Abstract

Previous studies have established a correlation between early clitic omission and the existence of past participle agreement, explainable with a maturational constraint – the UCC. Since Portuguese doesn’t show past participle agreement, it is expected that Portuguese children will produce clitics early on. In order to find out whether this correlation holds for Portuguese, an experimental study was conducted reproducing Schaeffer’s 1997 and adapting it to particular properties of Portuguese – the availability of null objects and variability of clitic position. The results of this study suggest that Portuguese children do omit clitics, apparently contradicting previous studies. Since clitic omission lasts until later than in other languages, we hypothesize that the explanation may rely on complexity factors.

1. Introduction and background.

Recent research on the acquisition of clitics reveals that clitics may be problematic for children depending on the language being acquired. In some languages, clitics are omitted while in other languages clitics are produced very early on. Clitics have been found to be problematic, and omitted, in Catalan (Wexler, Gavarró and Torrens (2003)), French (Hamman et al. (1996), Jakubowicz and Rigaut (2000)) and Italian (Schaeffer 1997). For Spanish (Wexler, Gavarró and Torrens (2003)), Greek (Tsakali and Wexler (2003)), Serbo-Croatian (Ilic & Ud Deen (2003)) and Romanian (Babynyshev & Marin (2005)), it was found that children do not omit clitics. This differentiated behavior has been related to the existence of past participle agreement. Tsakali and Wexler (2003) and Wexler, Gavarró and Torrens (2003) argue that clitic omission is expected only in languages with past participle agreement.

Based on this background, the primary goal of this paper is to investigate whether children acquiring European Portuguese omit clitics. The prediction made by the authors mentioned above is quite straightforward. Since European Portuguese does not have past participle agreement (in compound tenses)¹, as

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¹ It is necessary to specify that past participle agreement is bad in compound tenses, since (1b) is grammatical if the participial form (adjectival) heads a small clause. For completeness, it is
shown in (1), it is expected that Portuguese patterns like Spanish, and that children do not omit clitics.

(1) a. O Pedro já os tem lido.
   the Pedro already them\textsubscript{CL} has read\textsubscript{sg}

   *b. O Pedro já os tem lidos.
   the Pedro already them\textsubscript{CL} has read\textsubscript{pl}

However, an evaluation of children’s data in European Portuguese is not simple, because of the availability of discourse-bound null objects (Raposo 1986). As shown in (2), in root contexts, null objects freely alternate with clitics:

(2) a. Tirei os óculos da gaveta e pus [ _ ] no bolso.
   (I) took the glasses from the drawer and put in the pocket

   b. Tirei os óculos da gaveta e pu-los no bolso.
   (I) took the glasses from the drawer and put them\textsubscript{pl} in the pocket

Given the availability of null objects in the adult grammar, if children omit a clitic, it is necessary to find a way of distinguishing between cases of omission (patterning like Italian or French) and target-like null objects. In other words, if it is found that children produce null complements, it has to be established whether they are target deviant in omitting clitics or whether they are target-like in producing null objects.

As Raposo (1986) shows, null objects are ruled out in strong island contexts:

(3) A: E a Maria?
    what about Maria

   B: O Pedro está triste porque o Zé *(a) beijou.
   the Pedro is sad because the Zé her\textsubscript{CL} kissed

This restriction on the distribution of null objects provides the necessary distinguishing factor for distinguishing between clitic omission and null objects. It is, therefore, necessary to test strong island contexts in children’s productions.

The second goal of this paper is, then, to present an experimental procedure testing clitic omission, but controlling its nature (clitic omission vs. null object).

For several languages, it has been shown that children make no mistakes in clitic placement (see Guasti (2002) for a review). In European Portuguese,
clitics can be enclitic or proclitic, depending on the syntactic environment (Duarte and Matos 2000, a.o.). Proclisis triggers include negation, some adverbs, a filled CP, and certain quantified subjects. Enclisis appears elsewhere. Contrary to the findings for other languages, Duarte and Matos (2000) show that children misplace clitics, tending to generalize enclisis. These facts make it necessary to test whether clitic placement is a relevant variable for determining rates of omission.

