

Production and Placement of Object Clitics: Evidence from Early Bulgarian

A striking distinction between two patterns of object clitic acquisition exists among languages. In Spanish (Wexler, Gavarró, Torrence 2003) and Greek (Marinis 2000) clitics emerge at the very beginning of language production (around the age of 2) and the rate of clitic omissions in obligatory environments is insignificant. At the same time, in languages such as Italian (Schaeffer 2000), French (Jakubowicz et al. 1998), Catalan (Wexler, Gavarró, Torrence 2003) and Romanian (Avram 1999), the initial stage of clitic production is characterized by a phase of clitic omission.

Since there is a lack of comprehensive studies on early Bulgarian (but cf. Ivanov 2008), the goal of the present paper is to bring empirical data from Bulgarian in regard to two fundamental issues: (I) The acquisition course of object clitics in Bulgarian, i.e. with or without a phase of omission, and (II) The principles of clitic placement once clitics have become part of children's grammar. The latter is particularly interesting in light of the fact that Bulgarian has verb-adjacent clitics that can be proclitics (preceding the host) and enclitics (following the host).

The study included an elicited production task with 42 monolingual Bulgarian children, aged 2;4-4;2. Each child was tested on 5 transitive verbs in 4 conditions depending on the elicited object accusative clitic- masculine, feminine, neuter and plural. All answers obligatorily included a clitic in enclitic position. In a second trial of the study, 12 of the children were tested on items eliciting clitics in proclitic positions.

The results of the study show that clitic acquisition in Bulgarian is characterised by an initial phase of omission, which lasts until the age of about 2;8. After this age, production is turbulent and omissions are rare. Furthermore, children's performance on the second task of the experiment indicates that once the phase of omission has ended, children are adult-like in their command of clitic grammar as no significant errors of clitic misplacement were found in the data.

The experiment delivers two important findings: (I) Clitic acquisition in Bulgarian is characterized by an initial phase of clitic omission thus patterning Bulgarian together with languages such as Italian, French, Catalan and Romanian, and (II) Bulgarian children show an adult-like mastery of clitic syntax obeying the clitic requirements of verb-adjacency and producing both proclitic and enclitic constructions from the clitic onset. The latter is in line with research on other languages, e.g. on French (Grüter 2006), Greek (Marinis 2000) and Croatian (Stiasny 2006) where position errors occur only at a very low rate, if at all.

References

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