The Acquisition of Syntax in Romance Languages

Edited by Vincent Torrens
Linda Escobar

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The Acquisition of Syntax in Romance Languages
Language Acquisition & Language Disorders

Volumes in this series provide a forum for research contributing to theories of language acquisition (first and second, child and adult), language learnability, language attrition and language disorders.

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The acquisition of syntax in Romance languages

Editors: Vincent Torrens and Linda Escobar

Introduction

This volume includes a selection of the papers delivered at the first and second language acquisition workshop ‘The Romance Turn’ which took place in Madrid on September 2004. The papers address a wide range of acquisition phenomena from different Romance languages and all share a common theoretical approach based on the Principles and Parameters theory. They favour, discuss and sometimes challenge traditional explanations of first and second language acquisition in terms of maturation of general principles universal to all languages. They all depart from the view that language acquisition can be explained in terms of learning language specific rules, constraints, or structures.

The workshop intended to gather new acquisition research data in the Romance languages in the light of well known hypotheses about some linguistic phenomena. We have obtained papers on the acquisition of Catalan, French, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and comparative papers with other languages. The papers are not only inherently interesting; they represent one way to look for concrete answers to questions that permeate linguistic science. We include the following topics on the fields of first, second language acquisition and bilingualism: null arguments, subject pronouns, root infinitives, wh-movement, verb movement, clitics, determiners and resumptive pronouns.

The different parts into which this volume is organized reflect different approaches that current research has offered. The contributions in Part 1 deal with issues of development of reflexive pronouns, determiners and clitics in Catalan, French, Italian and Spanish. In the opening chapter Sergio Baauw, Marieke Kuipers, Esther Ruigendijk & Fernando Cuetos analyse reflexive clitics in Spanish in comparison with reflexive pronouns in many Germanic languages under the experimental condition that there are pragmatic differences between SE- and SELF anaphors in the line of Reuland (2001). In order to capture their results, they support Avrutin’s (1999) claim that children have early knowledge of the principles of syntax but often have problems with the use of syntax (feature checking, A-Chain formation) and structure information (formation of referential dependencies). Anna Gavarró, Ana Teresa Pérez-Leroux & Thomas
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Roepner report on their work on acquisition of the bare noun/definite contrasts in English versus Catalan. They claim that children are sensitive to structural contrasts in the NP domain, i.e. in the object position, independent from parametric variation.

The paper of Isabelle Barrière & Marjorie Perlman Lorch gives an account of the order of acquisition of different types of SE-constructions in French along with a wide range of research strategies, proposing a modified version of Borer & Wexler’s (1987) Maturation Hypothesis. Natascha Müller, Katrin Schmitz, Katja Cantone & Tanja Kupisch’s paper provides evidence that acquisition of object clitics in French and Italian presents language-specific differences in relation to the acquisition of verbs and the setting of the null subject parameter. The paper by Pannemann studies the cross-linguistic influence in bilingual language acquisition formulated by Müller & Hulk (2000) for the acquisition of determiners and adjectives.

Part 2 focuses on the acquisition of verbs, auxiliaries, and the properties of Inflection. The first two papers deal with early Italian. Claudia Caprin & Maria Teresa Guasti focus on the use/omission of the copula and auxiliary BE. They claim that children omit auxiliaries more often than the copula because the computation in which the former are involved is more costly than the computation in which the latter is involved and also conclude, supporting Hirsch and Wexler’s (2004) claim (based on work by Embick 2004), that children’s passives are resultative passives, in which “be” selects a V(erbal) P(hrase). Elisa Franchi also investigates the acquisition and the developmental pattern of copular constructions. The pattern emerging from the data is analysed along the lines of the Truncation Hypothesis (Rizzi 1993, 1994).

Manola Salustri & Nina Hyams’s paper compares early Germanic languages, on the one hand, with Spanish, Catalan, and Italian along with other null subject languages, on the other hand. It is argued that that there exists an analogue of the Root Infinitive (RI) stage in the latter languages: the imperative. According to this Imperative Analogue Hypothesis (IAH), they propose that what is universal about the RI stage is the mapping of irrealis mood onto a tenseless clausal structure. The last two papers in this part of the volume analyse acquisition of verbs with respect to presence/absence of subjects.

