Clitic Omission in The Acquisition of European Portuguese: Data from Comprehension

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1. Introduction

European Portuguese, like other Romance languages, has pronominal clitics, appearing in enclitic and proclitic positions depending on syntactic environments (Duarte and Matos 2000, among others), as illustrated in (1):

(1) a. O rapaz leu-o.  
The boy read it
b. O rapaz também o leu.  
The boy also read it
‘The boy also read it’

Unlike most Romance languages, European Portuguese allows for null objects, identified by an accessible discourse topic (Raposo 1986), as shown in (2):

(2) A: E o teu carro?  
What about your car
B: Levei para a oficina hoje.  
Took to the garage today
‘I took it to the garage today.’

Null objects are ruled out in strong islands, which has been explained by their need to be bound by a covert topic operator (Raposo 1986):

(3) A: E a Mariana?  
What about Mariana
B: Estou triste porque *(a) beijaste.  
Am sad because *(her) kissed
‘I’m sad because you kissed her.’

Recent research on the production/omission of clitic pronouns in language acquisition reveals that, in several languages, children omit this type of pronoun in their initial productions. For languages like Italian (Schaeffer, 1997), Catalan (Wexler, Gavarró and Torrens, 2003) or European Portuguese (Costa and Lobo, 2006), it has been shown that there is a significantly high rate of omission, contrary to what happens in languages like Spanish or Greek. Wexler (2003) proposes an analysis for clitic omission based on the fact that clitics enter multiple feature checking relations, suggesting that, for maturational reasons, in the languages at stake, children generate syntactic structures without the pronoun. In Costa and Lobo (2006), it is proposed that Wexler’s analysis cannot be generalized to all languages in which there is clitic omission, suggesting that, for European Portuguese, what underlies omission is an overgeneralization of
the null object construction, available in adult grammar. Superficially, it is
difficult to determine whether a production without an internal argument is to be
interpreted as a syntactic representation with a null pronominal form (null
object construction) or without the realization of any pronoun, that is, one must
be able to differentiate a target-deviant clitic omission from a target-like null
object, and to determine what is the structural representation of a sentence in
which a clitic is not produced. It is, therefore, important to find suitable criteria
to distinguish these two alternatives. Data from the production of different clitic
types (dative, reflexive, and specified for 1st and 2nd person) reveal that there is,
indeed, for Portuguese children, a correlation between clitic omission and the
null object construction (Costa & Lobo 2007b, Carmona & Silva 2007).

In this paper, we aim at finding evidence confirming or not this type of
correlation on the basis of data from comprehension. In order to attain this goal,
we will present the results of an adaptation of the test developed in Grüter

2. Clitic omission in acquisition

2.1. Clitic omission as the result of a universal constraint

The work of several researchers has shown that, in the development of
some languages, pronominal clitics are omitted (Schaeffer, 1997; Wexler et al.,
2003; a.o.). In Wexler et al. (2003), it is, however, shown that this phenomenon
is not found in all languages: in languages like Italian, French and Catalan, there
is clitic omission in the earlier stages of syntactic development, while in
languages like Spanish clitic omission is not attested. Wexler et al. (2003)
propose that the early omission of clitics is due to the effects of the Unique
Checking Constraint, a constraint subject to maturation:

(4) Unique Checking Constraint (Wexler 1998)
The D-feature of DP can only enter one checking relation.

The crosslinguistic differences in the process of acquiring clitics would,
then, be due to the fact that the category pro must check two features – in
AgrOP and in CIP – only in languages in which there is past participle
agreement (assuming Sportiche’s (1996) analysis of clitics):

(5) [CIP object clitic] [AgrOP AgrO] [VP V [DP pro]]

This line of inquiry predicts that there is a correlation between the two
phenomena: early clitic omission and overt past participle agreement. For
example, in French, since there is past participle agreement in compound tenses,
as shown in (6), clitic omission is expected:

(6) Je les avais faites.
I cl-acc-fem-pl had made-fem-pl
‘I had made them’
The Unique Checking Constraint was originally proposed to account for root infinitives, which emerge in the earlier stages of development in several languages. Since this constraint is subject to maturation, it is predicted that clitic omission ceases at the same stage at which root infinitives are no longer produced, around the age of three.