Summing up, this paper addresses the following questions:

A. Is there clitic omission in European Portuguese?
B. If children produce null forms, is it possible to determine whether they are target-deviant instances of clitic omission or target-like null objects?
C. Is the proclisis-enclisis variation relevant for children’s behavior in what concerns clitic omission?

The paper is organized as follows: in section 2, we present the experiment conducted for eliciting clitics; in section 3, the results of the experiment are presented; section 4 discusses and analyzes the results.

2. Experiment.

An elicitation task was run, modeled after Schaeffer (1997). Given the facts mentioned in section 1, three conditions were tested:

a) Accusative 3rd person clitic production in enclitic environment in declarative contexts;
b) Accusative 3rd person clitic production in proclitic environments (involving negation and questions);
c) Accusative 3rd person clitic production in strong island contexts.

Conditions a) and b) aim at determining whether there is omission in enclitic and proclitic environments. Condition c) elicits clitics in strong island contexts, since this is the relevant domain to differentiate omission from null objects. Recall that in this context, null objects are ruled out, hence, if children produce a null form in a strong island, it can, in principle, be unambiguously identified as a case of clitic omission.\(^2\) Given its structural properties, the strong islands are a necessarily proclitic environment, which makes it impossible to test enclisis in this context. Three test items per condition were used.

\(^2\) An obvious alternative explanation is to think that children do not know the domain in which null objects are allowed. We will comment this alternative explanation in section 3.
For conditions a) and b), we reproduced Schaeffer’s (1997) experiment. In this protocol, in which a story acted out with props is commented upon by a puppet, a DP is made highly accessible, and children are asked to correct the puppet. In their correction, they are led to refer to the accessible DP, placed in an accusative context. Accordingly, children may cliticize it, omit it, or repeat the DP. The latter is not expected, given the discourse properties of the DP. In languages without null objects, cliticization is then the only available option for an adult. In European Portuguese, however, there may be alternation, in this context, between cliticizing the DP and producing a null object construction. In (4) and (5), we illustrate a test item for condition a) and b), respectively:

(4) Example of test item – Condition a): enclisis

_Experimentador 1:_
Olha! Está aqui o Urso Pooh. Ele hoje encontrou o Tigre e achou que o tigre estava muito despenteado... Ah! Ele tem uma escova! Olha para o que o Pooh fez ao tigre.
_Fantoche:_
Eu sei! Ele lavou o tigre!
_Experimentador 1:_
Não...não lavou nada. Diz-lhe lá o que o Pooh fez ao tigre!

_Expected response:_ penteou-(o)

_Experiencer 1:_
Look! Here’s Pooh. Today, he met Tiger and he thought his hair was not nice…Ah! He has a comb! Look at what Pooh did to Tiger.
_Puppet:_
I know! He washed Tiger!
_Experiencer 1:_
No...he did not. Tell him what Pooh did to Tiger.

_Expected response:_ combed-(him)

(5) Example of test item – Condition b): proclisis

_Experimentador 1:_
O Pooh está a tentar pentear a princesa.
_Fantoche:_
Eu não quero dizer mais asneiras. Não sei se ele já penteou a princesa…
_Experimentador 1:_
Pergunta lá ao Pooh se ele já penteou a princesa.

_Expected answer:_ Já (a) penteaste?
CLITIC OMISSION, NULL OBJECTS OR BOTH?

Experiencer 1:
Pooh is trying to comb the princess.
Puppet:
I don’t want to say more stupid things. I don’t know if he has already combed the princess...
Experiencer 1:
Ask Pooh whether he has already combed the princess.
Expected answer: already (her) combed

For condition c), the task had to be slightly changed, since eliciting a whole sentence with a strong island might add difficulties for the children. Hence, we elicited the clitic in a completion task in which all the child had to produce was the clitic and the verb. An example of test item is given in (6):

(6) Example of test item – Condition c): null object

Experimentador 1:
O Pooh ficou todo contente quando cheirou aquele bolo.
Fantoche:
Ele ficou todo contente quando comeu aquele bolo!
Experimentador 1:
Não foi nada...Não foi quando comeu o bolo. Diz lá ao fantoche: o Pooh ficou contente quando fez o quê ao bolo? Ele ficou contente quando...
Expected response: o cheirou.

