

Selective delay in the comprehension of direct object relatives in child heritage Romanian

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An impressive number of studies on the acquisition of relative clauses report that direct object relatives (OR) are more difficult to comprehend than subject relatives (SR) (Friedmann et al. 2009, Adani 2011). The former, however, are not equally difficult. ORs with a preverbal subject are better comprehended by 5- to 7-year-old French and Italian children (Arosio et al. 2009, Adani 2011, Guasti et al. 2018). Similar results were reported for monolingual Romanian; 5-year-old Romanian-acquiring children comprehend ORs with a preverbal subject better (Sevcenco and Avram 2012). In OR production, however, 6- and 10-year-old Romanian monolinguals preferentially place the subject in postverbal position. Child heritage speakers (CHS) of Romanian, Romanian - French bilinguals, on the other hand, preferentially place the subject in preverbal position. The preference gets stronger with the children for whom French is the dominant language. They place the subject exclusively in preverbal position in ORs. Avram et al. (submitted) account for this difference in terms of a delay in discourse pragmatics without excluding possible interference effects from the societal language, French. Both Romanian and French allow pre- and postverbal subjects in ORs, but it is only in French that preverbal subjects are the preferred choice.

In this study we extend the investigation to the comprehension of ORs in child heritage Romanian in contact with French, with a view to testing whether language dominance is reflected in the comprehension of ORs with pre- and postverbal subjects.

We present results from a binary sentence picture matching task, an adaptation of the task used in Sevcenco and Avram (2012) (see A).

The participants are 66 Romanian - French bilingual children (5-, 8- and 11-year-olds), all born in France to Romanian families. They speak Romanian in the family and French in the community. They attend a French kindergarten/school. The children who had been in a French-teaching environment for at least 3 years at testing time have French as their dominant language (as evidenced by questionnaires and the analysis of a corpus of narratives). We compared their responses to those of 66 age-matched Romanian monolinguals (RM).

With CHSs, multiple ANOVAs followed by post-hoc t-tests revealed a significantly higher accuracy rate for ORs with a preverbal subject across the three age groups (Figure 1). At age 8, comprehension of ORs with preverbal subjects is practically at ceiling and similar to that of SRs but it differs significantly from the comprehension of ORs with a postverbal subject. The comparison with age-matched monolinguals revealed that, with the 5- and the 8-year-olds, the only significant difference targets ORs with postverbal subjects. In this condition the score of the CHSs was lower. The RMs comprehend ORs with a preverbal subject on a par with SRs earlier, at age 5. At age 11, the difference between CHSs and RMs is no longer statistically significant (Figure 2) but a preverbal subject advantage is still found with the CHSs (Figure 1). Overall, our findings show that only ORs with postverbal subjects are vulnerable both in monolingual and in heritage Romanian, but they are more vulnerable with the latter. Guasti et al. (2018) discuss this preverbal subject advantage, also attested in child French and Italian. They account for it in terms of parsing. The parser prefers to assign a SR analysis. In ORs with a preverbal subject, when encountering the subject, it gets positive evidence that the preferred parse must be revised and how. In ORs with a postverbal subject, the parser gets negative evidence when encountering the verb (in cases of number mismatch) but information with respect to how the preferred parse should be revised is obtained only when encountering the postverbal subject. Young children have difficulties abandoning an initial response. In the case of ORs with postverbal subjects the negative nature of the information makes reanalysis even

more difficult. In this particular task there was no number mismatch either. We suggest that in child heritage Romanian in contact with French reanalysis of the initial parse is further hindered by the strong preference for preverbal subjects in ORs in the dominant language, a preference also attested in production.

A. Comprehension task: binary picture selection task (adapted from Sevcenco & Avram 2012)

(a) OR with preverbal subject (x6)

ariciul pe care pisica îl piaptăna
 hedgehog-the DOM which cat-the CL.ACC.3SG combs

(b) OR with postverbal subject (x6)

ariciul pe care îl piaptăna pisica
 hedgehog-the DOM which CL.ACC.3SG combs cat-the
 ‘The hedgehog that the cat is combing.’

(c) SR (x6)

pisoiul care îl spală
 cat-the that CL.ACC.3SG washes

pe câine

DOM dog

‘The cat that is washing the dog.’