The analysis further assumes a universal principle – Minimize Violations – constraining the choice of a numeration that leads to a derivation with the smallest number of violations.

According to this analysis, in languages with past participle agreement, children have two options: either they do not Project CIP, violating whatever forces the D-feature of pro to be checked, or they do not project AgrOP, violating the requirement that the Case of pro must be checked against this functional category. The former case yields a clitic-less sentence; the latter yields a sentence with a clitic. Since both derivations involve the same number of violations, both can be generated by the child’s grammar, which would explain that omission rates are around 50%.

In languages without past participle agreement, pro must not check features against AgrO, and, consequently, the derivation with the clitic can be picked, since it does not violate the Unique Checking Constraint.

2.2. Clitic omission as the result of complexity

Costa & Lobo (2006, 2007a) showed that the predictions made by Wexler et al. (2003) are not borne out for European Portuguese. Since this is a language without past participle agreement, as shown in (7), according to their proposal, no clitic omission is expected.

\[(7) \quad \begin{align*}
\text{a.} & \quad \text{Eu tinha-as cheirado.} \\
& \quad \text{I had them}_\text{PL-FEM} \text{ smelled}_\text{SG-MASC}
\end{align*}
\]

\[\begin{align*}
\text{b.} & \quad \text{*Eu tinha-as cheiradas.} \\
& \quad \text{I had them}_\text{PL-FEM} \text{ smelled}_\text{PL-FEM}
\end{align*}\]

‘I had smelled them.’

However, accusative clitic omission was found, even in contexts in which the null object construction is disallowed in the adult grammar. Moreover, the results obtained revealed that omission in European Portuguese is found at later stages, since 4 year olds still omit clitics. This is different from what was found by Wexler et al. (2003), who report that clitic omission ceases at around the age of 3.

Furthermore, other works, such as Costa & Lobo (2007b), Carmona & Silva (2007), and Silva (in prep.), show that, in the acquisition of European Portuguese, clitic omission is different depending on clitic types. The rate of omission for 3rd person accusative and dative clitics in matrix simple clauses is higher than the rates found for reflexive clitics, for 1st and 2nd person clitics and for accusative and dative clitics within islands: approximately 70% of omission for non-reflexive accusative clitics in matrix simple clauses; 60% of omission for dative clitics; 40% of omission for reflexive clitics; 40% of omission for accusative clitics in islands. These different rates of omission appear to correlate with the contexts in which the null object construction is available in the adult
grammar: there is less clitic omission in contexts in which null objects are disallowed (strong islands, reflexive contexts and 1\textsuperscript{st} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} person).

The characteristics of clitic omission in European Portuguese, apparently different from what is found in languages like Italian and Catalan, show that an explanation in terms of the UCC is not adequate for the European Portuguese data. For this reason, it was proposed that clitic omission in European Portuguese arises as a result of the system’s complexity, corresponding to an overgeneralization of the null object construction. The analysis proposed in Costa and Lobo (2006) is inspired in Reinhart’s (1999) proposals for comprehension in acquisition. According to Reinhart, the post-syntactic choice between two convergent derivations requires a higher computational effort, and induces chance-level performances in comprehension tasks. The proposal is to extend this idea to production. Since the grammar of European Portuguese generates freely alternating structures with a clitic or with a null object, the child must choose between the two, which causes a delay in the acquisition of these structures. Since there are only some specific contexts in which null objects and clitics are in complementary distribution, the child must also learn in which contexts null objects are ruled out. In other words, since in many contexts of European Portuguese clitics freely vary with null objects, the child will only stop omitting clitics when s/he has identified the contexts in which the null object construction is not allowed. One of these contexts is strong islands, which require a specialized knowledge of the special characteristics of the context, which, in turn, is arguably problematic for children.

