

Antecedent preferences of pronominal subjects in temporal adjuncts: The view from child Romanian

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Background. One common assumption with respect to the null (NPS) vs. overt pronominal subject (OPS) alternation in intra-sentential contexts in null subject languages (NSL) is that NPS preferentially take a prominent antecedent, whereas OPS a less prominent one (Carminati 2002). Several studies, however, reveal that these preferences are subject to cross-linguistic variation (Alonso-Ovalle et al. 2002, Filiaci 2011, Filiaci et al. 2013), which is also reflected in the acquisition path. Acquisition studies report that adult-like antecedent preferences develop relatively late. In some languages, they are acquired earlier for NPS (Sorace et al. 2009, Serratrice 2007 for Italian, Kraš & Stipeć 2013 for Croatian); in others, 5 year-olds have no clear preference for the antecedent of either NPS or OPS (e.g. for European Portuguese, Lobo & Silva 2015). The age at which adult-like preferences are attested may also differ from one language to another (e.g. Italian vs. Croatian, Kraš & Stipeć 2013). Extending the investigation to other languages could shed light on the conditions governing the antecedent preferences of pronominal subjects as well as on possible parametric differences. **Aim.** We investigate the interpretation of NPS and OPS in temporal adjuncts in child Romanian, with focus on the following questions: (i) Which are the antecedent preferences of pronominal subjects in child Romanian?; (ii) Is there any difference between antecedent choice in anaphoric and in cataphoric contexts?; (iii) Are there any language-specific properties which can explain the attested pattern? **Participants.** 40 monolingual Romanian-speaking children (age range 3;11-5;11) and a control group of 40 adults (age range 19-68) took part in the study. **Method.** We used two picture selection tasks. The participants were required to choose the picture which best matched the sentence they heard. The first task tested antecedent preferences in an anaphoric context, the second one in a cataphoric context. Each task tested 3 conditions: (i) null pronoun; (ii) overt personal pronoun; (iii) (proximal) demonstrative. Each condition had 4 items (examples are given in (1)), i.e. 12 test sentences in each task. **Results and discussion.** The results (summarized in Tables 1 and 2) show that 4- and 5-year old Romanian children make no distinction between NPS and OPS with respect to antecedent choice. In both the anaphoric and the cataphoric contexts the choice of the antecedent was similar for these two pronominal subject types. But in the anaphoric context the children performed roughly at chance level, whereas in the cataphoric context the preferred antecedent was the matrix subject. With demonstratives, the object was the preferred antecedent in both tasks. The children differed from the adults only with respect to the preferences for NPS in an anaphoric context, which would indicate, at first sight, that antecedent preferences for OPS are adult-like earlier. We argue, however, that 4- and 5-year-olds cannot differentiate between NPS and 3rd person OPS. We account for the results in light of properties of the pronominal system of Romanian. In the case of demonstratives and NPS, reference resolution of pronominal subjects in temporal adjuncts is sensitive primarily to syntactic role (matrix object and matrix subject, respectively). But 3rd person OPS have hybrid behaviour as ‘weak’ and strong pronouns (see Cardinaletti & Starke 1999 for a discussion of this difference). In their case, linear order and topic-focus articulation modulate antecedent choice. When 3rd person OPS do not indicate topic shift or contrastive focus, they behave like ‘weak’ pronouns, overlapping with NPS. This overlap might delay the acquisition of antecedent preferences for these two types of pronominals.

- (1) a. Elefantul a stropit motanul în timp ce **pro/el/acesta** mergea cu bicicleta.
 elephant.the has splashed cat.the in time that pro/he/this.one went with bicycle.the
 ‘The elephant splashed the cat while he was riding the bicycle.’
- b. În timp ce **pro/el/acesta** mergea cu bicicleta, elefantul a stropit motanul.
 in time that pro/he/this.one went with bicycle.the elephant.the has splashed cat.the
 ‘While he was riding the bicycle, the elephant splashed the cat.’

Table 1. Antecedent preferences of pronominal subjects in an anaphoric context

Condition	null pronoun		overt personal pronoun		demonstrative	
	subject	object	subject	object	subject	object
Children	45%	55%	52%	48%	42%	58%
Adults	79.2%	20.8%	53.5%	46.5%	25%	75%

Table 2. Antecedent preferences of pronominal subjects in a cataphoric context

Condition	null pronoun		overt personal pronoun		demonstrative	
	subject	object	subject	object	subject	object
Children	71.25%	28.75%	67.5%	31.8%	22.5%	77.5%
Adults	75%	25%	66.8%	32.5%	25%	75%

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