Very early object clitic omission: How early is too early?

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It is a well-established fact that there are high omission rates of object clitics across a variety of languages, such as French, Catalan and Italian (Jakubowicz et al. 1997; Schaeffer 2000). Equally well established, but still a point of debate, is the fact that some languages display very early omission rates, followed by early target clitic constructions; a notorious example is Peninsular Spanish, but this also holds for languages such as Romanian and Greek. Tsakali and Wexler (2003) were the first to highlight the fact that clitic omission is differentially distributed across clitic languages, and subsequent work by Wexler et al. (2004) and Gavarro et al. (2010) categorizes these languages as ones without object clitic omission. In this talk we revisit the question of very early omissions and early resolution of these omissions with the aim of arguing that object clitic omission should be viewed as a generalized stage across clitic languages, with differences related to resolution timing. Our arguments come from two different sources: 1) early omissions found in spontaneous production in languages such as Spanish and Romanian; 2) early omissions found in experimental contexts, including new data we obtained from 2-year-old Peninsular Spanish children.

1) Avram and Coene (2007) analyzed two longitudinal corpora of monolingual Romanian (A. 1;05 to 2;10, B. 1;09 to 3;05). Data reveals early emergence of third person object clitics (at 1;09 and 2;00, respectively), high omission rates in obligatory contexts for a short period of time (roughly for 11 months) and early convergence to the target – over 90% clitic production around 2;10 at an MLU under 3. Fujino and Sano (2002), for a child speaking peninsular Spanish, report omission rates varying between 7.7% and 92% between the ages of 1;7 and 2;5 (those rates might be inflated by some methodological decisions). 2) Omissions in elicited production have been found in Wexler et al. (2004) for Spanish, in the present perfect condition in 2-year-olds (15.62%); for Romanian, Babyonyshev and Marin (2005) show that 2-year-olds had significant omissions (60%); note that within this age range for children with MLU higher than 2.0 the omission rate is only 16%, while for children with MLU lower than 2.0 the omission rate is 86% (see also Ivanov 2008 for Bulgarian). Our own study looked at direct object clitic omission in the Spanish of 2-5 year-old monolingual Spanish children living in Madrid, Spain. An elicited production picture task eliciting direct objects was conducted on 52 children 2;04 to 5;11 and 16 monolingual adults. An example of the task prompt is: Que quiere hacer Rita con la pelota? / "What does Rita want to do with the ball?" Target answer: lanzarla / "throw it". The results confirm Wexler et al. (2004) results: Children do not omit clitics starting at 3 years of age. Interestingly, omissions are found in the 2-year-olds (37%) and then they virtually disappear by age 3 (3%) ($F_{(1,117)}$=31.51, p<.000) resembling monolingual adults (Table 1). This study confirms that 2-year-old children omit in Spanish and that omission subsists early on (before 3 years; Table 2). Children therefore omit in the infinitival construction, in addition to the clitic omissions in the present perfect context found in Wexler et al. (2004). Looking at 2-year-old individual children in our data, the omissions display what has been characterized as "optional omissions" (Wexler et al. 2004; Pirvulescu et al. 2012): no child omits at 100%; omissions are one type of answer along clitics and DPs; each child produces at least one omission error (with a maximum of 10 omissions out of 16 tokens). If indeed clitic omission is a generalized stage, the question we need to address changes from 'Why do children omit clitics in some languages?' to 'Why are there different resolution times of clitic omission across languages?' This in turn leads to trying to find a common underlying cause as well as different explanations based on language-specific properties. One explanation we explore

in this study is a generalized null object stage coupled with language specific properties such as input complexity and computational cost.

Table1: Mean proportion (s.d. in parenthesis) of object types produced by monolingual Spanish children and adults in direct object clitic elicitation task.

Age (yrs)	Mean age	SD	Age Range	DP	CL	Omission
2 (n=15)	2;7	0.35	2;4-2;11	0.06 (0.16)	0.57 (0.41)	0.37 (0.36)
3 (n=13)	3.5	0.30	3;0-3;11	0.05 (0.05)	0.92 (0.08)	0.03 (0.08)
4 (n=12)	4.6	0.25	4;1-4;11	0.02 (0.06)	1.0 (0.06)	0
5 (n=12)	5.6	0.35	5;1-5;11	0.03 (0.09)	1.0 (0.06)	0
Adults (n=16)	-	-	24-62	0.18 (0.19)	0.82 (0.19)	0

Table 2 : Mean proportion (s.d. in parenthesis) for 2-year-old children

Age	Omission
2;4-2;9	0.76 (0.22)
2;10-2;11	0.14 (0.20)

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