An analysis along the lines of Wexler et al. (2003) is also problematic for some results obtained for French, since clitic omission is found at later ages, lasting beyond the root infinitive stage (cf. Jakubowicz et al., 1996; Pérez-Leroux, Pirvulescu & Roberge, 2006; Grüter, 2006; a.o.). Alternative explanations, linking clitic omission to other complexity factors, have been advanced by different authors.

Grüter (2006) explains object clitic omission in French not in terms of a grammatical constraint, but rather in terms of interface conditions with language external systems. This author found that children omit clitics in production, but do not assign a transitive interpretation when interpreting verbs with a null complement. As such, it is proposed that children do not fail to produce clitics because they are producing null objects. Instead, it is proposed that clitics are omitted because there are limitations at establishing long-distance Agree relations between a clitic and its doubler pro. Such limitations are due to working memory capacity and have consequences for the insertion of clitics at the morphological component. This hypothesis is not easily extendible to the results obtained so far for European Portuguese, since it does not predict different results for different types of clitics. As mentioned above, 1\textsuperscript{st} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} person clitics are less omitted than 3\textsuperscript{rd} person accusative clitics. The Agree relations between the different types of clitics can be shown to be the same. As we will see, the results of the comprehension test we present in this paper do not allow extending this analysis to the results of Portuguese children either.

2.3. The nature of the construction with clitic omission

The nature of the construction with clitic omission in the child’s grammar is not entirely clear in Wexler et al.’s (2003) analysis. The authors appear to
attribute to the omission a deviant status, in the sense that not producing the clitic is a grammar violation with the same status as producing the clitic. On their analysis, which assumes Sportiche’s (1996) analysis of clitics, in languages with past participle agreement, there is an identical number of violations for both constructions, which makes it possible that either construction is chosen, in compliance with Minimize Violations (Wexler, 1998). In the construction with a clitic, AgrOP is not projected and pro does not check Case; in the construction without a clitic, CIP is not projected and pro does not check D-features against CIP.

As for the European Portuguese data, Costa & Lobo’s analysis interprets clitic omission in the child’s grammar as an instance of the null object construction, that is, as a construction containing an empty category, identified in discourse, which can correspond to a variable A-bar bound by a null topic or, alternatively, to a null pronoun – pro (Raposo, 1986; Costa & Duarte, 2003). Given the nature of the null object construction, these null forms are ruled out in strong island contexts since the null form must be bound by a topic operator. It is not an easy task to determine the nature of the construction with omission in the child’s grammar. How to know whether the construction with omission contains a null form or whether it does not contain any pronoun? If it is a null object construction, the child’s grammar must contain this construction and the child should be able to interpret a sentence without an accusative clitic as transitive. If, on the contrary, the child’s grammar does not allow null objects, it is expected that the child rejects a transitive interpretation for structures without a clitic, displaying an asymmetry between comprehension and production, since, contrary to the transitive interpretation without an internal argument, the intransitive interpretation will not violate any grammatical principle, and should, consequently, be preferred by the children. This was the strategy adopted by Grüter (2006), who ran a test for assessing the comprehension of structures without a visible argument, and, as such, for finding criteria to determine the nature of the construction with complement omission in the grammar of French and English speaking children. Given the relevance of the comparison between production and comprehension revealed in Grüter’s work, we adapt her test in order to assess children’s comprehension of null objects.

3. Comprehension test for null objects applied to European Portuguese speaking children

3.1. Goals

The hypothesis that clitic omission in the production of European Portuguese speaking children is an overgeneralization of the null object construction (Costa and Lobo 2006, 2007a) predicts that children are able to assign a transitive interpretation to sentences with a verb without an overt complement in all contexts in which they omit clitics, that is, in contexts with 3rd person dative and accusative clitics, with reflexive clitics, with 1st and 2nd person clitics, and in strong island contexts. If omission was a consequence of grammatical constraints in the generation of structure, as proposed by Wexler et al. (2003), one would expect an asymmetry between production and comprehension, as found in Grüter (2006).
The goal of the experiment we present is to test whether European Portuguese speaking children master the null object interpretation in third person accusative contexts both in matrix simple clauses and in strong islands. We leave the other contexts for further research.

