CLITIC OMISSION IS NULL OBJECT: EVIDENCE FROM COMPREHENSION*

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of 3rd person singular accusative clitic omission has been widely studied in the literature on language acquisition crosslinguistically. Schaeffer (1997), Wexler et al. (2003) Tsakali & Wexler (2003), among many other authors, report that clitics can be omitted in early stages of linguistic development. However, it appears that there is quite some degree of crosslinguistic variation in the development of clitic production. Wexler et al. (2003) contend that clitics are omitted only in some languages, namely in those languages in which there is past participle agreement. In languages without past participle agreement, clitics are not omitted in the early stages of development. Wexler et al. (2003) further argue that the stage of development in which clitics can be omitted correlates with the age at which root infinitives are produced. This proposal is challenged in studies like Jakubowicz et al. (1996), who report that clitic are omitted in French – a language with past participle agreement - past the root infinitive stage. These apparently contradictory results find an easy explanation if there is no single source for clitic omission crosslinguistically.

For European Portuguese, Costa and Lobo (2005) found that clitics are omitted after age 4, i.e. beyond the age in which root infinitives are produced in those languages that have it. It was further found that the rate of omission was much higher than the rates found for other languages.

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Based on these differences, it was hypothesized that clitic omission in European Portuguese was not of the same type as what has been found for languages like French, Italian or Catalan.

European Portuguese has null objects in transitive contexts, as in (1), in which the accusative clitic is optional (Raposo 1986):

(1) Tirei o dinheiro do bolso e guardei(-o) na gaveta.
   (I) took the money from-the pocket and kept(-it) in-the drawer
   “I took the money from the pocket and put it in the drawer.”

The null object construction is ruled out in several contexts. For the purposes of this paper, it is enough to highlight that null objects are ruled out in strong islands (2) and in reflexive contexts (3):

(2) Vi a Teresa, quando *(a) beijaste.
   (I) saw the Teresa, when *(her) kissed
   “I saw Teresa, when you kissed her.”

(3) O Pedro lavou*(-se)
   The Pedro washed *(himself)
   “Pedro washed himself.”

The characteristics of clitic omission in European Portuguese were further explored in Costa and Lobo (2006), Carmona and Silva (2007) and Silva (2008). In these studies, the production of different types of clitics was investigated: dative clitics, reflexive clitics, non-argumental clitics and clitics specified for 1st and 2nd person (all contexts like (2) and (3) in which null objects are ungrammatical). It was found that there was much less omission in the contexts in which null objects are ruled out in the the target adult grammar. For this reason, Costa et al. (2008) hypothesize that clitic omission in the acquisition of European Portuguese is to be understood as an overgeneralization of the null object construction. This would explain the differential rates of omission in the context of strong islands and in reflexive contexts.

The purpose of the present paper is to provide some further argumentation in favor of the idea that clitic omission in the acquisition of European Portuguese is an overgeneralization of the null object construction, by showing that results from comprehension are compatible with those found in production.

The paper is structured as follows:
In section 2, we explain why assessing comprehension of null objects is relevant.

In section 3, we present the results of a comprehension task developed for assessing children’s knowledge of the ban on null objects in strong islands and in reflexive contexts.

In section 4, we present the conclusions of the paper.

2. Production vs. Comprehension.

The hypothesis put forward in Costa and Lobo (2006) and Costa et al. (2008) that children overuse null objects in production straightforwardly explains the basic facts of clitic omission in the acquisition of European Portuguese. First, it accounts for the fact that children’s rate of null complements is higher in Portuguese than in other languages. Second, it predicts that the rates of omission are smaller in the contexts in which null objects are ruled out in the target grammar, provided that children already have some knowledge of the distribution of null complements. Third, it predicts that the ages at which children omit complements in this language are different from those in which there is omission in other languages, since the phenomenon is different in nature.

There is an important prediction of this hypothesis. If children are indeed overusing the null object construction, this means that they know that their language includes this construction. Since null objects are available in some languages only, this hypothesis predicts that this aspect of crosslinguistic variation is already acquired at the ages we are investigating – between 3 and 6.

As argued in Grüter (2006), assessing comprehension may provide a good testing ground for this last prediction. If children’s grammar includes the null object construction, it is predicted that children are able to comprehend null objects.