Experiencer 1:
Pooh was very happy when he smelled that cake.
Puppet:
He was very happy when he ate that cake!
Experiencer 1:
No. It wasn’t when he ate the cake. Tell the puppet: Pooh was very happy when he did what to the cake? He was very happy when….
Expected response: it smelled.

As shown in the expected response, in the strong island context (the temporal adverbial clause), the clitic cannot be omitted, since this is not a legitimate null object context.

The elicitation task was followed by a repetition task, containing four instances of proclisis. This repetition task was created, because elicitation of proclisis tends to be more difficult (given the nature of the proclisis triggers). The inclusion of this repetition task aimed, then, at increasing the data on
proclisis in case the elicitation of proclitics as in (5) would fail, which eventually did not happen.

Given these conditions, let us check what the possible results of this experiment are:

A. If clitics are found in island contexts only, this will mean that there is no clitic omission, but there are target-like null objects. A result like this will be consistent with the predictions made by Tsakali and Wexler (2003), given the lack of past participle agreement in European Portuguese.

B. If clitics are found in all contexts, it has to be concluded that there is no omission of clitics, and that children have not acquired null objects. A result like this will also be coherent with the prediction that the language should not have clitic omission because of the lack of past participle agreement.

C. If clitics are omitted in all contexts, two reasons may underlie this behavior. Either Portuguese children omit clitics and produce target-like null objects, or they omit clitics and have not yet acquired the availability of the null object construction. 

Prima facie, the result hypothesized in C appears to be problematic. Note, however, that it is inconclusive just in what regards the mastery of the null object construction by children. It enables to assert that clitics are omitted. As it will become clear in the following sections, the results of the experiment enable to draw conclusions even in what regards the acquisition of null objects.

The experiment involved 21 monolingual children, aged between 2 and 4 (average age 3;10), and 6 adult controls with no linguistics background. The children were divided into two groups (2-3 year olds and 4 year olds), since, in the studies mentioned in section 1, it was shown that there was a developmental effect. The age effect will be relevant in the discussion of the results. The data were collected in individual sessions, and recorded with a minidisk recorder. One of the experimenters registered the data during the application of the experiment. The recordings and manual encoding were confronted for reliability. Ambiguous cases and cases that could not be properly heard were discarded and not counted.

3. Results.

In (7), (8), and (9), the results for the control group, the 2-3 year old group, and the 4 year old group, respectively, are presented. For each condition,
CLITIC OMISSION, NULL OBJECTS OR BOTH? 7

we present the absolute number and the proportion of responses. The categories considered were clitic, DP, null form, and strong pronoun.

(7) Control group:

\textbf{Condition a) - enclisis:}
\begin{itemize}
  \item Clitic: 8/18 (44.44\%)
  \item DP: 1/18 (5.55\%)
  \item Null: 9/18 (50\%)
  \item Strong pronoun: 0/18 (0\%)
\end{itemize}

\textbf{Condition b) - proclisis:}
\begin{itemize}
  \item Clitic: 12/18 (66.66\%)
  \item DP: 2/18 (11.1\%)
  \item Null: 4/18 (22.2\%)
  \item Strong pronoun: 0/18 (0\%)
\end{itemize}

\textbf{Condition c) - null object:}
\begin{itemize}
  \item Clitic: 16/18 (88.88\%)
  \item DP: 2/18 (11.11\%)
\end{itemize}

\textbf{Repetition task (proclisis)}
\begin{itemize}
  \item Clitic: 24/24 (100\%)
\end{itemize}

(8) 2-3 year old group:

\textbf{Condition a) - enclisis:}
\begin{itemize}
  \item Clitic: 3/41 (7.31\%)
  \item DP: 8/41 (19.5\%)
  \item Null: 28/41 (68.29\%)
  \item Strong pronoun: 2/41 (4.87\%)
\end{itemize}

