

Person features and the acquisition of clitics*

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“For Adriana, with memories of our excursions in Lisbon, Kourion and other places”

In her paper on participle agreement, Belletti (2006) showed how some person specifications give rise to obligatory participle agreement while others do not. The contrast is exemplified in (1) for Italian.

- (1) a. L’ho vista/*visto.
3sg.cl have.1sg seen-fem-sg/*seen-masc-sg
‘I have seen her.’
b. Mi/ti ha vista/visto.
1sg/2sg.cl have.3sg seen-fem-sg/seen-masc-sg
‘S/he has seen me.’

In Romance varieties with less pervasive participle agreement than Italian, such as peninsular Catalan, third person may display participle agreement, but agreement is banned with first and second person object clitics:

- (2) a. L’he vista/vist.
3sg.cl have.1sg seen-fem-sg/seen-masc-sg
‘I have seen her.’
b. M’/T’ha *vista/vist.
1sg/2sg.cl have.3sg *seen-fem-sg/seen-masc-sg

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‘S/he has seen me.’

We assume that participle agreement is the spell out of an operation that eliminates an uninterpretable feature in ν P. The presence of such an uninterpretable feature triggers movement of the associate of the clitic to the specifier of ν P. The Unique Checking Constraint analysis of clitic omission in early child grammar capitalises on this operation (Wexler 1998, Gavarró, Torrens and Wexler 2010). Under that analysis, double feature checking by a given DP is subject to maturation. If a clitic derivation involves only elimination of one uninterpretable feature at CIP, as in e.g. Spanish or Romanian, no participle agreement is found and no clitic omission occurs in early production. If the derivation requires two instances of feature elimination, at ν P and CIP, participle agreement takes place, but double feature elimination conflicts with the Unique Checking Constraint (UCC) and early clitic omission is found. This is, by hypothesis, what happens in Italian, French and Catalan with third person object clitics.

A straightforward prediction of this hypothesis is that first and second object clitics will be omitted if participle agreement occurs in the language with those clitics, but should be unproblematic otherwise. This is the prediction we aim to test with Catalan.

We designed an elicitation task replicating that of Silva (2008) for European Portuguese. We tested 44 children (sixteen 2-year-olds, nineteen 3-year-olds, nine 4-year-olds) and 10 adult controls, all native speakers of the varieties of Catalan in which no participle agreement is found with first/second person clitics. Subjects were tested on 8 items, counterbalanced for person; we did not elicit plural clitics, since previous work, including Silva (2008), indicated that extralinguistic issues rendered elicitation unrealistic. The results appear in Table 1. Adults produced a 100% clitics (either with finite and non-finite verbs).

Table 1: Results for clitic production/omission of first and second person object clitics (absolute numbers and percentage in parentheses)

age group	cl +fin	om +fin	cl –fin	om –fin	DP –fin	non-valid
2-year-olds	36 (28.13%)	2 (1.56%)	46 (35.94%)	18 (14.06%)	9 (7.03%)	17 (13.28%)
3-year-olds	79 (51.97%)	11 (7.24%)	26 (17.11%)	22 (14.47%)	1 (0.66%)	13 (8.55%)
4-year-olds	34 (47.22%)	0	34 (47.22%)	4 (5.56%)	0	0
adults	54 (67.50%)	0	26 (32.50%)	0	0	0

First and second person clitics are collapsed in the results since the statistical analysis reveals that there is no statistically significant difference between first and second person for any age group. Nor do we find any significant difference (in terms of omission rate) between 2 and 4-year-olds, a result we interpret as meaning that the performance of 2-year-olds is close to adult-like. The high rates of clitic production and low rates of omission reported are consistent with those found in spontaneous production in Catalan and other languages without a null object option (Romanian, Coene and Avram 2011).

Importantly to evaluate the hypothesis put forward, we compared omission and production of first/second person clitics with those for third person clitics investigated in Gavarró, Torrens and Wexler (2010). Omission is significantly higher for third person clitics (Estimated Means of omission are 0.34 (CI_{95%} = (0.22, 0.48)) for third person clitics, but only 0.14 (CI_{95%} = (0.08, 0.21)) for first/second person) and, at age 2, there is a significant difference between omission with third person and omission with first/second person (Estimated Means of omission are: 0.18 (CI_{95%} = (0.09, 0.31)) for first/second person and 0.77 (CI_{95%} = (0.52, 0.91)) for third person). This contrast between first/second and third person falls within the predictions of the UCC underpinning clitic omission and production.

References

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