

# How Italian-speaking children aged 5 to 10 years deal with cleft sentences

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**Introduction:** a subject-object/non-subject asymmetry characterizes spontaneous production (Bazzanella 1994; Santos 2009), elicited production (Hupet and Tilmant 1989; Lobo et al. 2016; Del Puppo 2016) and comprehension of cleft sentences (Lempert and Kinsbourne 1980; Gordon et al. 2001; Dick et al. 2004), whereby subject clefts are more frequently adopted and more easily processed and understood by children and adults. The asymmetry recalls the one pointed out for restrictive relative clauses (Labelle 1990; Belletti and Contemori 2010; Costa et al. 2011 a.o.), which has been accounted for in structural terms (Friedmann et al. 2009). This study investigates the production of contrastive cleft sentences and cleft who-questions by the same children, and discusses the usage children made of taxing syntactic configurations when encouraged to produce object-extracted cleft sentences and object-extracted relative clauses with the same relevant properties.

**Participants:** 126 Italian-speaking children aged 5;3 to 10;4 (split into 5 age-groups) and 11 adults from Venice and its surroundings.

**Materials and method:** participants carried out a set of oral production tasks: a correction task aimed at eliciting subject and object cleft sentences (1 and 2), a task eliciting subject and object who-questions (3 and 4), a preference task (Novogrodsky and Friedmann 2006) eliciting subject and object restrictive relative clauses (5 and 6), and a delayed repetition task eliciting the very same contrastive clefts and restrictive relatives previously tested.

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| 1) It is THE GOAT that is touching the cow! | 5) I like the teacher that is rewarding the children. |
| 2) It is THE GOAT that the cat is pushing!  |   |
| 3) Who is washing the child?                | 6) I like the teacher that the policemen are halting. |
| 4) Who is the child washing?                |   |

**Results:** all groups accurately employed subject contrastive clefts in order to correct a previous claim (children: 50%; adults: 54%), whereas only 10 children made use of contrastive object clefts (the youngest child is 5;7 y.o.). However, children display good mastery of the subtle semantic-pragmatic properties of such sentences, as shown by the use they made of truncated clefts in discourse and by the good performance at the repetition task (on average across child groups: 92% accurate imitations). Despite this, some children showed not to understand the provided object clefts accurately, interpreting them as featuring SOV order instead of OSV.

When required to produce who-questions, participants also uttered cleft interrogatives:

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| 7) Who is it that is washing the child?     | 10) Do you know who is it that is washing the child? |
| 8) Who is it that the child is washing?     |  |
| 9) The child, who is it that he is washing? | 11) Who is it that is being washed by the child?     |
|   | 12) Is it his mother that is washing the child?      |

As a whole, these account for 33% of the responses (adults: 5%), 55% of which were uttered in the subject condition (adults: 100%; no object cleft questions). More object cleft structures with preverbal subjects like the one in (8) were employed in the question task as compared to the correction task (2): relevant object cleft questions appeared 4% of times in the child corpus, while contrastive object clefts amount to 0.7% of the corpus. Interestingly, only one child produced both object contrastive clefts and object cleft questions; other 8 children uttered at least one object

contrastive cleft, and 13 children only uttered cleft questions. Furthermore, 21 children produced at least one object relative like the one in (6) in the preference task. Of these, only 3 children also produced similar object contrastive clefts. Moreover, 5 children only produced contrastive object clefts, but no object relative with the relevant DP DP V configuration.

Therefore, some Italian-speaking children who show to master a problematic syntactic configuration in terms of Child Relativized Minimality in an experiment eliciting relative clauses, do not make use of object contrastive clefts involving the same configuration in a correction task, and vice-versa. Differently from contrastive clefts, however, subject and object cleft *who*-questions are largely exploited by Italian children from the age of 5 years.

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