

The Pronoun Interpretation Problem in romance complex predicates

Valentina Brunetto*

University of Leeds, School of Modern Languages and Cultures, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK

Received 10 April 2013; received in revised form 10 May 2014; accepted 1 September 2014

Available online 18 November 2014



CrossMark

Abstract

This article argues that the Pronoun Interpretation Problem in child Romance is limited to syntactic constructions in which clitics are not interpreted as bound variables. Reporting experimental data from an Act Out task administered to Italian children aged 3–6, it is shown that not only Exceptional Case Marking but also causative Faire Par constructions trigger PIP. Based on the syntactic properties of the embedded vPs in these two constructions, I argue that coreference is an option for clitic pronouns in these complex predicates. I propose that the cross-linguistic distribution of the phenomenon in light of these findings supports a unitary pragmatic account of the PIP as evidence for the modularity of binding and coreference. The account defended in this paper holds that children's early difficulty with local coreference resides in the syntax/pragmatic interface, involving mastery of a scalar opposition between pronouns and reflexives which interfaces with the syntactic knowledge of the local domain.

© 2014 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Clitic climbing; Binding; Coreference; Romance causatives; Language acquisition

1. Introduction

The acquisition research in the past three decades has provided insightful evidence on the relation between the interpretation of pronouns and the innate component of the language faculty. Since the dawning of the Canonical Binding Theory (Chomsky, 1981), children's mastery of clitic pronouns in simple Principle B contexts has been invoked as uncontroversial evidence for the innateness of binding. The cross-linguistic picture shows that, whereas full pronouns are not interpreted in an adult-like fashion up to until at least age 6, comprehension of clitic pronoun is fully adult-like from the earliest stages:

- (1) Mama Bear_i washed her_i (50% correct in Chien and Wexler (1990))
- (2) Lo gnomo_i lo_i lava (85% correct in McKee (1992))
The gnome him. washes
- (3) ¿La niña_i la_i seca? (90% correct in Baauw et al. (1997))
The girl her.dries off

* Correspondence to: 6 Thornville Place, Leeds LS6 1JW, UK. Tel.: +44 7447611979.

E-mail addresses: vale_b85@hotmail.it, V.Brunetto@leeds.ac.uk.

Wexler and Chien (1985) first referred to the phenomenon exemplified in (1) as “Delay of Principle B Effect” (DPBE). The main observation in favour of syntactic continuity in child grammar was the sharp contrast between, on the one hand, children’s delay in the application of Principle B and, on the other hand, their knowledge of the structural conditions on binding, revealed by their very early mastery of Principle A. More recently, the terminology has been contested by Baauw and Cuetos (2003), who have objected that the maturational connotation in the label does not account for the presence of the phenomenon in language impairments (referents). Thus the more neutral terminology *Pronoun Interpretation Problem* (henceforth, PIP), has come into use in more recent literature.

Three empirical facts are of particular interest in the syntactic distribution of the PIP. The first was soon brought to light by Chien and Wexler’s (1990) experiments, which were set up precisely to tease out syntactic and pragmatic strategies of antecedent-pronoun coindexation. By testing children’s performance in contexts where the pronoun had a quantified local antecedent, Chien and Wexler (1990) demonstrated that the apparent Principle B delay was extrasyntactic in nature, and related to the pragmatic interpretation of pronouns. The so-called *Quantificational Asymmetry*, a label we borrow from Elbourne (2005), is a robust result: children discriminate between referential and non-referential (*wh*- or quantificational) antecedents, disallowing binding of a pronoun by a quantified NP in a local domain (Avrutin and Thornton, 1994; Boster, 1991; Chien and Wexler, 1990; Thornton, 1990; Thornton and Wexler, 1999):

(4) I know who_i washed him_i: Bert. (8% anaphoric interpretations in Thornton (1990))

Relatedly, cross-linguistic research revealed a *Clitic Exemption Effect*, as shown in (2) and (3), namely, the absence of interpretation problems in the acquisition of languages with clitic pronouns. In McKee’s (1992) study, Italian children correctly interpreted *lo* as disjoint from the subject 85% of the time; similar rates hold in Spanish (Baauw et al., 1997; Baauw, 2000; Padilla, 1990), Russian (Avrutin and Wexler, 1992) and French (Hamann et al., 1997; Jakubowicz, 1989).

Together, these two facts point to the modular dissociation between syntax, the module responsible for the interpretation of bound variables, and pragmatics, the module responsible for the interpretation of free or unbound variables – as first observed by Reinhart (1983). Reinhart (1983) specifically posited the existence of two strategies of pronoun resolution, binding and coreference, arguing *contra* Chomsky (1981) that any pronoun which is not bound falls under the coreference module.

The third puzzling side of this phenomenon is that it surfaces with exceptional case marked pronouns, clitics and full alike. In some languages (e.g. Dutch, Baauw et al., 1997; Philip and Coopmans, 1996), ECM sentences trigger *extra* PIP, i.e. less than chance-level performance or, in other words, a true preference for the intrasentential subject. In Romance, this has been reported (Baauw et al., 1997; Baauw and Cuetos, 2003; Hamann et al., 1997) to be the *only* context in which clitics are not exempt from interpretation problems, giving rise to just above chance level performance.

This article will focus on the exceptional properties of cliticization in the contexts which give rise to clitic interpretation problems. The puzzle which ECM complex predicates raise in developmental perspective is twofold: on the one hand, it reopens the question of the Clitic Exemption Effect; on the other hand, it poses a challenge to the standard definition of Principle B and local domains. I will present the results of an act-out experiment conducted on Italian children in the PIP stage which broadens the empirical domain by including causative *Faire-Par* constructions.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows: I will start by providing a background of the phenomenon and how it has fed linguistic theory, leading to a fine-grained distinction between strategies of reference assignment in syntax and in pragmatics. In Section 2, I highlight the limits of the approaches which have “exempted” clitic pronouns from the debate by identifying the PIP with properties incompatible with the *pragmatics* of cliticization. In Section 3 I discuss the attempts advanced in both acquisition and linguistic theory to accommodate the empirical data, especially the special status of ECM, by focusing on the *processing* load involved in interface computations. Section 4 sets the question of the Clitic Exemption Effect from a syntactic viewpoint: can binding effects in object cliticization be explained in derivational perspective? If so, why does PIP show up in ECM complex predicates and not in simple predicates? In Sections 5 and 6 I discuss the syntactic predictions of a phase-based analysis for Italian complex predicates and its implications for a perhaps unified explanation of the phenomenon in acquisition perspective. The concluding Sections 7 and 8 are devoted to the discussion of the experimental study and the potential contribution of a refined syntactic and pragmatic analysis for our current understanding of binding constraints and obviation in the child grammar.

2. Clitics under the pragmatic view

Both the *Quantificational Asymmetry* and the *Clitic Exemption Effect*, under the early pragmatic view (Avrutin and Wexler, 1992; Chien and Wexler, 1990), are evidence that children’s knowledge of Principle B is innate, whereas the pragmatic knowledge of local coreference is delayed. The exemption of clitics from local interpretation problems, according to these accounts, is explained by their referential deficiency, specifically, their inability to refer deictically. Since clitics cannot refer deictically, they must be bound, either in syntax or in the discourse (Avrutin and Wexler, 1992). The gist

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/935366>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/935366>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)