3.2. Methodology

The test consisted of an adaptation to Portuguese of the test carried out by Grüter (2006) for French and English. As in Grüter (2006), the experiment consisted in a truth value judgement task of a sentence uttered by a puppet about a sequence of images presented to the child.

The truth value judgement task (cf. Crain & Thornton 1998) allows us to determine which interpretations the child can – or cannot – assign to a given sentence and inquiry whether the child differs from the adult in allowing a larger or a smaller number of interpretations or different interpretations. A potentially ambiguous sentence is presented to the child in a context making one of the interpretations true or false. After the presentation of an image, the child is asked to judge whether a sentence uttered by a puppet is true or false.

In the test items, the following transitive/intransitive alternation verbs were used: mergulhar ‘dive’ (‘x mergulha’ or ‘x mergulha y’), adormecer ‘fall asleep’/’put to sleep’ (‘x adormece’ or ‘x adormece y’), acordar ‘wake up’ (‘x acorda’ or ‘x acorda y’), baloiçar ‘swing’ (‘x baloiça’ ou ‘x baloiça y’). As shown in the following examples, both uses are possible for all these verbs:

(8) a. O Rui mergulhou.
the Rui dove
‘Rui dove.’

b. O Rui mergulhou o irmão na piscina.
the Rui dove the brother in the pool
‘Rui put his brother in the pool’

(9) a. O Rui adormeceu.
The Rui fell asleep
‘Rui fell asleep.’

b. O Rui adormeceu o bebé.
The Rui fell asleep the baby
‘Rui put the baby to sleep.’

(10) a. O Rui acordou.
The Rui woke up
‘Rui woke up’

b. O Rui acordou o bebé.
The Rui woke up the baby
‘Rui woke up the baby.”

(11) a. O Rui baloiçou na cadeira.
The Rui swang in the chair
‘Rui swang in the chair.’

b. O Rui baloiçou o bebé na cadeira.
The Rui rocked the baby in the chair
‘Rui rocked the baby in the chair.’
The test was preceded by a familiarization period with the task, with the puppet, with the images and with the verbs used in both variants (transitive and intransitive). In the period of adaptation to the experimental setup, the images were presented to the child and the four verbs were used in the transitive and in the intransitive constructions in order to ensure that the verbs, in their different constructions, were known to the child, and in order to make the interpretation of the drawings easier.

The following conditions were tested:

a) intransitive structures in simple clauses (T) 4 items [CI]
b) intransitive structures in islands (T) 2 items [CII]
c) object clitics in simple clauses and in islands (T) 4 items [CT]
d) null object in simple clauses (T) 4 items [CON]
e) null object in islands (F) 4 items [CION]
f) superfluous DPs in simple clauses (F) 4 items [COS]
g) superfluous DPs in islands (F) 2 items [CIOS]
h) superfluous clitics in simple clauses (F) 4 items [CLS]
i) superfluous clitics in islands (F) 2 items [CILS]

The test had a total of 30 items and 2 fillers. The order of presentation of the items was randomized, in order to avoid that the same image appeared twice in a sequence. The task had a duration of 20-30 minutes for each child.

The null object in simple clauses condition [CON] aims at inquiring whether the child’s grammar contains the null object structure. If so, the child will be able to assign a transitive interpretation to a verb without an overt complement. If not, the child will interpret the verb as intransitive.

