecting complex aspects of language and cognition.

The early system has to cope with performance limitations and constricted computational and memory resources. However, experimental evidence suggests that, rather than resorting to extragrammatical explanations for ellipsis phenomena, we should adopt an approach reconciling immaturity of the early system with continuity in the grammatical competence children are endowed with (Rizzi 2005). In the case of argumental ellipsis, early subject omission in non-NSLs has long prevailed in the interest of researchers in the controversial search for evidence for the continuity/discontinuity dichotomy in language acquisition. Among competing approaches, the first line has been able to provide undisputable evidence that grammatical regularities are at play in children's omission. The option of truncating full clausal structures, by producing "less" in the appropriate syntactic conditions,

retains more explanatory adequacy if refined from maturational arguments, especially in the light of the data coming from special populations[8].

The findings from the present analysis offer support to the hypothesis that ellipsis, albeit favoured by the early system, nonetheless obeys precise regularities which call for a grammatical option. However, several considerations need to be added to discuss the asymmetries observed.

Inasmuch as the island condition should offer reliable rates of true omissions – any construction which is not to be accounted for as a variable – it can be stated that these are extremely circumscribed from age 3.5 onwards (table 10). The sheer asymmetry between animate and inanimate null objects in root condition is reduced in the island condition, which might be taken as evidence that children do also interpret inanimate null objects as specific. Hence we do not expect those omissions to be sensitive to the animacy feature of its antecedent. Still, the slightly higher level of inanimate zero objects might appertain to a different option, namely argumental omission intended as ellipsis of a generic internal argument s-selected by the verb. Being interpreted as [-specific], such option is universally available and insensitive to islands. Assuming that it might be adopted in development as well does not amount to saying that children allow generic internal arguments to be interpreted as referential[9]: in actual fact, data indicate that omissions follow a linear path towards disappearance in the island condition, while inanimate objects are dropped to a considerable extent still at age five in matrix clauses (table 2), that is to say, in the appropriate syntactic condition to ensure discourse-linking of the silent category. Those objects are reminiscent of deictic-like null objects, universally attested as inanimate but crucially [+specific] – well chronicled by Sirguðsson (2004a; 2008) with respect to special registers. As Cyrino and Lopes (2006) pointed out, those are also the first null objects to be attested at the early stages of the acquisition of Brazilian Portuguese, a language in which loss of third person clitic pronouns has led to prevalent use of strong pronouns and null objects, respectively, for animate and inanimate antecedents.

As for the Italian children's preference for the null objects construction in those items in which the antecedent was inanimate, input considerations might be of interest. Cyrino, Duarte and Kato (2000) appealed to a sort of "referentiality hierarchy" to explain the concomitant role of animacy and specificity in the types of null objects which diachronically began to spread in Brazilian Portuguese. Arguably, primacy of [-animate] null objects is attested in acquisition as well and first

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[8] Therefore, from the assumption that children do not identify the root of the clause with the CP layer to the broadened speculation that special communication demands leave the option open to truncate structural layers.

[9] This is the position endorsed by Pérez-Leroux, Pirvulescu and Roberge (2007; 2008).

occurrences in deictic contexts appear not to be a prerogative of null object languages.

8. *Null objects, clitic drop and alternative views*

A long accepted analysis has generally paralleled object drop to a phenomenon exclusively appertaining to the acquisition of Romance languages.

The relatively circumscribed amplitude of omissions in the domain of languages without clitic pronouns has led to the – perhaps precipitate – conclusion that a null object stage is not universally attested, rather failure in the costly computation of accusative clitics is at the origin of what should be properly addressed as clitic drop.

Complexity of accusative clitics has been extensively documented, both from theoretical analyses (Jakubowicz et al. 1996; Belletti 1999) and from genuine linguistic evidence. The clitic system is undisputedly one of the most fragile ones in first and second language acquisition, as well as delayed language acquisition and linguistic breakdowns. In addition to the syntactic derivation of such peculiar category halfway between the functional and lexical field, forced to move to check overt case and φ-features due to its deficient D° structure, more recent considerations have addressed the categorial status as a more explanatory account for the pernicious difficulty of accusative clitics in the realm of clitic pronouns. Categorial complexity in the precise sense that, as arguments merged in V-complement position and bearing a theta role, they do not uniform to full object DPs, which renders their categorization more difficult (Rizzi 2000; Hamann 2003).

