

Clitics as disambiguators in child grammar

Teodora Radeva-Bork
(University of Potsdam)

One of the main properties of Slavic languages is their syntactic flexibility, which provides a great level of variability in the ordering of sentence constituents (1). This paper deals with the L1-acquisition of noncanonical word orders in Bulgarian, and more specifically with the alternations between Verb-Object (VO) and Object-Verb (OV) word orders, both presenting licit combinations in the target grammar. Whereas the sentences in (1) are potentially ambiguous with regards to the interpretation of subject/object, (2) shows an option, in which the overt doubling of the direct object by a clitic with the same *phi*-features and case resolves the ambiguity. The Bulgarian examples in (2) are instances of the so-called object clitic doubling (CD) phenomenon that is prevalent in the Balkan (and Romance) languages.

The questions that arise here are how children deal with such syntactic alternations in the early stages of grammar, and whether they can interpret clitics in sentences like (2) as disambiguators in such specific ambiguous syntactic settings. In order to address these questions, I present experimental data from an elicited comprehension study of direct object CD constructions in Bulgarian. The experiment utilized an elicited comprehension picture-matching task with 16 children, aged 2;5-4;2. Four transitive verbs in three conditions depending on the used clitic form- masculine, feminine and neuter, gave a total of 12 test items. A model test sentence is given in (3).

On the basis of the Bulgarian data, we gain evidence for the following observations. Children show some comprehension of CD (meaning they interpret the clitic correctly as a reference to the direct object) around age 3;0, but do not achieve adult-like performance even by age 4;2. In view of the observations that, on the one hand, single clitics in Bulgarian emerge at around 2;3 with productive use at 2;6 and, on the other hand, CD is adult-like at only 63% even by age 4;2 (cf. Radeva-Bork 2012, 2015), we can conclude that single and double cliticization are not simultaneous processes (similar findings for Modern Greek in Marinis 2000). This could mean that whereas children understand and produce clitics as direct objects (i.e. in contexts of single cliticization), they have problems deciphering clitics in doubling contexts and remain misled by the ambiguity of the syntactic structure. The results from Bulgarian are interesting in the context of the observations made by Smolík's (2015) elicited comprehension study of 107 monolingual Czech children, showing that noncanonical, object-initial sentences are generally more difficult to understand by children than sentences with neutral word order.

The main finding from the present experiment on Bulgarian CD, i.e. children are often led down the garden path even in the presence of a doubling clitic, are further discussed in a cross-linguistic context, analyzing data from studies on clitic doubling and OV word order from Spanish (Varela 1988, Torrens and Wexler 1996), Serbo-Croatian (Ilić&Deen 2004), and Albanian (Kapia 2010). Additionally, some observations about the asymmetry between production and comprehension of CD will be made on the basis of a pilot study on the production of disambiguating CD contexts in Bulgarian.

Data (from Bulgarian)

- (1) a. Majkata celuna deteto.
 mother_{DEF} kissed child_{DEF}

- b. Deteto majkata celuna.
 c. Majkata deteto celuna.
 d. Celuna majkata deteto.
 'The mother kissed the child.'
 'The child kissed the mother.'

...

- (2) a. *Deteto go celuna majkata.*
 child_{DEF} it_{ACC.CL.3SG.NEU} kissed mother_{DEF}

'The mother kissed the child.'

- b. *Deteto majkata go celuna.*
 'The mother kissed the child.'

- c. *Majkata ja celuna deteto.*
 mother_{DEF} her_{ACC.CL.3SG.FEM} kissed child_{DEF}

'The child kissed the mother.'

- d. *Majkata deteto ja celuna.*
 'The child kissed the mother.'

...

- (3) Model test sentence with CD (elicited comprehension)

Mečkata ja xvana Borko.
 bear_{3SG.FEM.DEF} her_{ACC.CL.3SG.FEM} caught_{3SG.PAST} Borko_{3SG.MASC}

'Borko caught the bear.'

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