**Example of test item for the null object condition:**

Lead: *Vamos ver o que o Rui fez ao cão.*

Puppet: *Olha! Mergulhou na piscina!*

‘Let’s see what Rui did to the dog’

‘Oh! He dove it in the pool’

Adult answer: true

The left hand image, presented in the first place, presents a context making the occurrence of the null object legitimate. The image on the right displays a context compatible with a transitive interpretation – Rui is diving the dog in the pool.
A few comments are necessary in order to understand the lead-in sentences. While piloting the test, we realized that the eliciting sentence was crucial for obtaining answers compatible with the adult grammar, namely for obtaining a transitive reading for null objects. Therefore, a neutral lead-in sentence, like “let’s see what happened”, even with previously mentioned referents, did not provide an adequate context for eliciting a null object. On the contrary, a sentence with the structure “let’s see what x did to y” is more adequate. However, since this type of sentence might condition a transitive interpretation, we introduced the expression “Look!” (functioning as a surprise interjection) at the beginning of each sentence, which neutralized the preference for an interpretation, and made the transitive and the intransitive (in which nobody did anything to anyone) readings equally accessible. The introduction of this expression made sure that something different from what was expected from the lead-in sentence might have happened. This was relevant both for adults and children, which shows that the pragmatic context was the same for both groups. The relevance and adequacy of the introduction of this expression becomes relevant, for example, in the intransitive condition. In order to make sure that a potential transitive reading might emerge, it was necessary to create a scenario in which there was an expectation that X did something to Y. However, in the picture shown, nothing happened to Y. At first sight, the lead-in would be infelicitous. But the insertion of this expression ensures that other alternatives are also felicitous. With this methodology, we made sure that both interpretations have the same status in terms of felicity and that there is the same lead-in for all conditions. The need for controlling for these aspects is not surprising, since, as is well known, null objects are highly sensitive to discourse settings.

The condition [CION], null object in islands, allows assessing whether the child’s grammar rejects null objects in islands, as the adult grammar does. If the knowledge of children is the same as the knowledge of adults, children will reckon that null objects are ruled out in islands, assigning an intransitive interpretation to the verbs in this context. If their grammar differs, children may interpret verbs as transitive in this context.

Example of test item for null object in island condition:

Lead: *Vamos ver o que aconteceu.*
   ‘Let’s see what happened.’

Puppet: *O cão ladrou quando o João* 
   *the dog barked when the* 
   *João baloiçou na cadeira.* 
   *Luís swung in the chair* 
   ‘The dog barked when Luís rocked it in the chair.’

Adult answer: False
The conditions \([\text{CI}]\) and \([\text{CII}]\), intransitive structures in simple clauses and in islands, and the conditions \([\text{COS}]\) and \([\text{CIOS}]\), superfluous arguments in simple clauses in islands, allow inquiring whether the child masters transitivity and whether s/he masters both the transitive and the intransitive reading for each verb used in the task.

**Example of test item for intransitive structure conditions:**

Lead: *Vamos ver o que é que o Rui fez ao cão.* Puppet: *Olha! Mergulhou na piscina!*

‘Let’s see what Rui did to the dog’ Look! Dove in the pool.

‘Oh! He dove in the pool.’

Adult answer: True

If the child knows the intransitive construction, s/he will judge the sentence as true. The introduction of the expression “Look!” allows making the intransitive reading plausible, even after a lead-in sentence which might force a transitive reading. This strategy proved efficient in most cases.

**Example of test item for superfluous object condition:**

Lead: *Vamos ver o que a Marta fez à boneca.* Puppet: *Olha! A Marta adormeceu a boneca!*

‘Let’s see what Marta did to the doll’ ‘Oh! She put the doll to sleep’.

Adult answer: False

The condition \([\text{CT}]\), object clitics in simple sentences and in islands, and the conditions \([\text{CLS}]\) and \([\text{CILS}]\), superfluous clitics in simple sentences and in
islands, allow us to assess whether the child’s grammar includes knowledge about clitics. If so, the child will assign a transitive interpretation to test sentences with clitics, accepting transitive contexts and rejecting sentences containing clitics in intransitive contexts.

