

The pragmatics of subject distribution in the acquisition of Catalan

Anna Gavarró & Eduardo Palma
(Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona)

Although it has been found that children acquiring a null subject language place subjects (and objects) in an adult-like manner from early on (see (1)), less is known about their sensitivity to the discourse import of different syntactic positions. Here two consecutive studies on the pragmatic competence of 3 to 5 year-olds acquiring Catalan are reported; unlike former studies, based on production (De Cat 2009), our goal was to elicit judgments on the appropriateness of certain word orders in specific discourse contexts. Two preference tasks were designed in which the child heard two characters on a video clip utter a sentence each and was asked to indicate which character was ‘saying it as s/he would say it’.

The first experiment tested (i) broad focus (with canonical SVO order) (2), (ii) topics (which appear preverbally, with a resumptive pronoun in the case of objects) (3), and (iii) narrow, postverbal focus (4). Ungrammatical sentences were used as control, with a total number of items of 20. Twenty Catalan-speaking children from Minorca took part in the experiment (ten 3-year-olds, mean: 3;8, ten 4-year-olds, mean: 4;7, plus twenty-one adults). The results appear in Table 1 (the answers of four children whose behaviour according to the statistical analysis were random and two further children who did not understand the task were excluded). Adults produced 95.7% correct answers – a result that corroborates the adequacy of the design. No statistically significant differences were found as a function of age; 4-year-olds performed equally on all experimental items, while 3-year-olds performed better on topics and postverbal subjects than in broad focus. Because topics and foci were tested for both subjects and objects few data points were collected, and a new design was devised.

The second experiment only included (i) broad focus (SVO) and (ii) postverbal focused subjects (VOS). The experiment was run with twenty Catalan-speaking children of ages 4 and 5 (ten 4-year-olds, mean: 4;8, ten 5-year-olds, mean: 5;7). The children who performed at chance were discarded, and the results of the remaining children, in Table 2, indicate that 5-year-olds perform well in this task – the difference between 4- and 5-year olds is statistically significant, $OR=2.324$ ($CI=(0.859, 6.289)$). Significant differences were found between conditions for 5-year-olds, with performance with broad focus being better than with postverbal narrow focus ($OR=0.5$ ($CI=(0.094, 2.657)$). The method in this second experiment was shown to be reliable since control sentences were judged correctly 100% of the time by all children.

Which method is better to evaluate the pragmatic sensitivity of children is still an open question. De Cat’s subjects performed well at a younger age in their production of broad focus and topicalised subjects (subjects followed by a resumptive subject clitic) in French, but the number of no-answers was high. Here the rate of non-answers is lower, but the task is more difficult and we only have evidence for pragmatic competence at age 5; selection of a particular word order is still an easier task than emitting an acceptability judgment. Aside from this methodological result, the encoding of focus requires the integration of pragmatic and syntactic knowledge, as well as intonation in a language like Catalan; even though the argument has been made that children are delayed in pragmatics (Schaeffer 1997, Schaeffer and Matthewson 2005) or it the integration of discourse and syntax (Serratrice, Sorace and Paoli 2004), the results from Catalan indicate that at 5 at the latest this is no longer the case even in a metalinguistic task.

(1) a. Això no ho he fet jo. (Laura, 4;0,10, from Childes)

- this NEG it have done I
 ‘I haven’t done it.’
- b. Jo dic que sí, que xoquen. (Gisela, 4;2,3, from Childes)
 I say that yes, that clash-3pl
 ‘I say they clash.’

- (2) – Què passa? (What happens?)
 – Na Maria fa un pastís. (vs. – Fa un pastís na Maria.)
 D Maria bakes a cake
- (3) – Què volia en Marc?
 what wanted D Marc
- (4) – Qui ha cantat? (Who sang?)
 – Ha cantat na Maria. (vs. – Na Maria ha cantat.)
 has sang D Maria

Materials



Table 1: Percentage of correct answers (Experiment 1)

	3-year-olds	4-year-olds
broad focus	40%	63.3%
topic	68.5%	46.6%
postverbal focus (OB)	57.1%	50%
postverbal focus (SU)	71.4%	58.3%

Table 2: Percentage of correct answers (Experiment 2)

	4-year-olds	5-year-olds
broad focus	66.6%	85.7%
postverbal focus (SU)	50%	64.2%

De Cat, C. 2009. Experimental evidence for preschoolers’ mastery of ‘topic’. *Language Acquisition* 16: 224–239.

Schaeffer, J. and L. Matthewson. 2005. Grammar and pragmatics in the acquisition of the article system. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 23: 53-101.

Serratrice, L., A. Sorace and S. Paoli. 2004. Crosslinguistic influence at the syntax-pragmatics interface: subjects and objects in English-Italian bilingual and monolingual acquisition. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 7: 183–205.