Vincent Torrens, Linda Escobar & Ken Wexler examine early Spanish comprehension data from different experimental paradigms and give support to the External Argument Requirement Hypothesis, according to which children have trouble with base structures that don’t assign a subject/external argument. Finally, Jacqueline van Kampen examines early French, Spanish and Portuguese with respect to finite verbs that lack a subject. She proposes a four-stage process of acquisition.

Part 3 contains three papers which deal with wh-movement transformations in child language. Elaine Grolla’s paper relates a number of configurations in Brazilian Portuguese along with English in which the following holds: when a derivation involves movement, the insertion of a pronoun is blocked. In this sense she proposes a unified account of the problems that have been reported so far in child language with respect to certain configurations containing A and A’ bound pronouns.
PART I

Clitics, determiners and pronouns
The production of SE and SELF anaphors in Spanish and Dutch children

Sergio Baauw*, Marieke Kuipers*, Esther Ruigendijk* and Fernando Cuetos**

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Both Dutch zich and Spanish se are considered Simple Expression or SE anaphors. The present study shows that, in spite of this classification, Spanish children perform much more adultlike on se than Dutch children do on zich. We argue that this developmental difference supports a different analysis of zich as a pronominal element, as opposed to se, which is best analyzed as a reflexive-marker. We also found that Spanish children perform highly non-adultlike on the complex anaphor sí mismo and other strong reflexives, unlike Dutch children who performed highly adultlike on zichzelf. We claim that Spanish children's difficulties with strong reflexives are for the most part the result of their limited ability to construct integrated discourses.

1. Introduction

Many languages, including Dutch and Spanish, have two types of anaphoric elements: so-called Simple Expression or SE-anaphors, such as zich in Dutch and se in Spanish, and complex anaphors, called SELF-anaphors, such as zichzelf in Dutch and sí mismo in Spanish. These two types of anaphors differ from each other pragmatically. In general, SE-anaphors are the unmarked option (1a), whereas SELF-anaphors are used in contrastive situations (1b).

(1)  a. El mago se levanta de la cama, y la bruja se viste.
    ‘The wizard gets out of bed, and the witch is dressing SE.’

b. La mujer viste a la niña y luego se viste a sí misma.
    ‘The woman is dressing the girl, and then she is dressing SELF.’

However, the difference between SE-anaphors and SELF-anaphors is not just pragmatic, but also reflects syntactically different ways of coding reflexivity. In addition, Dutch zich and Spanish se show some strikingly different properties, despite their shared status as SE-anaphors.
In this paper we will present experimental results on Dutch and Spanish children's production of SE- and SELF-anaphors. We will argue that the results support early knowledge of both the syntax and the pragmatics of SE and SELF-anaphors. At the same time it will be shown that the use of some of this knowledge is problematic. This affects Dutch children's performance on the SE-anaphor zich, but not Spanish children's performance on se, which confirms the different status of se and zich.

2. Reflexivity in and outside narrow syntax

According to Reuland (2001) SE- and SELF-anaphors reflect different levels of encoding reflexivity. In general lines, the proposal distinguishes referential dependencies formed in narrow syntax (a modular and independent computational system) from dependencies formed outside narrow syntax.

Dependencies formed in narrow syntax involve A-Chain formation between two elements that are in a feature checking relation. A-Chain formation results from checking operations between SE-anaphors, such as Dutch zich, and their local subjects. According to Reuland (2001) this operation proceeds in the following way: the formal features of zich (third person, accusative case), move to INFL where they end up in a checking configuration with the subject in [Spec, IP].

\[(2) \quad a. \quad \text{Jan waste zich.} \quad \text{‘John washed himself.’} \\
   b. \quad \llbracket \text{Jan} \ [\text{INFL} \ [\text{Fzich \ Fwaste}]] \ [\text{VP} \ \text{waste \ zich}] \rrbracket \\
   \text{John washed SE zich} \]

Zich checks the D-feature and the phi-features number and person of the subject. However, checking the subject’s person feature will lead to the elimination of the person feature on zich. Since the person feature of zich is interpretable, its elimination leads to loss of information (Chomsky 1995). To prevent this from happening, Reuland proposes that the subject Jan “recovers” the checked and deleted person feature of zich. This recovery operation has an important side effect: it creates a referential dependency – an A-Chain – between zich and the local subject. Note that third person pronouns, such as hem ‘him’ or haar ‘her’ cannot be involved in A-Chain formation. Reuland argues that this is because they are specified for number, number being a feature that cannot be recovered after checking and deletion of this feature has taken place (see Reuland 2001 for a discussion).1