**Example of test item for clitic conditions:**

**Lead:** Vamos ver o que a Marta fez à boneca. **Puppet:** Olha! A Marta adormeceu-a!

‘Let’s see what Marta did to the doll’ ‘Look! Marta put her to sleep’

Adult answer: True

**Example of test item for superfluous clitic condition:**

**Lead:** O Zé e a Alice estão a dormir. Vamos ver o que o Zé fez à Alice.

‘Zé and Alice are sleeping. Let’s see what Zé did to Alice’

**Puppet:** Olha! O Zé está a acordá-la!

‘Look! Zé is waking her up’

Adult answer: False
3.3. Participants

20 children aged between 3;2 and 5;10 (average age 4;4) participated in the test. All children are monolingual speakers of European Portuguese, from the kindergarten Centro Social da Quinta do Anjo, in the metropolitan area of Lisbon. 6 adults with university degrees were used as control group. An additional group of 9 children was excluded, for not being able to do the test. The children excluded either had a clear yes-bias, assigning true interpretations to all sentences, including those with superfluous arguments, or did not understand the task.

3.4. Results

3.4.1. Control group

The following results were obtained for the control group. The percentages indicate the correct answers, as predicted by the characteristics of the adult grammar:

a) [CI]: 100%
b) [CII]: 100%
c) [CT]: 100%
d) [CON]: 92%
e) [CION]: 92%
f) [COS]: 100%
g) [COS]: 100%
h) [CLS]: 100%
i) [CILS]: 100%

The control group displayed the expected results (approximately 100% rates in almost all conditions). Only in the null object conditions (both in islands and in simple clauses), the results were slightly lower, but still at a rate of 90%:

Table 1. Results for the control group

3.4.2. Children

For the children, the following results were obtained:
a) [CI]: 93.4%
b) [CII]: 89.7%
c) [CT]: 97.4%
d) [CON]: 80%
e) [CION]: 30%
f) [COS]: 96.2%
g) [CIOS]: 90%
h) [CLS]: 92.5%
i) [CILS]: 84.6%

Children had results very similar to the adults’ performance (above 80%) in all conditions, except for the condition testing null objects in islands (condition e) [CION]), in which children assigned a transitive interpretation to the verb without a complement, unlike adults.

Table 2. Results for the children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CI</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CON</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COS</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CION</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLS</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CII</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CT</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIOS</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CILS</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In general, there were no significant individual differences between children and no developmental effect was found, which is reflected in very significant group tendencies and in similar responses for all children independently of age. For this reason, we are not presenting the individual data. Crucially, no case of a child was found who would accept null objects in islands, ruling them out in the other conditions.

3.4.3. Synthesis.

From the results of the test, the following conclusions may be drawn:
i) The results obtained in conditions [CI], [CII], [COS], [CIOS] and [CILS] show that children master transitivity, rejecting superfluous arguments and interpreting intransitive structures just like adults;
ii) Children’s good results in conditions [CLS] and [CT] reveal that they interpret clitics like adults do;
iii) Children accept null objects in simple clauses, like adults do, as shown by their comparable results in condition [CON];
iv) As shown by the results obtained in condition [CION], children, unlike adults, accept null objects within strong islands.
The good results obtained in all conditions but one reveal that children did not have problems with the information structure requirements involved in the task.

3.5. Discussion

The results obtained for European Portuguese differ from those obtained for French and English by Grüter (2006). Grüter (2006) shows that there is an asymmetry between production and comprehension: although French children omit accusative clitics, they reject a transitive interpretation for verbs with an overt complement (around 85% of rejection of null object interpretation). Accordingly, the author concludes that, although null objects are allowed in several contexts in French adult grammar (Cummins & Roberge, 2005; a.o.), clitic omission in the production of French speaking children is not compatible with an analysis in terms of null object. The asymmetry between the data from production and comprehension leads the author to adopt the hypothesis that omission is due to extralinguistic factors.