\textbf{Condition b) - proclisis:}
\begin{itemize}
  \item Clitic: 5/39 (12.82\%)
  \item DP: 6/39 (15.38\%)
  \item Null: 28/39 (71.79\%)
  \item Strong pronoun: 0/39 (0\%)
\end{itemize}
**Condition c) - null object:**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clitic</td>
<td>1/43</td>
<td>2.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DP</td>
<td>24/43</td>
<td>55.81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Null</td>
<td>18/43</td>
<td>41.86%</td>
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**Repetition task (proclisis)**

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<tr>
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<th>Count</th>
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<tr>
<td>Clitic</td>
<td>25/54</td>
<td>46.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DP</td>
<td>0/54</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Null</td>
<td>29/54</td>
<td>53.7%</td>
</tr>
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(9) 4 year old group:

**Condition a) - enclisis:**

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<tr>
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<th>Count</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clitic</td>
<td>1/21</td>
<td>4.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DP</td>
<td>4/21</td>
<td>9.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Null</td>
<td>16/21</td>
<td>76.19%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strong pronoun</td>
<td>0/21</td>
<td>0%</td>
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**Condition b) - proclisis:**

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<th>Count</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clitic</td>
<td>5/22</td>
<td>22.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DP</td>
<td>2/22</td>
<td>9.09%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Null</td>
<td>15/22</td>
<td>68.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong pronoun</td>
<td>0/22</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Condition c) - null object:**

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<th></th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clitic</td>
<td>0/23</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DP</td>
<td>15/23</td>
<td>65.21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Null</td>
<td>8/23</td>
<td>34.78%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Repetition task (proclisis)**

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clitic</td>
<td>21/28</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DP</td>
<td>0/28</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Null</td>
<td>7/28</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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We would like to draw the reader’s attention to some aspects of these results. Note, first, that the control group behaves as expected. In the proclisis and enclisis conditions, there is a fair split between production of null objects and production of clitics. Proclisis favored the production of the clitic, a tendency not reproduced in children’s results. In condition c), no null objects appeared, and clitics were massively produced. DPs were produced at a non significant rate. Overall, for the control group, clitic production was much higher than for
the children in conditions a) and b) (55.55%), and, in island contexts, clitics were produced 88.88% of the time.

A second aspect is that there are very few cases of clitic production in both groups in all conditions. Collapsing all conditions, the rate of clitic production is 10% in the 2-3 year old group, and 13.95% in the 4 year old group. No developmental effect was found. The lack of developmental effect contrasts with what was found for other languages, in which it was found that 4 year olds typically no longer omit clitics.

Null forms are found in all contexts, which corresponds to pattern C of the preceding section. According to the discussion made above, this result leads to the conclusion that there is clitic omission in European Portuguese, a matter we will return to in the next section.

The rate of DP production in island contexts is higher than in conditions a) and b) (for the 2-3 year old group, there was 17.5% of DPs in conditions a) and b), and 55.81% of DPs in island contexts; for the 4 year old group, there was 13.95% of DPs in conditions a) and b), and 65.21% of DPs in island contexts).

There was more production of clitics in the repetition task than in the other task.

A final aspect worth noting, but not visible from the presentation of results above is that some of the few clitics produced in the proclitic environments was misplaced, contrary to what is reported for other languages, which confirms Duarte and Matos’ (2000) observation that there is a tendency to overuse enclisis.

