

Are object omissions in Romance object clitic omissions?

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One of the most important components of Müller and Hulk's article is the proposal for a unified account of bilingual and monolingual L1 acquisition. More specifically, they argue that crosslinguistic influence in bilingual acquisition will be indirect in nature. Thus, instead of producing novel, bilingual-only transfer errors, crosslinguistic influence acts to magnify or prolong typical developmental errors in the bilingual acquisition context. In other words, the difference between monolingual and bilingual L1 acquisition will be one of degree and not kind. Furthermore, they found evidence for such indirect influence at the pragmatics/syntax interface. This adds a possible corollary to their unified account: the pragmatics/syntax interface will be a challenging problem space in any language acquisition context.

I would like to pursue the search for a unified account further by suggesting that what is vulnerable at the pragmatics/syntax interface in both bilingual and monolingual L1 acquirers of Romance may be vulnerable for all Romance language learners, L1 and L2, normally developing and impaired. In so doing, I want to expand on an aspect of Müller and Hulk's report, the emergence of object clitics in Romance, and argue that object omissions in the acquisition of Romance could be described more specifically as object clitic omissions. I will support this argument with evidence from learners of French. I will then discuss how this proposal could be integrated into Müller and Hulk's account of the quantitative differences in the monolingual and bilingual children they studied.

Müller and Hulk offer the following observations with respect to object clitics in Romance. First, object clitics form a different method of licensing an empty canonical argument position, in contrast with the use of discourse-connected PRO in the C-domain in topic drop languages like German and Dutch. Second, object clitics are acquired late in monolingual L1 Romance. Third, object omissions decline in the Romance language of the bilingual children as object clitics are used more frequently. This third observation begs the question of a possible connection between these phenomena.

Müller and Hulk do not draw a lot of attention to the fact that object clitic use is a pragmatically determined phenomenon, as is topic drop. Moreover, the pragmatic context in which one can use anaphoric devices like object clitics (antecedent understood by both speaker and hearer) has a great deal of overlap with the pragmatic context in which topic drop can occur. In fact, the contextualized examples given in (14) in their article are also places where object clitics could have been used. As such, object clitics, as well as topics residing in the C-domain, are items at the pragmatic/syntax interface. In addition, the tardy appear-

ance of object clitics in acquisition could be explained in part by their complex interface structure. Object clitics are part functional, part lexical category, involve movement, and their syntactic use must be coordinated with pragmatic principles (cf. Jakubowicz, Nash, Rigaut, and Gerard, 1998).

Research I have conducted in collaboration with Martha Crago (Crago and Paradis, 1999) shows a connection between pragmatic context, object clitic use, and object omissions in French-speaking children with specific language impairment (SLI) and child L2 learners of French. We analyzed spontaneous language production samples from four groups of children: (1) seven-year-old monolingual, French-speaking children with SLI; (2) seven-year-old English-speaking children acquiring French as an L2 who had the same MLU as group (1); (3) seven-year-old monolingual, normally developing (ND), French-speaking children, and (4) three-year-old monolingual, ND, French-speaking children matched on the basis of MLU with groups (1) and (2). The children's language samples were coded for the presence of object clitics in "permissible" contexts. Permissible contexts were defined as contexts where the object of the verb being referred to had already been mentioned in near discourse, making pronominal reference possible. The samples were also coded for the presence or absence of objects, whether lexical or clitic, in the context of transitive verbs.

Our statistical analyses revealed that the children with SLI and the L2 children used object clitics less frequently in permissible contexts than ND age and MLU controls (see also Jakubowicz et al., 1998). In fact, they used object clitics in less than 50% of permissible contexts. The difference in object clitic use between the three-year-old MLU controls and the seven-year-old age controls was not significant (76% versus 96% respectively), but the absolute scores showed that the three year olds were not at ceiling. We suspect that the three year olds were close to, but not at, the end of the acquisition stage for object clitics in L1 French.

So, our initial analyses showed that L2 and SLI learners of French have difficulties with object clitics. Our second round of analyses was aimed at discovering their error patterns in object clitic contexts. What we found was that in the majority of cases, their errors were object clitic omissions (SLI: 75%; L2: 78%). Other errors included repeating the full DP, or using the pronoun-like form, *ça*, in canonical object position. Finally, for both the SLI and L2 groups, the majority of all object omissions occurred in object clitic permissible contexts. An excerpt from a transcript illustrating a child with SLI dropping an object clitic is given in (1).