Our analysis acknowledged the shared interpretive properties of cliticization and silent topicalization without clitic resumption. Assuming that both clitics and null objects share discourse-relatedness, we have upheld the hypothesis that a doubling structure is at play in cliticization, where part of the computation takes place in the inflectional field (the clitic derivation yielding, accordingly, either proclisis or enclisis) and part at the interpretive interface, traditionally identified in the CP field (Rizzi 1997). The trade-off we found between clitics and omissions, in the testing condition in which referential interpretation of a null object was illicit, might be taken as indication that two options are competing in children's grammar, one of which less costly hence favoured at the early stages.

Under such view, no deviancy is postulated in children's interpretation of the object as referential, even when this is not pronounced. Assuming this position implies departing from those approaches that identify omissions with clitic drop.

In Schaeffer (2000) failure to licence discourse-relatedness on the clitic is assumed to follow from lack of movement of a base-generated pro to the clitic head in the Infl node. If we accept the movement analysis as pivotal for a descriptive account of the syntactic means through which a clitic pronoun licences its reference, nevertheless pursuing the hypothesis of a complete isomorphism between zero

objects and clitic drop leads to the inevitable conclusion that children never mark specificity when omitting the clitic.

This is exactly what such accounts proposes, connecting deviancy to a non-yet-developed pragmatic rule. The immature early system does not need to licence discourse-relatedness on the object clitic because no difference is presumed in the state of knowledge between speaker and addressee.

If the child were not producing a d-linked empty category, no difference would have been found between matrix and adjuncts clauses, contrary to facts.

Not only pragmatic competence has been investigated in depth in child studies, with consistent indications that children have discourse notion from very early on, but also this factor cannot easily fit with clitic omissions in populations in which linguistic deficit is dissociated from other cognitive modules.

Maturation arguments have been adduced in Wexler's (1998; 2003) account of clitic omissions as well. The Unique Checking Constraint, assumed to hold in the non-mature child grammar against multiple feature checking, besides being uneasy to reconcile with a continuity view of language acquisition, runs once again into the risks mentioned above. Firstly, such a pro would not be referential; secondly, participle agreement errors would be visible (which is a very disputed argument) when the clitic is spelled out and the converse when the clitic is omitted.

In cross-linguistic perspective, theories advocating clitic drop must presuppose absence of a null object stage in languages with a strong/weak pronominal system. The Unique Checking Constraint, in addition, implies a further distinction within the Romance languages with and without over past participle agreement. In actual fact, its prediction has not been wholly borne out, as recent analyses on European Portuguese showed (Costa et al. 2007; 2008). Interestingly, European Portuguese is a language without past participial morphology. But even more interestingly, European Portuguese is a null object language.

9. Remarks on the null object stage in cross-linguistic perspective

In recent times, Castilla et al. (2007; 2008) have questioned the radical claim – dating back at least to Brown's (1973) corpus – that there is no null object stage in the acquisition of English.

Clearly, object omissions (to be intended as pronominal omissions, in a definite condition) in this language are hardly explained by theories resorting to clitic drop. Nevertheless, evidence is not uncontroversial. To the low percentages reported by Bloom (1990) and Hyams and Wexler (1993) among others, Pérez-Leroux et al.

(2008) have opposed much higher values[10], crucially yielded with [-animate] objects, in elicitation.

Under the proposal to assimilate object omission to a true UG option, namely an operator-variable construction, these data do not come inexplicable.

We have proposed that a null object construction, whence a variable is A'-moved to inherit referentiality from a topic salient in the discourse, is a UG option children may recruit at the first stages of acquisition, when ellipsis is the most favourable resort for the early system.

