

Subject-object relative clauses asymmetry: the role of the lexical restriction in production

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A robust finding from acquisition, adult processing and pathological populations is that object A'-dependencies are harder to parse and comprehend than subject A'-dependencies. Mainly in connection with the acquisition results, the featural Relativized Minimality approach (fRM, Rizzi 1990, 2004, Starke, 2001, Friedmann et al. 2009) ascribes the problem to a grammatical constraint bearing on intervention configurations. As grammar is involved in both modalities of performance, this approach predicts parallel difficulties in production and comprehension. Alternatively, the problem has been analyzed as a parsing problem in the comprehension of object A'-dependencies (e.g. in Gibson & Warren's 2002 Dependency Locality Theory based on self-paced reading experiments with adults). This alternative makes no prediction on parallel difficulties in comprehension and production.

Much recent literature on acquisition has confirmed that problems also arise in the production of certain object relatives, with selective effects that are expected under fRM (Friedmann et al. 2009, and the literature summarized in Belletti & Guasti 2015). Building on the elicited production data gathered by B&C 2010, 2012, C&B 2013, in this poster we propose a new way of highlighting the problematic nature of the production of object relatives crossing a lexically restricted subject, compared to the production of minimally different subject relatives. The elicitation procedure involved a preference task (adapted from Friedmann & Novogrodsky 2006) of the kind illustrated in (1) and (2). 96 Italian-speaking children aged 3;10-8;9 were tested.

We counted the proportion of lexical subjects and lexical objects produced in the target sentence reproducing the preambles in (1)a and (2)a: how many times would children reproduce the lexically restricted object of the preamble in the elicited SR (1)? and how many times would they pronominalize it, or modify the preamble in other ways? Similarly, how many times would children reproduce the lexically restricted subject of the preamble in the elicited OR (2)? The rationale behind this count is that if subject and object relatives are roughly on a par in production, lexically restricted subjects and objects should be preserved at a comparable rate in the sentences produced by children. On the other hand, if object relatives across a lexically restricted subject are difficult also in production, as is predicted by the fRM approach, one would expect that children would try to overcome the problem by avoiding the critical intervention configuration, e.g. by pronominalizing the intervening subject or changing the preamble in other ways in OR (2), whereas in subject relatives children would modify much less the lexically restricted object of the preamble, which does not intervene in the subject dependency in SR (1).

As tables 1. and 2. show, the asymmetry between SRs and ORs is evident. SRs are produced with repetition of the lexically restricted direct object of preamble (1)a in 84,2% and 87,6% of cases (in configurations of mismatch and match in number with the subject, respectively). In contrast, important difficulties emerge in the production of ORs, in which the preverbal lexically restricted subject of preamble (2)b is reproduced in only 15% and 12,7% of the elicited OR's (in configurations of mismatch and match in number with the object, respectively; these percentages include standard ORs and ORs with lexical preverbal subject and a resumptive clitic pronoun). Thus, in production, a lexical noun phrase creates selective difficulties in object relative clauses when it structurally intervenes in the dependency, but

not elsewhere. This selective difficulty mirrors the state of affairs observed in comprehension. This is predicted by the fRM approach: if the problem arises from a grammatical principle, it is expected to manifest itself in parallel ways both in comprehension and production.

- (1) Elicitation of subject relatives: (There are two boys)
 - a. Preamble: A boy meets a friend
A boy meets a teacher
Which boy would you rather be?
 - b. Target: I would rather be the boy that meets a friend (or ...the boy that meets a teacher)

- (2) Elicitation of object relatives: (There are two boys)
 - a. Preamble: The neighbor combs a boy
The father combs a boy
Which boy would you rather be?
 - b. Target: I would rather be the boy that the father combs (or ...the boy that the neighbor combs)

Fig.1: % of structures produced in the elicitation of SRs with respect to the nature of the object

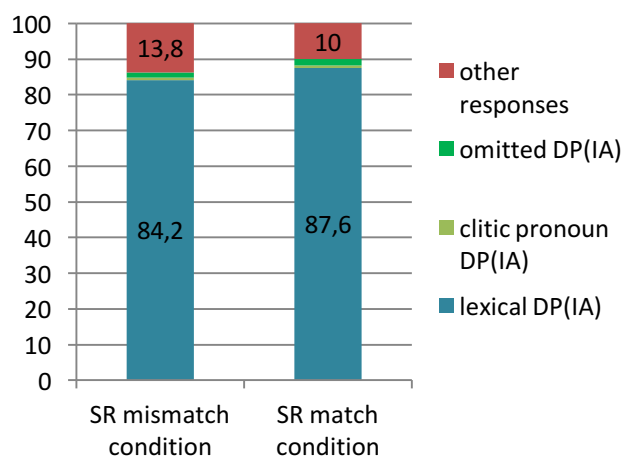
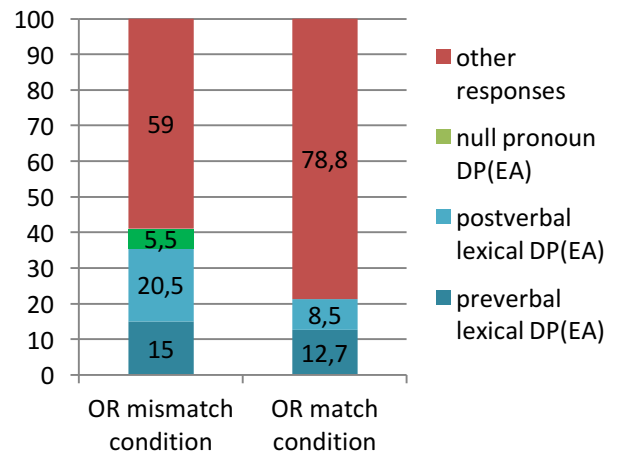


Fig.2: % of structures produced in the elicitation of ORs with respect to the nature of the subject



Selected References

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