- (1) EXP = experimenter; CHI = child (Byanca)
 EXP: ah elle est encore dans ton sac à dos?
 “ah, it is still in your backpack?”
 CHI: non. “no.”
 EXP: elle est où?
 “where is it?”
 CHI: ma mère a jeté. “my mother threw away.”

Put together, these findings suggest that a large part of the variable appearance of obligatory objects in French could be object clitic omissions. Therefore, we could speculate that the challenging problem space object clitics pose for learners of French is the principal mechanism underlying object omissions in development.

Why would object clitic omissions, hence object omissions, be more pronounced in bilingual L1, SLI, and L2 Romance than in ND, monolingual L1 Romance? Let us look first at the Germanic–Romance bilinguals. Müller and Hulk put forth a persuasive explanation for object omissions in their structural overlap account. They argue that the topic drop/empty canonical object position structure in Germanic and the object clitic/empty canonical object position structure in Romance result in competing evidence for the target structure in Romance. They propose that this overlap causes delay in convergence on the correct Romance target structure, the observable result of which is a protracted and magnified period of object omissions. I would like to suggest that the majority of these object omissions may actually be object clitic omissions. If this is correct, the influence of the Germanic language may be more precisely described as causing delay and confusion in the acquisition of object clitics, the result of which is a prolonged period of object omissions.

Since the monolingual children with SLI have no influence from a language with topic drop, their object clitic omissions must be due to another source. These children could be expected to display protracted acquisition of object clitics on the basis of comparison with what researchers have found for the acquisition of tense morphology in English-speaking children with SLI. For instance, normally developing L1 acquirers of English go through an optional infinitive stage of acquisition, whereas children with SLI show an *extended* optional infinitive stage (Rice, Wexler, and Cleave, 1995; Rice, Wexler, and Hershberger, 1998). Also, pragmatics in general and pronominal reference in particular have been found to be areas of weakness in English-speaking children with SLI (Leonard, 1998). Thus, because object clitics in French are late acquired in normal development and involve pragmatics, we could predict that they would be a particularly challenging component of French for children with SLI to acquire.

Similar to the children with SLI, the English-speaking L2 learners of French have no influence from a topic drop language, and yet they display object omissions. Nevertheless, influence from their L1 could explain their object clitic omissions. I would like to suggest that in their case it is the complete inability to transfer properties of the pronominal system from L1 to L2 that underlies their omissions in object clitic context. The object pronominal

systems of French and English are highly divergent, whereas lexical objects are placed in same position in both languages. For example, English pronouns are strong pronouns, not clitics, and object pronouns reside in canonical position. In contrast, French has a more complex pronominal system involving both strong pronouns and clitics, with object pronominal clitics appearing in preverbal position. English-speaking L2 learners of French cannot transfer their L1 system of pronoun use to their L2 and one possible outcome of this inability could be delay and confusion in their acquisition of the target pronominal system. In turn, the result of this delay and confusion may be similar to other learners of French: object omission errors.

Let me summarize my argumentation as follows. Object clitics can be considered a vulnerable area at the pragmatics/syntax interface in the acquisition of Romance. I would like to predict that this aspect of the grammar will be problematic for all learners of Romance, in the spirit of a unified account. The outcome of the problematic nature of this aspect of the grammar will mainly, although not exclusively, take the form of object omissions in acquisition. Object omissions will be more pronounced in certain acquisition contexts, namely under an impaired language faculty, and when another language is being acquired either simultaneously with or prior to the acquisition of Romance, and where that other language provides misleading (Germanic) or opposing (English) evidence for the target structure. In my view, the advantage of analyzing the object omissions of the Germanic–Romance bilingual children Müller and Hulk studied as object clitic omissions is that it would permit the integration of their findings with those for other learners of Romance.

In conclusion, the overarching purpose of this discussion was to highlight the necessity of conducting cross-learner comparisons in order to further our understanding of what aspects of language acquisition are universal, and what aspects vary according to learner context. Accordingly, it is important to point out that Müller and Hulk's article is a significant contribution towards this goal.

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