4. **Discussion.**

Let us now consider the results presented in light of the questions outlined in the introduction. The first aspect to be noted is that the prediction that European Portuguese should not have clitic omission, because it does not have past participle agreement, is not confirmed. As presented above, the fact that there are null forms in strong island contexts makes it possible to state that these null forms are instances of omitted clitics rather than target-like null objects. Recall from section 2 that we discussed the fact that a result in which children produce null forms across the three conditions might be inconclusive, since it might correspond to a overuse of null objects. Accordingly, this might mean that children have null objects, but have not learnt the special characteristics of the strong island context. However, it is possible to show that such reasoning does not hold. First, if clitic omission was just a case of target-like null object in European Portuguese, as defended for Brazilian Portuguese
(Lopes 2003)\(^3\), clitics should appear in island contexts, and the results for conditions without islands should not differ significantly from those obtained for the control group. More importantly, the rate of DP production is much higher in condition c), showing that children do have some knowledge of the distribution of null objects. It is, then, the rate of DP production that provides the crucial piece of evidence to conclude that the null forms in the strong island contexts are not just a target-deviant extension of the null object construction. Since it is possible to argue that children know that strong islands are not a legitimate domain for null objects, it is possible to conclude that there is clitic omission in European Portuguese.

Clitic omission in European Portuguese differs, however, from what has been found for other languages. Crucially, the age at which there is no clitic production is higher than in languages with clitic omission (for instance, in Wexler, Gavarró and Torrens (2003), it is shown that clitic omission in Catalan drops down from 74% to 25% in the 3 year old group). This difference calls for an explanation. We contend that the nature of omission in European Portuguese is different.

In order to understand our proposal, let us first review the proposal made by Wexler, Gavarró and Torrens (2003) in order to explain clitic omission. The authors assume the analysis of clitics outlined in Sportiche (1996), among others, according to which clitics are verbal agreement morphemes generated in the functional domain, and heading a clitic phrase, as shown in (10)

\[
\text{(10) \quad } [\text{CIP \, CL}_i \, [\text{AgrOP} \, [\text{VP} \ldots \text{DP}]]]
\]

As shown in (10), clitics are coindexed with a DP (typically a pro) in an argumental position. This XP must raise to the specifier position of CIP, passing through Spec,AgrOP in languages in which there is past participle agreement.

This analysis of clitics contrasts with those arguing that clitics are generated in argumental positions, and then raise to the inflectional domain. This has been argued for European Portuguese in Duarte and Matos (2000), among others. We contend that the two analyses do not exclude each other. Rather, they correspond to differentiated status of clitics, correlating with the availability of clitic-doubling in different languages. In other words, if a clitic is generated in the functional domain and coindexed with a DP in argument position, this DP may host pro or a lexical DP. In the latter case, doubling arises. If the clitic is generated in the argument position, it cannot be doubled by

\(^3\) Note that, in Brazilian Portuguese (BP), the structural conditions for the occurrence of null objects are not as restricted as in European Portuguese. In particular, in BP null objects seem to be allowed in island contexts (cf. Bianchi & Figueiredo-Silva (1994)). This means that the nature of children’s omissions in BP may be different.
a lexical DP.\footnote{In Fiéis and Pratas (2005), it is argued that the functional and argumental analyses do not exclude each other even language-internally, which explains differences between reflexive and non-reflexive clitics, and between argumental and non-argumental clitics.} Bearing these analytical tools in mind, let us return to Wexler, Gavarró and Torrens’ analysis. The authors sustain that clitic omission is a consequence of a constraint available for children, subject to maturation, stating that a given D-feature can only check against one functional category – the Unique Checking Constraint (UCC), defined in Wexler (1998). Since the DP coindexed with the clitic in (10) has to check a D-feature on AgrO and in CIP, the UCC prevents it from doing so. As a solution, CIP is not projected, and the DP only has to check a D-feature against AgrO. This results in clitic omission. Recall that this explanation holds for clitic-doubling languages, in which the clitic is a verbal agreement morpheme not generated in argument position.

Let us now return to the European Portuguese data. European Portuguese is not a clitic-doubling language. Clitics are argumental and cannot be doubled by lexical DPs. Nevertheless, it could still be argued that the UCC explains our data, in the sense that the clitic itself enters a double checking relation. The clitic must check Case and is attracted to Infl. Assuming that both movements are motivated by some kind of feature checking, this may yield a violation of the UCC. An analysis along these lines might explain clitic omission in spite of the lack of past participle agreement. The crucial distinguishing factor to explain patterns of clitic omission would then be the clitic doubling nature of the language. However promising this type of approach may be, it cannot be the explanation for our data, given the differences in age.