Referential dependencies can also be formed outside narrow syntax, at a level that we will call “information structure” (Vallduví 1992), but which other may call “linguistic discourse” or Conceptual-Intentional (C-I) interface (Reuland 2001). In the non-local domain, pronouns can be identified with their antecedents through variable binding or coreference. In the local domain SELF-anaphors can be used. The SELF-part of SELF-anaphors, -zelf in Dutch and mismo in Spanish, is identified with the local subject by projecting a “guise”, a mental representation of an object/individual
with properties highly similar but not necessarily identical to the object/individual represented by the local subject (Heim 1982; Jackendoff 1992).²

Importantly, the fact that referential dependencies can be encoded at different levels may affect the acquisition of these elements. Avrutin (2004) argues that although five-year-old children have targetlike syntactic systems, they have problems with the use of narrow syntax to build information structure. Instead, they may often rely on extra-syntactic strategies (i.e., context) to structure information. Stated differently, problems are expected to arise whenever there is competition between narrow syntactic and extra-syntactic operations. This explains why children show significantly more difficulties with those aspects of grammar that play a role in building information structure, such as tense, determiners and pronouns, than with for instance agreement, which is present only to satisfy requirements of narrow syntax. Ruigendijk et al. (in press) showed in their study on the interpretation of pronouns that children (and agrammatics) exhibit problems with the use of narrow syntax to establish referential dependencies. If these claims are correct, children are expected to show problems with the production and interpretation of SE-anaphors, but not with SELF-anaphors. As argued above, SE-anaphors involve a purely syntactic way of establishing referential dependencies, whereas the anaphoric properties of SELF-anaphors rely basically on an extra-syntactic association of the guise introduced by the SELF-morpheme with the local subject. In other words, children could prefer the non-syntactic way to encode referential dependencies.

Also, children may have problems with pragmatic or discourse principles, as argued by many authors (Chien & Wexler 1990; Kraemer 2000). If this is true they are predicted to show problems with the correct context of use of SE-anaphors and SELF-anaphors, using SELF-anaphors in non-contrastive contexts and vice versa.

In the next section, we present an elicited production experiment that tested the different predictions with respect to the acquisition of SE- and SELF-anaphors by Dutch and Spanish children.

3. Experiments

3.1 Method

The Dutch and Spanish subjects were tested with a Story Elicitation Task. The aim of the task was to elicit short stories on the basis of three-picture-sequences.

One experimenter, who was sitting opposite to the child and could not see which picture sequence was being described, had to guess which picture the child was describing. In the Dutch experiment, another experimenter sat next to the child, and acted as the child’s helper. The kind of help that was allowed consisted in a general description of the action depicted when the child misinterpreted the picture (e.g., “I think the story is about dressing”). In the Spanish experiment, when the child misinterpreted the pictures, the experimenter asked the child to show the backside of the
picture sequence, on which the verb representing the main action of the sequence was printed. Then, the experimenter mentioned the verb (e.g., “Aha, I see the story is about dressing”), and the child was invited to tell the story again.

The child picked up a picture sequence from the pile, and put the picture aside after telling the story. The stories were recorded with a DAT recorder (Dutch experiment)/tape recorder (Spanish experiment), and transcribed afterwards.

The experiment consisted of two conditions of seven items each, eliciting either SE- or SELF-anaphors. Since two items of both conditions gave rise to many visual errors in both children and adults, we decided to exclude them from the analysis, limiting ourselves to five items per condition. The items differed from each other in the verb that was used. The following (Dutch/Spanish) verbs were used: *wassen/lavar* ‘wash’, *aankleden/vestir* ‘dress’, *afdrogen/secar* ‘dry’, *schminken/pintar* ‘make up’ and *insmeren/untar* ‘put oil on’. All these verbs allow both SE- and SELF-anaphors. The test items were intermingled with 20 filler items.

The total number of items was 34. In the Dutch experiment the items were divided over two test versions of 17 items each. Each child received one version, which was administered to her in one session of 20 minutes. The adult controls were tested in a similar way, with the exception that the verb representing the action was written underneath the last picture of the three-picture-sequence, in order to avoid visual errors, and no second experimenter, acting as a helper was present. Moreover, the adults received the complete test (34 items) in one session. In the Spanish experiment, both children and adults received the complete test in one session of 30 minutes, with a brief break in between. Before the actual test started, some practice items were administered.

In (3) we give an example of a SE-item and a SELF-item, together with a model response.

