

# Children's production of relative clauses in Palestinian Arabic: Unique errors and their movement account

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## Abstract

This study tests empirically several hypotheses formulated for the learning trajectory of Palestinian Arabic relative clauses and the errors the process might involve. Findings from elicited production of children acquiring Palestinian Arabic relative clauses show that like in other languages, subject relatives are acquired first, and that among the non-subject relatives a certain gradation obtains with the prepositional relatives being acquired later than the non-prepositional ones. As to the errors attested in the process, the findings confirm that in addition to the familiar resumptive DP error (DP doubling), acquisition of these structures in Palestinian Arabic involves a couple of errors which, to our knowledge, have never been documented in the acquisition of relative clauses across languages. We argue that these errors, referred to as “subject fronting” and “complementizer doubling”, are due to the nature of the adult derivation of relative clauses in the language as viewed by Aoun and Choueiri (1996), rather than by Shlonsky (1992), and propose a concrete account thereof. Finally, we account for the resumptive DP error across languages, including Palestinian Arabic, using the ‘matching analysis’ of Sauerland (1998, 2002).

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## 1. Introduction

The acquisition of relative clauses follows a similar trajectory in many languages, with subject relatives being mastered earlier than all other relative clauses (Friedmann et al., 2009a; Günzberg-Kerbel et al., 2008). Moreover, the process involves non-target-like productions such as over-use of resumptive pronouns (1), use of resumptive DPs (RDPs) (2), and omission of resumptive PPs in languages such as Hebrew where such omission is not allowed (3) (Armon-Lotem et al., 2006; Friedmann and Novogrodsky, 2004; Guasti and Shlonsky, 1995; Hamburger and Crain, 1982; Labelle, 1990; Pérez-Leroux, 1995; Varlokosta and Armon-Lotem, 1998, a.o.).

Target: the ball that the boy catches

(1) \*the ball that the boy catches **it**

(2) \*the ball that the boy catches **the ball**

resumptive pronoun

RDP

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- Target: ha-ec she-ha-gamad tipes **alav**  
 the tree that-the-dwarf climbed on-him/it  
 'the tree that the dwarf climbed'
- (3) \*ha-ec she-ha-gamad tipes  
 the tree that-the-dwarf climbed  
 'the tree that the dwarf climbed'

Findings from our study of elicited production of relative clauses by children acquiring Palestinian Arabic (PA) reveal that the learning trajectory in PA is quite similar to that found in other languages, but the errors are not. Alongside the aforementioned errors, especially the RDP error, children acquiring PA make two unique errors, never documented before, to our knowledge. We will refer to these errors as "subject fronting" errors (4) and "complementizer doubling" errors (5) (*illi* being the relative complementizer in Arabic).

- Target: `iz-zara:fi *illi* l-walad ḥaḏan-ha  
 the-giraffe that the-boy hugged-her/it  
 'the giraffe that the boy hugged'
- (4) \*`iz-zara:fi **l-walad** *illi* ḥaḏan-ha subject fronting  
 the-giraffe the-boy that hugged-her/it
- (5) \*`iz-zara:fi **illi** l-walad **illi** ḥaḏan-ha complementizer doubling  
 the-giraffe that the-boy that hugged-her/it  
 'the giraffe that the boy hugged'

The goal of this paper is to examine and discuss these findings with respect to theoretically driven hypotheses, motivated by the derivation of relative clauses in general and in PA, in particular.

The paper is structured as follows: In section 2 we discuss some theoretical issues concerning the derivation of relative clauses, and specify how they might bear on the acquisition of these structures, especially in PA. Based on this, section 3 introduces our main question and hypotheses for the acquisition of relative clauses in PA, lays out our testing ground, namely an experimental study eliciting relative clauses in PA, and discusses how the findings of this study bear on the hypotheses. In section 4 we focus on the errors, the two unique ones as well as the familiar RDP error. We suggest that the former are interrelated stemming from the peculiarities of the derivation of PA relative clauses, whereas the RDP error, not necessarily in PA, is best accounted for using the 'matching analysis'. The proposed account of both types of errors suggests that a derivation involving A'-movement should be assumed for relative clauses in PA, probably, alongside a binding derivation. Section 5 summarizes the paper.

## 2. Relative clauses in linguistic theory

Relative clauses are embedded CPs modifying nominal phrases. They include a bound variable coreferential with the modified DP. Depending on the language or relativization site, the variable can be realized by a null syntactic element, probably a trace (6a, d) (but see ahead), or by an overt one, referred to as a resumptive pronoun (6b, c).

- (6) a. This is **the present**<sub>i</sub> [<sub>CP</sub> which<sub>i</sub> Lisa bought **t<sub>i</sub>/\*it<sub>i</sub>**] English  
 b. This is the present<sub>i</sub> [<sub>CP</sub> that Lisa didn't know [<sub>CP</sub> who sent **it<sub>i</sub>**]].<sup>1</sup>  
 c. zot **ha-matana**<sub>i</sub> [<sub>CP</sub> she-lisa kanta (**ota**<sub>i</sub>)] Hebrew  
 this the-present that-Lisa bought her/it  
 'This is the present that Lisa bought.'  
 d. zot **ha-yalda**<sub>i</sub> [<sub>CP</sub> she- (\*hi<sub>i</sub>) kanta et ha-matana]  
 this the-girl that she bought Acc the-present  
 'This is the girl that bought the present.'

<sup>1</sup> In the syntactic literature, a sentence like (6b) is considered grammatical, due to the occurrence of the pronoun (compare with (i)). However, see the work of Clemens et al. (2012) showing that such sentences, even with the pronoun, are judged as ungrammatical.

(i) \*This is the present [<sub>CP</sub> that Lisa didn't know [<sub>CP</sub> who sent]].

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