



Complementizers and subordination in typical language acquisition and SLI

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to report on the pattern of use of complementizers by Greek SLI children as well as describe differences and/or similarities with patterns of emergence in typical language development. The complementizers *na* (corresponding to the English infinitival marker *to*), *oti* and *pos* (corresponding to the English *that*) and *pu* (introducing factive complements and relative clauses) were investigated in spontaneous speech samples of 8 children with SLI and two control groups: 8 language-matched and 8 age-matched children. The theoretical frameworks adopted are that of the *Interpretability Hypothesis*, according to which LF-interpretability plays a determining role in the acquisition of formal features by SLI children, and Roussou's account of the C domain in Greek. In line with these accounts, the child data was analysed with respect to feature specification, posing a distinction between *pu* on the one hand, specified for the interpretable feature of definiteness, and *oti* and *pos* on the other, while *na* holds a unique status, functioning as marker of mood/modality and a clause-typing element. Additionally, the selectional restrictions these complementizers impose on inflection were also investigated. The results indicate that complementizers with low specification for LF-interpretability are more sensitive in SLI, while their selectional properties are active, revealing a problem in the morpho-phonological operation of spell-out rather than their lexical representation in the children's underlying grammar.

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1. Introduction

Although a great amount of research on typical and impaired language acquisition has reported findings on patterns of emergence of a variety of morpho-syntactic features, little is known about the way Greek subordination emerges in child language, especially in SLI grammars. Research findings from English and Hebrew typical acquisition data have shown that subordination first emerges in the use of complement clauses, while adverbial clauses follow and relative clauses are the last to appear in child speech (Bloom et al., 1980; Dromi and Berman, 1986). This pattern has been accounted for in terms of structural complexity of embedding in combination with conceptual complexity and discourse requirements, whereby complement clauses are more accessible since they are selected by the verb. On the other hand, a number of studies have indicated the reverse order, with relative clauses emerging before complements (e.g. Armon-Lotem, 2005). This pattern is explained on account of the feature complexity of the embedded clause. Specifically, complement clauses require knowledge of the subcategorization properties of the selecting verb, thus lexical information needs to be available apart from syntactic knowledge, which renders their acquisition more demanding.

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Greek data have revealed that adverbial (purpose) clauses appear along with some complement clauses, while relative clauses seem to emerge earlier than they do in the studies mentioned above and precede temporal, causal and conditional clauses (Stephany, 1995). This pattern requires a different explanation as it cannot be accounted for by reference to the degree of structural complexity of these clause types alone. The acquisition of subordination is approached from a different perspective in this paper: patterns of emergence and early use are associated with the morpho-syntactic properties of subordinators. Specifically, the use of subordination markers and especially complementizers is investigated in association with the formal features they encode. Use (versus omission) of complementizers is analyzed with respect to the encoding of intrinsic LF-interpretable features they involve rather than the structural complexity of the clauses they introduce. Although one cannot completely disregard the factor of structural complexity, it is not seen as the sole determining factor affecting acquisition patterns in this paper.¹

The study is placed within the theoretical framework which suggests that SLI development is affected by feature-interpretability at LF (Tsimpli, 2001; Tsimpli and Mastropavlou, 2007; Tsimpli and Stavrakaki, 1999). Since very little is known about the way subordination emerges in SLI grammar, the acquisition patterns of Greek complementizers are presented and analyzed with respect to their differences in feature-specification in terms of interpretability.

1.1. Theoretical background

1.1.1. Specific Language Impairment

Children with specific language impairment form a highly heterogeneous population with respect to the characteristics they exhibit in acquiring language. This heterogeneity has led to variability in the descriptions of the symptoms associated with the disorder, which is why a consistent set of diagnostic markers has not been established as yet, while formal diagnosis of SLI is performed on the basis of exclusion criteria – i.e. lack of pathological, neurological or psychosocial disorders to account for the linguistic setbacks. What is more, even greater controversy has been raised in researchers' attempt to formulate an account on the aetiology of the disorder, while the locus of the dispute lies in two fundamental questions: first, *is SLI specific to language or does it affect cognitive development as well?* And second, *is language development in SLI deviant or delayed?* With respect to the first question, two major trends have been noted in the literature, namely the *psychological* approaches and the *linguistic* ones. *Psychological* approaches see SLI either as a result of a general perceptual deficit (e.g. Leonard, 1989; Tallal, 1976) or as the outcome of problems related to phonological memory (e.g. Gathercole and Baddeley, 1990). However, adopting a modular approach to language, the *linguistic* accounts are more relevant to the purposes of the present study.

Seven major linguistic accounts of the SLI aetiology, forming four theoretical trends, are identified in the literature. In some of these accounts the disorder is seen as a *representational deficit*, causing problems to the children's ability to formulate grammatical rules (*Implicit Rule Formation hypothesis* – IRF, Gopnik and Crago, 1991), establish agreement relations (*Missing Agreement account* – MA, Clahsen, 1989), acquire morpho-syntactic features (*Feature Blindness hypothesis* – FB, Gopnik, 1990) or specifically those features that are LF-uninterpretable in Chomsky's terms (*Interpretability Hypothesis* – IH, Tsimpli and Stavrakaki, 1999). Alternatively, accounts that argue for a *computational deficit* maintain that SLI affects the children's language production system, impeding their ability to activate syntactic operations such as Movement (*Representational Deficit of Dependent Relations* – RDDR, van der Lely, 1994; van der Lely et al., 2011) or leading them to avoid computational complexity by *leaving features or bundles of features optionally unpronounced* (Jakubowicz, 2011; Jakubowicz and Roulet, 2007). Finally, the postulation that SLI constitutes a *processing deficit* has also been put forward, arguing that affected children have limited abilities of processing morpho-syntactic input of low phonetic substance (*Sparse Morphology Hypothesis* – SMH, Leonard et al., 1988). The accounts mentioned so far argue that SLI impedes on language acquisition causing deviant developmental patterns, contrary to accounts that view SLI as a *developmental delay*, rendering children unable to grow out of the Optional Infinitives stage, omitting thus tense and/or agreement markers (*Extended Optional Infinitives account* – EOI and *Agreement/Tense Omission Model* – ATOM, Wexler et al., 1998).

In a nutshell, three linguistic loci are proposed by the above mentioned approaches: the perceptual mechanisms responsible for the analysis of grammatical information, the underlying representations of formal features, and the derivational component responsible for the application of grammatical operations. These accounts have failed to provide a complete description of the problems SLI causes to language development, giving a wide range of characteristics, which, however, do not always coexist in the SLI population. This is attributed to the fact that most of these accounts have been formulated on the basis of linguistic evidence from a single language, while cross-linguistic variation constitutes a serious challenge for most of them. However, some of them have been more successful in explaining contradictory findings from different languages more than others. For instance, the EOI and ATOM models have proven problematic in accounting for cross-linguistic differences due to the different status of optional infinitives in different languages, as well as because of the fact that tense is not affected by SLI in some languages as much as in others (de Villiers, 2003; Dromi et al., 2003; Clahsen et al., 1997; Clahsen and Dalakakis, 1999; Mastropavlou, 2006; Tsimpli and Stavrakaki, 1999, and others). On the other hand, Leonard's *sparse morphology hypothesis* acknowledges great cross-linguistic variation, since SLI symptoms are highly dependent on the morpho-phonological characteristics of each language. This account lies at the opposite extreme as it implies that there are no language areas that are crosslinguistically affected by SLI. Yet, despite the heterogeneity that

¹ At the same time, we also acknowledge that factors other than the morphosyntactic properties of subordinators, such as factivity, can also affect patterns of acquisition.

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