(3) a. SE-condition

| Dutch: Een heks en een tovenaar lagen in bed te slapen. |
| Spanish: Una bruja y un mago estaban dormidos en la cama. |

‘A witch and a wizard were sleeping in bed.’

| Dutch: Toen stapte de tovenaar uit bed. |
| Spanish: Entonces el mago salió de la cama. |

‘Then the wizard got out of bed.’
The production of SE and SELF anaphors in Spanish and Dutch children

b. SELF-condition

Dutch:
En daarna kleedde de heks zich aan.

Spanish:
Y luego la bruja se vistió.

‘And then the witch dressed SE.’

Dutch:
Een vrouw maakte haar kindje wakker.

Spanish:
Una mujer despertó a su niño.

‘A woman woke up her child.’

Dutch:
Toen kleedde ze het kind aan.

Spanish:
Entonces vistió al niño.

‘Then she dressed the child.’

Dutch:
En daarna kleedde ze zichzelf aan.

Spanish:
Y luego se vistió a sí misma.

‘And then she dressed SELF.’

3.2 Participants

19 Dutch-speaking children were tested, ranging from 5;4 to 6;7, with a mean age of 5;11. The children were tested individually, in a quite room at a primary school in Montfoort, Netherlands. In addition, 13 Dutch-speaking adults were tested. Also, 14
Spanish-speaking children and 4 adults were tested. The children ranged from 5;3 to 6;1, with a mean age of 5;8. The children were tested individually, in a quite room at a primary school in Oviedo, Spain.

4. Results

4.1 Dutch results

In Figure 1 we present the results of the Dutch experiment. The results clearly indicate that Dutch children have considerably more problems with the production of the SE-anaphor *zich* than with SELF-anaphors such as *zichzelf*. In fact, in the SE-condition they use *zich* only half as often as the adult controls did.

A Mann-Whitney Test shows that children do not perform differently from adults on *zichzelf* ($Z = −1.006, p = 0.314$), but do perform differently on *zich* ($Z = −3.265, p = 0.001$). Children’s performance on *zich* differs significantly from their performance on *zichzelf* (Wilcoxon, $Z = −2.524, p = 0.012$). This difference was not significant in adults (Wilcoxon, $Z = −1.235, p = 0.217$).

In order to avoid the use of *zich*, Dutch children frequently use alternative strategies to describe the final picture of a SE-trial, such as body-part construction (4a), and object omission (4b). Occasionally they used SELF-anaphors (4c) or pronouns (4d).

(4) a. De *jongen* waste *zijn buik*.
   the boy washed his belly

b. De *jongen* waste.
   the boy washed

c. De *jongen* waste *zichzelf / hemself*
   the boy washed SELF

d. De *jongen* waste *hem*.
   the boy washed him
The production of SE and SELF anaphors in Spanish and Dutch children

Among these strategies, (4a) is grammatical. (4b) may be grammatical, if no reflexive interpretation is intended. (4c) is ungrammatical if the pronominal reflexive hemzelf is used, and is just infelicitous if zichzelf is used. (4d) is plainly ungrammatical with a reflexive interpretation.

Children's most frequent errors on the SELF-condition involved the use of inalienable possession constructions (sometimes in combination with the possessive eigen 'own', like in *The boy washed his own belly*). It is important to note that Dutch children hardly ever used zich in the SELF-condition.

4.2 Spanish results

In Table 1 we present the results on the SE-condition.

The total number of child responses was 70, but we excluded those responses that were the result from misinterpretation of the picture sequence. Consequently, the total number of responses that was considered was 58. As can be seen, Spanish children's production of SE-anaphors is fully adultlike. The few non-targetlike responses that were produced (by both children and adults) mainly involved the use of strong pronoun constructions, with or without SELF-morpheme (Pron(Mismo) responses; see (5)), and a few object omissions.

The results on si mismo, on the other hand, show a different picture. As for the SE-condition, the total number of child responses was 70, but we only considered 45 responses. 25 responses that were the result of a misinterpretation of the picture sequence were excluded.\(^4\) As Tables 2a and 2b show, children hardly use si mismo (a SiMismo response). However, the same table shows that this form is not very frequent in adults either.

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<th>Table 1. Responses in SE-condition</th>
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<td>Adults</td>
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<th>Table 2a. Responses in SELF-condition</th>
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<td>SiMismo</td>
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<td>Children</td>
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<th>Table 2b. Responses in SELF-condition</th>
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