

Children’s use of different types of subjects in Clitic Left Dislocations

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Belletti & Manetti (forthcoming) investigated monolingual children’s production of Clitic Left Dislocations (henceforth CILD) and in particular the use of left dislocated object topics in structures as i.e. $DP_1 DP_2 Cl V$. In two elicited production experiments 72 children ($n=36$ in each experiment, from 4 to 6 year-olds) were presented with pictures depicting action verbs, either with both the subject and the object in the singular form (Experiment 1: e.g. cat washing dog, rabbit dressing bear) or with a plural subject and a singular object creating a number mismatch condition between DPs (Experiment 2: e.g. cats washing dog, rabbits dressing bear). In both tests children were asked to talk about the patients of the actions and this prompting question yielded the use of CILDs from the age of 4, showing that children master the use of left dislocated object topics under appropriate discourse conditions (see Belletti & Manetti forthcoming, for a detailed analysis of the CILDs and types of topics produced):

- (1) a. *Al/Il cane il gatto lo lava*
To the/the dog the cat him.Cl washes
‘The dog, the cat is washing him.’
- b. *Al/Il cane lo lavano*
To the/The dog him.Cl wash
‘The dog, (they) are washing him.’

As mentioned before, both experiments elicited CILDs, but an interesting difference emerged across experiments concerning the type of subject produced. The present paper aims at discussing this difference by highlighting and analysing the use of null pronominal vs. overt lexical subjects in the production of $DP_1 DP_2 cl V$ structures.

In Experiment 1, as expected, children preferred the production of CILDs with singular lexical subjects (64%) (i.e. $DP_{object} DP_{subject} Cl V$; see 1a), and seldom used null plural subjects (12%). In Experiment 2 pictures depicted two agents and required use of plural lexical subjects, but the results showed that the overwhelming majority of children’s CILDs had the subject realized as a null plural subject, resulting in structures in the form of $DP_{object} pro_{pl} Cl V$, (80%; see 1b). Moreover, production of CILDs in Experiment 2 significantly increased with respect to Experiment 1, as well as the number of children producing CILDs (Exp. 1: 47% vs. Exp. 2: 89%). Table 1 reports the ratio of these types of subjects in the two experiments (the remaining subjects, not reported in the table, were either post-verbal or a few singular null ones in Experiment 1):

	Null Plural Subject	Preverbal Lexical Subject
Experiment 1	12%	64%
Experiment 2	80%	12%

In light of these results, use of singular lexical subjects and null plural subjects across experiments will be discussed in terms of the discourse related properties that children adopted across conditions, as well as in terms of the different intervention configurations arising in children’s CILDs, within the featural Relativized Minimality approach (fRM, Friedmann, Belletti & Rizzi 2009).

First, we suggest that the most natural interpretation of the null pronominal subject present in several children’s CILDs of Experiment 2 should not be a referential interpretation. It should rather count as a generic one, which is a possibility allowed in several languages, including standard

Italian. Possibly, the presence in Experiment 2 of a plurality of subjects (two characters performing the action in each stimulus) has somehow primed use of plural generic null subject. Indeed, this option was only seldom used in Experiment 1, where the referent of the subject was always a singular character in the stimuli and the subject was mostly overt in children's CILDS answers.

In using a null plural pronominal subject in the given experimental conditions, their answers were thus completely informative about the (object) Topic of the question, and remained vague about the subject of the following sentence. These answers were anyway felicitous, as the question was specifically about the object, thus the choice of producing a null plural subject displayed a discourse felicitous behaviour.

Second, use of null plural subjects enabled children avoiding the use of CILDS with both the subject and the object expressed as lexical DPs (DP₁ DP₂ Cl V): this structure would instantiate an intervention configuration, namely Inclusion (see 2a), known to be hard for children, both in CILDS (Manetti et al 2016) and other A-bar dependencies (e.g. Object relatives; Friedmann Belletti & Rizzi, 2009). The use of silent *pro*_{pl} with the generic interpretation following the left dislocated Topic does not contain the feature [+NP] in its feature composition. We take this to be the crucial property accounting for the much-preferred use by children of CILDS in the form of DP_{obj} *pro*_{pl} Cl V, which allows a featural disjunction configuration, see (2b):

- (2) a. Il cane il gatto lo morde
 +Top +NP +NP
 The dog the cat bites him-Cl
 b. (al)La giraffa [*pro*_{pl} la lavano <_>]
 +Top +NP
 (to) the giraffe (they) wash it

Overall, our results confirm that at the age of the experiments monolingual preschoolers properly use lexical vs. null referential subjects (Belletti & Guasti 2015; Manetti 2017) depending on discourse conditions: the results of Experiment 1 specifically confirm this ability as children mainly used overt lexical subjects in order to be completely informative about which character performed a given action on the object topic patient. In Experiment 2, however, children displayed a different choice in subject selection, overwhelmingly preferring the use of null plural subjects with a generic interpretation, resulting in DP_{obj} *pro*_{pl} Cl V sentences. We suggested that this choice, which led to overall felicitous answers, was preferred since it made the subject in their CILDS somewhat lighter and create a disjunction configuration which is fully mastered by children.

To conclude, these two experiments investigated how monolingual children deal with the use of different types of subjects in a production study and could constitute a useful tool to extend the analysis to bilingual or L2 production of overt lexical vs. null pronominal subjects in the specific context of CILDS.

References:

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