Recall that omission lasts until later in European Portuguese than in other languages. Given the maturational nature of the UCC, if it were to explain our data, the age at which omission ceases should be similar across languages. Accordingly, the UCC does not seem to be the most adequate explanation for the pattern of omission we found in our data. In other words, as mentioned above, the nature of omission in Portuguese has to be different. If this conclusion is right, the results obtained are important, because their contradiction of the correlation between the availability of past participle agreement and clitic omission is only apparent.

Having established that the nature of omission in European Portuguese is different, it must be determined what it is. Let us first consider what is required to acquire clitics in EP:

a) To know that clitics and null objects coexist in some contexts.

b) To learn that null objects are ruled out in strong island contexts.

c) To learn clitic placement.

These characteristics contrast with those observable in other languages. Let us consider Catalan, for the sake of illustration. Catalan, like most Romance
languages, lacks null objects, and clitics are proclitic across most contexts. In this sense, the clitic system of Catalan is less complex than the Portuguese one.

In fact, Portuguese children do not have to abandon omission, but specialize the contexts in which omission (null object) is in complementary distribution with clitics. This requires sensitivity to strong island contexts. The significant difference in production of DPs in strong island contexts compared to the other conditions shows that the children tested are already displaying some sensitivity to the special characteristics of these domains.

In short, what we are suggesting is that complexity factors add difficulty for Portuguese children. Complexity comes from two different sources:

a) The existence of null objects.

b) Clitic placement (which explains the generalization of enclisis)

Naturally, if we are assuming that complexity is the key factor behind omission, we have the burden of proposing a metric for complexity. Let us assume with Reinhart (1999) that certain interface operations require reference set computation, and, consequently, add effort to children. The choice between a clitic and a null object is post-syntactic and discourse-conditioned. It passes the criteria to induce reference-set computation, since the conditions for choosing a clitic or a null object partly intersect, and, mostly, because a derivation with a clitic competes with a derivation with a null object in order to convey the same meaning.

Summing up, we argue that, in European Portuguese, there is clitic omission, but not due to the UCC. Rather, there may be two sources for clitic omission. In some languages, clitic omission is explained by the UCC. In that case, there must be an early developmental effect (coinciding with the Optional Infinitive stage), and it must correlate with past participle agreement or any other double checking phenomena. If the source of omission is complexity, it is expected that omission lasts until later, and it relates with the complexity of the system. This approach may extend to French data on object omission. Hamman et al. (1996), Jakubowicz & Rigaut (2000), and Tuller (2005) show that there is late omission in French, correlating with structural deficiency. According to the reasoning outlined above, this late omission should correlate with some complexity aspect. As noted in Zribi-Hertz (1985) and Cummins & Roberge (2005), Colloquial French has various types of empty/elliptical objects, which adds complexity to the French system, and correctly predicts that French and European Portuguese should behave alike in displaying late clitic omission.

5. Conclusion.

In this paper, we investigated whether there is clitic omission in the acquisition of European Portuguese, controlling for the difference between target-deviant clitic omission and target-like null objects. It was shown that the
results on European Portuguese might, in principle, provide a testing ground for the claim that there is a correlation between omission and past participle agreement, and consequently for approaches to omission based on the UCC.

The results obtained appeared to contradict previous studies for other languages, since it was found that there is clitic omission, distinguishable from null object, disproving a correlation with the availability of Past Participle Agreement.

However, since the omission lasts until later, and the nature of clitics is different, we suggest that the nature of clitic omission in European Portuguese is not the UCC. In this sense, our results do not contradict the UCC, but show that different sources may explain surface similar behaviors. In the particular case of European Portuguese, complexity can explain the performance of Portuguese children, provided that the special properties of Portuguese clitics and the availability of null objects are taken into account.

In future work (Costa and Lobo (in progress) and Silva (in progress)), we test the complexity hypothesis, by comparing these results with those to be obtained from elicitation of dative, reflexive and non-argumental clitics. Since many of these clitics do not freely alternate with null objects, they provide good means to detect whether any type of omission in European Portuguese is explainable by the UCC.

References.