Grüter (2006) tested the comprehension of null objects by French-speaking children in order to compare their performance with the results in production tasks. The idea was the following: if French-speaking children are producing null complements as an instance of an option available in adult French, it is expected that they accept transitive interpretations for verbs without a complement. If, on the contrary, their grammar does not include the null complement option, they should reject a transitive interpretation for verbs without a complement. In the latter case, the null complements uttered in production cannot be interpreted as instances of null objects (as produced in European Portuguese or in some variants of French (Tuller 2005)). Grüter (2006) found that French-speaking children
rejected the null object interpretation 86% of the time, assigning the verbs without a complement an intransitive interpretation. On the basis of this performance, it is legitimate to conclude that French-speaking children do not have knowledge of the null object construction at the ages under test.

In Costa and Lobo (2009), we replicated Grüter’s experiment for European Portuguese in order to check whether Portuguese children’s performance matches the one of French-speaking children and in order to test our own proposal. The main purpose of that test was to test the hypothesis that Portuguese children overuse the null object construction. If they overuse it, they must know it, and therefore accept it.

In the next section, we report on the previous experiment, expanding it to test reflexive contexts.

3. Experiments on the comprehension of null objects.

In order to assess whether the performance of children in comprehension is coherent with the findings for production, and whether children’s grammar includes the null object construction, we ran two comprehension tests. We raise the following three hypotheses:

H1: If children’s grammar includes the null object construction, they will be able to assign transitive readings to verbs without a complement, like adults do.

H2: Since children acquiring European Portuguese overuse the null object construction, producing null objects in strong islands, it is expected that they overaccept null object interpretations in strong island contexts, unlike adults do.

H3: Since children acquiring European Portuguese overuse the null object construction, producing null objects in reflexive contexts, it is expected that they assign reflexive readings to verbs without a complement, unlike adults do.

We first present the results of the test presented in Costa and Lobo (2009), in which the acceptance of null objects in simple declarative sentences and in strong islands was investigated. In 3.2., we present a new test with results for the acceptance of reflexive reading for null complements.

General method: We adapted Grütter’s (2006) comprehension test, and developed a truth value judgment task in which images were presented to
the child, followed by a description uttered by a puppet. The child’s task was to tell whether the puppet was telling the truth, and correct it.

3.1. Test 1: simple clauses and strong islands

In the first test (Costa and Lobo 2009), we examined children’s acceptance of null complements in simple declarative clauses and in strong islands.

The test included the following conditions:

a) Null objects in simple declarative clauses (target response: true);
b) Clitics in simple sentences (target response: true);
c) Clitics in islands (target response: true);
d) Intransitive structures (target response: true);
e) Null objects in islands (target response: false);
f) Superfluous arguments (target response: false).

We tested four items per condition, and the following verbs were tested: acordar “wake up”, mergulhar “dive/put in water”, adormecer “fall asleep/put to sleep”, baloiçar “swing”. All these verbs allow for a transitive/intransitive alternation. The setting by the pictures strongly favored the transitive interpretation. As such, if children accept the transitive interpretation, they do so, because they have the null object construction and because the pragmatics of the situation favors it. If they fail to do so, it is because their grammar lacks this construction, in spite of the favoring pragmatics. This way, the pragmatic factors are controlled for and neutralized (Costa, Lobo and Silva 2009).

The conditions above were selected for the following reasons:

A. The null objects in simple declarative clauses allow for testing whether children assign transitive interpretation to verbs without a complement, like adults, or whether they fail to do so, like Grüter (2006) found for French.

B. Condition e), null object in islands, is crucial to know whether children reject null objects in the same context adults do or whether, unlike adults, they overaccept null objects in islands, coherently to what they do in production.

C. Conditions b), c), d) and f) are control conditions to make sure that children have knowledge on transitivity with and without clitics both in main clauses and in island contexts.
Participants: The test was ran on 20 children aged between 3;2 and 5;10 (mean: 4;4), after excluding 9 children who were not able to complete the task. 6 adults were used as control group.

All children were tested individually in a quiet room in their kindergarten. No time limit was imposed during testing, and no response-contingent feedback was given by the experimenter, only general encouragement. The children were rewarded after the completion of the task. The test was preceded by familiarization with the tasks, the puppet, the images and the lexical items used.

