The acquisition of object clitic features in French: A comprehension study

Mihaela Pirvulescu [a,*], Nelleke Strik [b,1]

[a] University of Toronto Mississauga, Department of Language Studies, 3359 Mississauga Road North, North Building, Mississauga, Ontario L5L1C6, Canada
[b] Dalhousie University, Department of French, 6135 University Avenue, Halifax, NS B3H 4R2, Canada

Abstract

The goal of this paper is to study gender and number agreement features in French object clitics and strong pronouns. We adopt an analysis of clitic pronouns as defective categories, namely as simply spell-outs of phi-features and of strong pronouns as having an additional NP-layer; we predict that children will treat the two types of pronouns differently, showing more difficulty with the comprehension of clitics than with that of strong pronouns. Results of a picture choice task with 3- to 5-year-old French-speaking children partially confirm this prediction. Furthermore, 3-year-old children are not sensitive to features on clitics, showing recency effects. Our discussion shows that current proposals have difficulties in accommodating these results. Object clitics seem to be treated, in comprehension, similarly to agreement phi-features. However, while object clitics clearly present more of a challenge than other types of pronominals, we propose that the problem, especially with younger children, lay with the working memory such that the children attempt to keep anaphoric dependencies as short as possible.
© 2014 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Object clitic pronouns; Strong pronouns; French; Comprehension; Features; Acquisition

1. Introduction

How are object clitic pronouns represented in the child's grammar? And what does this imply with respect to their comprehension? Research on the acquisition of comprehension of object clitics in French is scarce, particularly research focusing on the phi-features[2] (gender and number) involved in these clitics. However, a considerable number of studies are available with respect to the production of object clitics. Previous research demonstrates that children acquiring French frequently omit object clitics in contexts where clitic pronouns are obligatory in the target grammar (Müller et al., 1996; Jakubowicz et al., 1997; Pérez-Leroux et al., 2008a,b; Zesiger et al., 2010; among many others). While previous studies on French clitic comprehension and production found most of the difficulties to manifest in production, object clitics' features were not directly targeted. In addition, recent work on Spanish found a correlation between the omission of clitics and difficulties with the retrieval of clitic features in their comprehension (Grüter et al., 2012). To verify whether

---

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 905 828 3766.
  E-mail addresses: ma.pirvulescu@utoronto.ca (M. Pirvulescu), nelleke.strik@dal.ca (N. Strik).
[1] Tel.: +1 902 494 3403.

[2] Note that we address here only gender and number, and not case features; as suggested by an anonymous reviewer, clitics might also be endowed with a topic feature; we will not address this possibility either. We will refer to these features as ''phi-features'' throughout the paper.

difficulties with object clitics might be related to children's difficulties with some features of the clitic itself, we aim to test their ability to recover the content of phi-features. Clitic pronouns will be compared with strong pronouns for reasons pertaining to their syntactic representation and their development in acquisition. We will present data from a picture choice task administered to 3- to 5-year-old monolingual French children.

This article is organized as follows: we will first present a short description of how object clitics have been analyzed in the literature in Section 2, then give an overview of relevant previous studies on the acquisition of object clitics and agreement in Section 3. Our study will be presented in Section 4 and followed by a general discussion and conclusion in Sections 5 and 6.

2. Object pronouns in French

French pronouns have distinct forms based on case, person, gender, number and reflexivity. Both clitic and strong pronouns exist in French, but their distribution and use are different. For direct objects, clitic pronouns are used. Gender distinctions are made only in third person forms. Since in this article we are interested in gender and number features, only third person clitics have been investigated. These are *le/la* ''him/her/it'' and *les* ''them'' (see (1)).

(1)	a.	Marie mange le gâteau.	Marie *le* mange.	(masculine singular)
		''Marie eats the cake.''	''Marie eats it.''	
	b.	Marie mange la pomme.	Marie *la* mange.	(feminine singular)
		''Marie eats the apple.''	''Marie eats it.''	
	c.	Marie mange les gâteaux.	Marie les mange.	(masculine plural)
		''Marie eats the cakes.''	''Marie eats them.''	
	d.	Marie mange les pommes.	Marie les mange.	(feminine plural)
		''Marie eats the apples.''	''Marie eats them.''	

French clitics cannot be separated or dislocated from the verb, except by other clitics or the negation element *ne*, and they are usually in preverbal position (unless with imperatives). Furthermore, they cannot be stressed, they cannot occur alone, they cannot be conjoined and they cannot be the complement of a preposition (cf. Kayne, 1975). In all these cases, strong pronouns or DPs are required.

For strong pronouns, as for clitics, gender distinctions are made only in third person forms. The third person strong object pronouns are *lui* ''him/it'', *elle* ''her/it'', *eux* ''them'' for masculine and *elles* ''them'' for feminine and as objects they appear with a preposition (see (2)).

(2)	a.	Marie pense à Paul.	Marie pense à *lui*.	(masculine singular)
		''Marie is thinking of Paul.''	''Marie is thinking of him.	
	b.	Marie part avec Sophie.	Marie part avec *elle*.	(feminine singular)
		''Marie is leaving with Sophie.''	''Marie is leaving with her.''	
	c.	Marie pense à Paul et Sophie.	Marie pense à *eux*.	(masculine plural)
		''Marie is thinking of Paul and Sophie.''	''Marie is thinking of them.''	
	d.	Marie part avec Sophie et Lisa.	Marie part avec *elles*.	(feminine plural)
		''Marie is leaving with Sophie and Lisa.''	''Marie is leaving with them.''	

As the examples illustrate, strong object pronouns can be either an indirect object, as in (2)a,c, or an adjunct, as in (2)b,d. They cannot appear before the verb, unlike clitic objects, nor can they appear immediately after the verb, unlike DPs. They must be preceded by a preposition. These characteristics are further illustrated below (adapted from Kayne, 1975:66):

(3)	a.	Marie connaît *mon frère*.
		''Marie knows my brother.''
	b.	*Marie *lui* connaît.
		''Marie him knows.''
	c.	*Marie connaît *lui*.
		''Marie knows him.''
	d.	Marie a fait ça *pour lui*.
		''Marie has made this for him.''