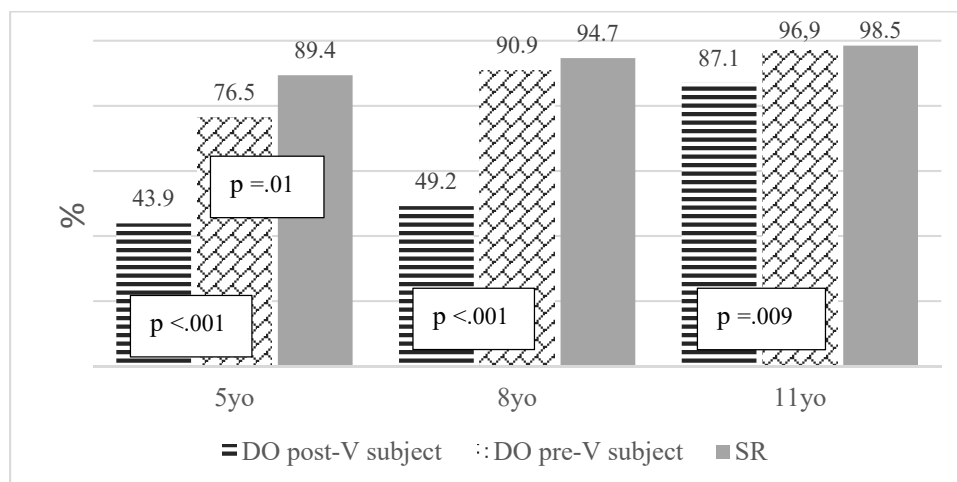


Figure 1. HSs: Comprehension of relative clauses

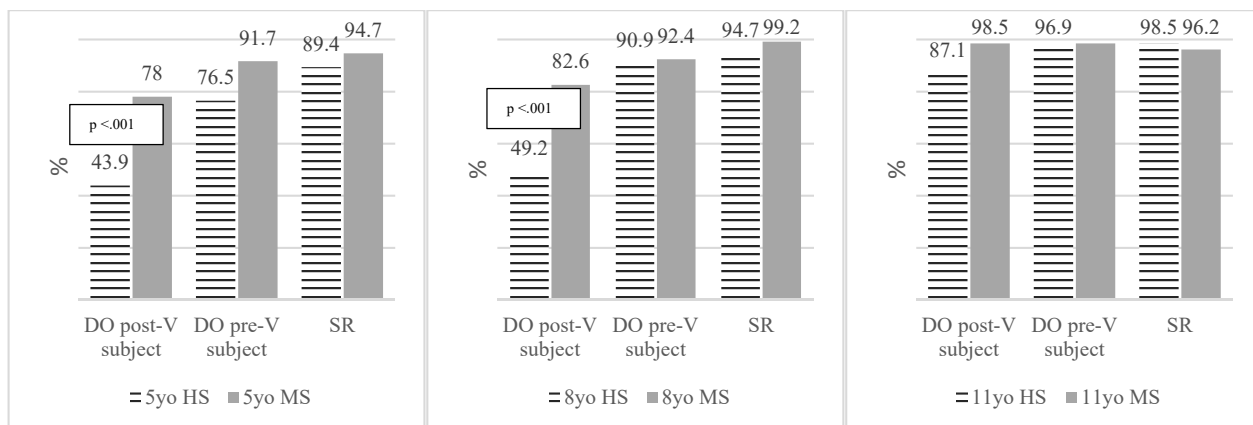


Figure 2. HSs vs MSs: Comprehension of relative clauses (per age group)

Selected references: Adani, F. 2011. Re-thinking the acquisition of relative clauses in Italian: Towards a grammatically-based account. *Journal of Child Language* 22: 141–165. Arosio, F., F. Adani, M.T. Guasti. 2009. Grammatical features in the comprehension of Italian relative clauses by children. In J. M. Brucart, A. Gavarró, J. Solà (eds.) *Merging Features: Computation, Interpretation and Acquisition*. Oxford: OUP, pp. 138–518. Guasti, M.T., M. Vernice & J. Franck. 2018. Continuity in the adult and children’s comprehension of subject and object relative clauses in French and Italian. *Languages* 3(3), 24. Sevcenco, A., L. Avram 2012. Romanian-speaking children comprehension of relatives, *RRL* LVII, 2.