Results. As can be seen in fig. 1, adults performed as expected in all conditions. Crucially, no significant differences were found between the null object condition in simple clauses and in islands.

![Fig. 1. Results experiment 1: control group](image)

Children performed above 80% in all conditions, exhibiting an adult-like performance, except in that they accepted null objects in islands. This is shown in Fig. 2:
Summarizing the results, we can observe the following aspects:

a) Children master transitivity and intransitivity, rejecting superfluous arguments and interpreting intransitive structures like adults do.

b) Children interpret clitics like adults do.

c) Children interpret null objects like adults do.

d) Children accept null objects in strong islands, unlike adults do.

3.2. Test 2: reflexive context

In the second test, we aim at detecting whether children also overaccept null objects in reflexive contexts, reproducing their behavior in production and what was found in the previous test.

The test included the following conditions:

a) Clitic with pronominal interpretation (target response: true);

b) Pronoun with reflexive interpretation (target response: false)

c) Reflexive clitic (target response: true)

d) Reflexive with pronominal interpretation (target response: false)

e) Null object with disjoint reference (target response: true)

f) Null object with reflexive interpretation (target response: false)

g) DP object (target response: true)

h) DP with reflexive interpretation (target response: false)

Again, we tested four items per condition, and only verbs allowing for a reflexive/non-reflexive alternation were tested: *pintar* (make up), *lavar* (wash), *pentear* (comb), *sujar* (make dirty). The method was exactly the same as in the previous experiment.

The rationale underlying the conditions under test is the following:
A. Conditions a), b), c), d), g) and h) act as control, to make sure that children master general conditions on binding and disjoint reference sentence-internally. If they failed in these conditions, no clear indication could be taken from the lack of appropriate interpretation for a null object. It could be due a lack of knowledge on binding, and not to lack of knowledge on null objects.

B. Conditions e) and f) are the crucial ones to assess whether children know that a null object cannot be used in a reflexive context. If they overuse the null object construction, it is predicted that they will accept null objects in condition f).

*Participants:* The test was ran on 19 children aged between 3;6 and 5;9 (mean: 4;7), after excluding 4 children who had a yes-bias. 9 adults were used as control group. The same procedures as in experiment 1 were used.

*Results.* The control group performed at ceiling in all conditions. Let us look at children’s results in Fig. 3:
Fig. 3: Results experiment 2: children
As Fig. 2 shows, children perform quite well in all conditions but one. Their responses are above 80% in all conditions, except in that they are able to assign a reflexive interpretation to a null complement.

Summarizing the results of this experiment, we can observe that:

a) Children master reflexivity, interpreting overt reflexives and pronouns like adults do (confirming previous results for European Portuguese, Cristóvão 2006);

b) Children are able to interpret null objects adult-like, assigning it a pronominal reading;

c) Unlike adults, children are able to assign reflexive readings to null complements, which is coherent to their behavior in production.

4. Discussion

The results of the two experiments are consistent with each other and the results obtained in previous research for production. The three hypotheses were fully confirmed: children acquiring European Portuguese know the null object construction, but overuse it both in strong islands and in reflexive contexts.

The results obtained further confirm the idea that clitic omission in acquisition is not a uniform phenomenon, since our results crucially differ from those obtained for French by Grüter (2006). Unlike French children, children acquiring European Portuguese know the null object construction, but this knowledge is not completely stable, because the construction is used and judged acceptable in contexts where it should not be.

In this sense, our results are consistent with the hypothesis that null objects are overused in European Portuguese. Note that, as argued in Costa, Lobo and Silva (2009), the good performance on the binding conditions precludes an interpretation of the overuse of null object as the effect of a late acquisition of pragmatics.

Finally, the results presented here provide a clue into the representation of the empty category assumed by children in the analysis of null complements. A pro analysis, as we assumed in earlier work, would predict that children would fail in binding tasks, contrary to fact. We hypothesize that, in continuity to adult grammar (Raposo 1986), children treat null objects as variables, but lack knowledge in the exact licensing conditions for variables. In further work, we intend to validate this hypothesis by investigating children’s knowledge of conditions on variable licensing. For now, it is sufficient to observe that we took a step further in clarifying the degrees of variation in the characteristics of clitic omission in child language.
References


