

Disentangling sources of difficulty associated with the acquisition of accusative clitics in French



Hélène Delage^{*}, Stephanie Durrleman, Ulrich H. Frauenfelder

Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland

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Abstract

Accusative clitic pronouns are acquired later than both nominative and reflexive pronouns in typically developing French-speaking children. However recent research suggests that not all these clitics are equally difficult, 3rd person accusative clitics (ACC3) being more problematic than 1st and 2nd person. In this study, we explored three properties which could make ACC3 complex: (1) gender marking, (2) discourse-participant independent reference, and (3) optionality in spoken French. We have created specific experiments assessing the role of each of these properties in clitic acquisition in 41 French-speaking children aged 4–8. Results show that all three properties play a role in making ACC3 complex, with the strongest influence coming from gender marking. Implications of these results are discussed in light of previous related studies.

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1. Introduction

Accusative clitic pronouns (ACC) have been widely investigated in studies of the acquisition of Romance languages. They have attracted particular interest because of their late acquisition as compared to both nominative and reflexive pronouns in typically developing French-speaking children (Delage, 2008; Hamann et al., 1996; Jakubowicz et al., 1998; Jakubowicz and Rigaut, 2000; Van der Velde, 2003; Zesiger et al., 2010). Their complexity has positioned them as a clinical marker of specific language impairment or 'SLI' (Paradis et al., 2003; Parris and Maillart, 2004) and more generally of atypical language development (Delage, 2008; Tuller et al., 2011). More recently, it has been suggested for Greek, Romanian and Catalan that not all ACC are equally difficult (Avram et al., 2015; Coene and Avram, 2011; Gavarró and Fortón, 2014; Tsimpli and Mastropavlou, 2007). Instead what appears to be problematic is specifically 3rd person clitics, while 1st and 2nd person ACC prove to be relatively simpler. This asymmetry has now also been confirmed for French by a recent study (Tuller et al., 2011). The aim of the present work is to further explore the 3rd versus 1st person distinction for ACC in French to elucidate why 3rd person clitics are associated with delayed development. More specifically, while all ACC share certain properties (listed in a–c in Table 1), those of the 3rd person present additional

^{*} Corresponding author at: Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Geneva, 40 boulevard du Pont d'Arve, 1211 Geneva 4, Switzerland. Tel.: +41 22 379 9170.

E-mail addresses: Helene.Delage@unige.ch (H. Delage), Stephanie.Durrleman@unige.ch (S. Durrleman), Ulrich.Frauenfelder@unige.ch (U.H. Frauenfelder).

Table 1
Properties of accusative clitics (adapted from Tuller et al., 2011).

All ACC	Specifically 3rd person ACC
(a) Appearance in a non-canonical position	(d) Morphological marking for gender and number (while other ACC agree for number only)
(b) Co-occurrence with a nominative clitic	(e) Discourse-participant independence for their reference (and therefore unmarked for animacy)
(c) Non-local binding	(f) Optionality in spoken French under discourse/lexical conditions

characteristics which would render them particularly difficult (listed in d–f in Table 1) and which are the focus of this research.

This study considers the impact of each of these properties specific to 3rd person ACC, namely (i) the morphological marking for gender, (ii) the discourse-participant-independent reference (i.e., where reference is not tied to speaker-addressee roles) and (iii) the legitimate omission or ‘optionality’ in specific contexts of spoken French. These properties have been hypothesized to play a role in delaying the acquisition of 3rd person ACC in previous research, which we review below.

1.1. 3rd person ACC

Research on the acquisition of French ACC (1) has shown that these emerge more slowly than both (2) reflexive and (3) nominative clitics in typical language development:

- (1) Jean **le** voit
John him sees
‘John sees him’
- (2) Jean **se** voit
John himself sees
‘John sees himself’
- (3) **Il** voit Jean
He sees John
‘He sees John’

Hamann et al. (1996) analyzed the spontaneous language of a French-speaking child from age 2 to 2;10 and showed that while the nominative clitic was present from the first recording (i.e., at age 2;0) and was consistently used in more than half of the child productions, ACC were virtually absent until age 2;6. Moreover at age 2;9, the accusative was found only in 14% of the contexts where it should have been obligatorily realized,¹ contrary to nominative clitics which occurred in 63% of such contexts. A similar delay was observed by Jakubowicz et al. (1998) in an elicited production study of 20 French children aged 5;6 to 5;11. In addition, these authors noted a delay between the accusative as compared to the reflexive clitic (both encoding 3rd person). Thus a hierarchy emerges, with the nominative being acquired before the reflexive, which in turn is acquired before the accusative. Jakubowicz and Rigaut (2000) confirmed this hierarchy with an analysis of natural language corpora as well as with an elicited production task conducted with 12 young children aged 2 to 2;7. Subsequently, the hierarchy was replicated in a study of 99 children aged 3;5 to 6;5 tested specifically with elicited production (Zesiger et al., 2010). This study clearly illustrated the developmental trend of these elements, namely that while nominatives were at ceiling at age 3, reflexives approached this level at age 4 (85%) while ACC only did so at age 6 (90%).

In sum, ACC are produced substantially less than other clitics in early childhood, yielding either frequent omissions of the object altogether, or the use of full lexical DPs (Determiner Phrases) instead. Elicited production experiments for clitics in French show that frequent omissions are indeed coupled with a substantial use of lexical DPs: At mean age 3;2, children omitted ACC 55.9% of the time and produced lexical DPs instead in 20.5% of their utterances (Van der Velde, 2003). This

¹ Meaning that these contexts did not meet specific restrictions (as further described) which could lead to ACC3 optionality in spoken French.

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