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Acquisition of object clitics in child Polish: Evidence for three developmental stages

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Abstract

Cross linguistic variation in L1 clitic acquisition is limited and well-governed, and has been attributed to an underlying syntactic mechanism, such as the Unique Checking Constraint (UCC) in connection with clitic-past participle agreement (Wexler et al., 2003), or a pragmatic constraint, such as Failed Referentiality (Schaeffer, 2000). The present study seeks to validate the claims following from the above theories by looking at the clitic acquisition facts in child Polish in two experiments: clitic production and clitic comprehension. The paper argues that claims following from the two acquisition theories are not supported by Polish L1 data due to an initially high clitic omission rate (60%) and the evidence of early clitic comprehension which precedes clitic production. By comparing clitic production and clitic comprehension results, three developmental stages are identified. A maturational account is adopted attributing non-adult-like structures in child grammar to a discourse-linking mechanism (Borer and Rohrbacher, 2002).

Keywords: Object clitic acquisition; L1 acquisition; Developmental stages; Clitic omission; Clitic comprehension

1. Introduction

Object clitics are a syntax–pragmatics interface phenomenon well-known for cross-linguistic generalizations. In L1 acquisition, they provide an insight into the early clause structure and mechanisms constraining the syntax–pragmatics interface. Cross linguistic variation in L1 clitic acquisition is limited and well-governed, and has been attributed to an underlying syntactic mechanism, such as the Unique Checking Constraint (UCC) in connection with clitic-past participle agreement, or a pragmatic constraint, such as Failed Referentiality. The present study seeks to validate the claims following from the above theories by looking at the clitic acquisition facts in child Polish in two experiments: an elicited clitic production experiment and a clitic comprehension experiment. It is argued that claims following from the two acquisition theories are not supported by Polish L1 data. By comparing the results of the clitic comprehension and clitic production experiments, three developmental stages are identified: Stage One, characterized by low comprehension and virtually no production; Stage Two characterized by consistent comprehension and low production; and Stage Three, characterized by consistent comprehension and production. A maturational perspective on the acquisition of object clitics is suggested, by attributing non-adult-like structures in child grammar to a discourse-linking mechanism analogous to T-chains in root infinitives. It is argued that clitics may remain phonologically null and syntactically

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unanchored as long as the morpho-phonological material necessary to produce them consistently has not been fully acquired.

2. Theories of L1 acquisition of object clitics

2.1. The Unique Checking Constraint

Following Wexler et al. (2003), the presence of clitic-past participle agreement in a given language accounts for two patterns of object clitic acquisition in child language. Languages with object clitic-past participle agreement (Catalan, French, Italian) involve a clitic omission stage (Schaeffer, 2000; Wexler et al., 2003), while languages without clitic-past participle agreement (Spanish, Greek) are characterized by early object clitics in child grammar (Wexler et al., 2003; Tsakali and Wexler, 2004). Due to the observed split, it has been hypothesized that clitic production in child grammar is regulated by the Unique Checking Constraint (UCC), which prevents the D feature on the DP from being checked twice.

UCC, initially proposed to account for Root Infinitives (i.e. non-finite forms used as main verbs) in child language, is said to work as follows. First, based on the Minimalist Theory (Chomsky, 1995), syntactic operations such as argument DP movement are motivated by feature checking. Upward movement of a DP can be triggered by the need to check features which are associated with certain functional projections. One such feature is the D(eterminer)-feature associated with both the DP and the functional projection. In particular, if the D-feature is [−Interpretable], it is checked once and subsequently deleted, while a [+Interpretable] D-feature does not get checked and remains in the derivation until LF. A [−Interpretable] feature cannot remain unchecked, as this would cause the derivation to crash, which explains why in adult syntax the uninterpretable features in all functional projections must be checked.

Second, UCC stipulates that in child syntax the D-feature of a DP can only check against one functional category (hence unique checking). Thus, if a derivation contains more than one functional projection each with a [−Interpretable] D-feature, for example tense (T) and subject agreement (AgrS), in adult grammar the subject DP must raise to check off against the D-features of both T and AgrS. This operation requires two instances of checking, which are problematic for a child, as stipulated by UCC. In order to prevent derivation from crashing (i.e. no unchecked uninterpretable features in the derivation), a particular functional projection (either T or Agr) is deleted from the representation. Thus, child grammar checks the D-feature against either T or AgrS, projecting only one of these INFL functional layers but not both. As a result, either tense or agreement is omitted, which is considered as UG-compatible convergence in the computational system of child syntax.

Third, the fact that children produce finite utterances alongside non-finite ones (root infinitives) follows from a constraint on LF called Minimize Violations: 'choose a numeration whose derivation violates as few grammatical properties as possible. If two numerations are both minimal violators, choose either one.' (Wexler, 1998:64). Since the projection of both T and Agr violates UCC (one violation), while the projection of only one of those functional categories violates well-formedness (one violation), Minimize Violations gives the child a choice between these two numerations, which accounts for optionality with respect to the production of both finite and non-finite verb forms in early syntax.

Finally, the interpretability of the D-feature in functional projections is parameterized, which accounts for the fact that DP raising occurs in some languages in order to check the [−Interpretable] D-feature but does not occur in others where that feature is [+Interpretable]. In order for the derivation to converge and the verbs to be marked for tense and agreement, both uninterpretable D-features under T and AgrS have to be checked. In order to account for the different RI rates in pro-drop and non-pro-drop languages, Wexler assumes that in INFL-licensed pro-drop languages AgrS is pronominal, and either contains a [+Interpretable] D feature which does not need to be checked or contains no D feature. In such case, the subject does not raise to check off the D-feature of Agr, but only raises to T. Thus, only one instance of checking is required for the numeration to converge, so that UCC is said to apply vacuously. The output is the same as the adult representation – there are no unchecked D-features and the derivation does not crash.

The UCC approach has also been applied to cross-linguistic patterns of object clitic acquisition. To account for the syntax of clitics, Wexler (1998/2014) follows Sportiche (1996) in assuming base-generated pronominal clitics as heads of their own functional projection ClP. The clitic associate is a *pro* which is base-generated in the canonical object position as a V complement. It undergoes overt movement to [spec, ClP] licensing the object clitic in Cl°.