On the contrary, the results of our test show that Portuguese children, unlike French children, display knowledge about the null object construction. Moreover, the performance of children in island contexts (condition [CION]) reveals that, similarly to the data obtained in production tasks, the specialized knowledge about the context in which null objects are legitimate is acquired late, that is, after 5 years old.

As such, the results of the test do not contradict the hypothesis that clitic omission in European Portuguese is an overgeneralization of the null object construction. However, it still is necessary to explain how the child abandons a widely permissive grammar as far as the distribution of null objects is concerned, acquiring a more restrictive grammar, in which null objects are ruled out in islands. This learnability problem, on the constraints about null object distribution, is explicitly referred to in Grüter (2006: 64) in the discussion of the French data.

In the case of European Portuguese, we speculate that learning that null objects are not legitimate in island contexts may be related to the acquisition of the specific contexts in which null pronominals are legitimate. A hypothesis to consider is that children’s grammar generally admits a pro argument, and that children’s task is to learn the constraints this argument is subject to. The work of Castilla, Pérez-Leroux and Eriks-Brophy (2007) goes in this direction, contending that different omission rates for different clitic types are better understood with an analysis along these lines. This is also consistent with the findings of Grinstead (1998), who shows that Spanish children, at the earliest stages of acquisition, produce only null subjects, ignoring, thus, that there are constraints forbidding null subjects in certain environments. The same line of explanation is confirmed by the results obtained in Costa and Lobo (2006) and Silva (in preparation) for reflexive clitics and 1st and 2nd person clitics, in which it was shown that even these forms are omitted, although they do not alternate with null objects in the adult grammar. Extending this test to other contexts, like reflexive clitics, will allow us to understand whether the omission of this type of clitics is also a case of overgeneralization of the null object construction. If it is, it is predicted that children, unlike adults, will accept null objects in reflexive contexts, in spite of the fact that they comprehend overt reflexives just like adults do, as shown in Cristóvão (2006, 2007).
4. Conclusion

The comprehension test carried out allowed us to show that Portuguese children, unlike French children, understand the null object construction. Unlike Portuguese adults, children are less restrictive, since they also accept null objects in island contexts. Moreover, it was shown that children master transitivity and interpret accusative clitics correctly. These results are compatible with the hypothesis that clitic omission in European Portuguese corresponds to an overgeneralization of the null object construction.

The results obtained, in particular the different performance between French speaking children and Portuguese speaking children, provide support to the idea that clitic omission in language acquisition is not a uniform crosslinguistic phenomenon.

Notes

1 This work was partly funded by Project POCI/LIN/57377/2004, FCT-MCTES.
2 We dedicate this paper to the memory of Celia Jakubowicz, who first suggested that we should look at comprehension data.
3 The assumption that clitics are not omitted in the acquisition of Spanish is controversial. Studies on spontaneous production, like Fujino & Sano (2002), and elicitation tests developed in Castilla, Pérez-Leroux and Eriks-Brophy (2007) describe an initial stage of optional omission.
4 Other contexts in which clitic and null object do not alternate in the adult grammar of European Portuguese are: 1st and 2nd person contexts and reflexive contexts. In Costa and Lobo (2006), it is shown that the rates of omission of accusative clitics in strong islands and reflexive clitics is comparable, which may indicate that the problem is not the acquisition of islands, but rather the acquisition of the contexts in which null objects are ruled out.
5 This result is not surprising, since there is some variation in adult grammar, in what regards the acceptability of null objects.
6 Note, however, that the lead-in sentence was crucial for inducing the null object reading in European Portuguese. We do not know to what extent this factor was controlled in the experiment carried out with French and English children. An anonymous reviewer suggests that the extension of null objects to islands might be explained under Schaeffer’s (1997) hypothesis that children lack some pragmatic knowledge. However, we think that our results show that children master all the
pragmatic prerequisites needed in this type of experiment, since there is no difference between the condition in which they fail and the other conditions in terms of information structure. If there was a lack of pragmatic knowledge, one would expect a generalized failure in identifying topics across conditions.

References

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