Such option crucially involves the complementizer system. As no internal licensing is admissible under agreement with a functional head in the Inflectional node, we must suppose that such object reaches a discourse-related position to "hook" to its antecedent. Edge positions are dedicated sites for elements which need to be "visible" to such topic to be properly interpreted. Such idea has been maintained and reformulated in Phase terms (Chomsky, 2001; Kayne 2005) as a computational device which sends to spell out the complement of a phase but leaves its edge active in the computation, available for further operations. Therefore, the special status of edges rests on economical grounds. We may hypothesise that what children interpret producing a null object is a silent demonstrative. Crucially, such derivation is not as costly as producing an overt pronoun. This is why we may assume early object omissions to arise in those cases in which this construction wins over, regardless of cliticization being the alternative. Given the well known asymmetries in the acquisition of the pronominal system in languages with and without clitic pronouns, it would be expected cross-linguistically that clitic omission spanned a longer stage. Nevertheless, a more complex interplay of factors might be involved in the developmental path, among which the role of the input cannot be underestimated. In this regard, Costa et al. (in press) have noted that children acquiring European Portuguese might undergo a more extensive phase of clitic omission due to the complexity of alternative syntactic derivations they are exposed to. Namely, availability of referential null objects in the input, in place of overt third person accusative clitic pronouns, renders the latter the most fragile category in the clitic system. In this sense, it is not so much the structural complexity of the pronoun and the features encoded in it, as the competition of an alternative derivation – in the author's, referred to as Post-syntactic Complexity – that exposes accusative clitics to a broader stage of optionality.

We should add that the complexity of cliticization is still a factor children confront with in development. In the present experiment the island condition, forbidding in principle a null object, actually yielded higher occurrences of clitics from very early on – nonetheless, percentages were still far from the target in the

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[10] The former claimed that omissions are in the region of 8-9% at age 2, but disappear by age 3; the latter reported a plunge in omissions from 35%, at age 2, to 8% at age 3.

youngest subjects, indicating that time is needed for cliticization to be properly mastered. Instead, the same constraint on Portuguese children was not "saved" by higher supply of clitics, rather by a significant resort to full DPs. This datum becomes meaningful especially on the light of the complex pattern of proclisis/ enclisis EP displays in finite clauses. Crucially, placement errors have been found to be peculiar to this language – with a generalised preference for enclisis – not only in acquisition but also in the registers of young generations (Duarte and Matos 2000).

Arguably, the competition between accusative pronouns and null objects belongs to the parametric realm of UG options. This may be one added reason for the universally attested "delay of complement clitics" (Hamann 2003) and their pernicious optionality span.

10. Conclusions

The speculative reading we have proposed for the findings discussed is that early null objects might be referential empty categories moved to a discourse-related position in syntax. Children appear to "exploit" the privileged syntactic status of root clauses to allow a null category – instead of an overt pronoun – to inherit reference from the discourse. Even at the youngest age, omissions have been found to drop in a syntactic condition in which an empty category would fail to be discoursally-bound – in the testing condition, both because of intervention of an island for extraction and of a matrix subject coreferent with it.

Children's preference for inanimate objects deserves a multi-angled analysis since a different typological status is at play if such object is non-referential. We have maintained that both are universally available but only the first is sensitive to islands. Such analysis should explain higher occurrences of inanimate null objects overall but, at once, a certain sensitivity to islands which suggests that most children's inanimate null objects are deictic-like referential categories.

Aligning children's null objects to the operator-variable construction well documented in languages like Chinese or Portuguese meets precise theoretical consequences. Firstly, it implies questioning that children's null objects derive from failure in performing clitic movement. Therefore, no pragmatic deficit is assumed if children appear to exploit a null object option in the appropriate discourse condition and in presence of a salient topic, which in turn implies that specificity is encoded in such category. Finally, a complete parallel between null objects and clitic drop would not be able to explain the – albeit reduced – phenomenon in languages without clitic pronouns. Cross-linguistic evidence might prove relevant to bring the debate outside the traditional domain of Romance languages. The tie between acquisition studies and comparative syntax rests on the precious angle that child phenomena can offer on the path of parameter setting, between positive evidence and performance limitations.

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