Recycling in Catalan clitic acquisition: Underspecification and frequency effects

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Clitic omission, considered a 'relief strategy' on the part of the acquirer to avoid incorrect forms whose morphophonology has not been fully acquired (Borer & Rohrbacher, 2002), has received a fair amount of attention in the language acquisition literature. However, the phenomenon of clitic recycling, or the extension of the use of another clitic in the paradigm (Longa, Lorenzo & Rigau, 1998), has received less attention.

Very little is known about the acquisition of oblique clitics *en* and *hi* in Catalan, other than the fact that they are acquired later than direct object clitics (Soto-Corominas, 2018). Oblique *en* is the clitic that surfaces to refer to a PP introduced by preposition *de,* (1). Oblique *hi* substitutes PPs introduced by a preposition other than *de,* (2).

(1) Parles [de coses]? Jo no <u>en</u> parlo.
'Do you talk [about stuff]? I don't talk (about it).'
(2) Penses [en coses]? Jo no <u>hi</u> penso.
'Do you think about stuff? I don't think (about it).'

In an Oral Production Task that elicited these two clitics in children ages 4-8 acquiring Catalan as an L1 or an L2 (*N*=296), the results showed that by age 8, oblique *hi* and *en* are produced grammatically only 11% of the time, and they are replaced with different (ungrammatical) clitics (3-4) at the same rate:

(3) Parles [de coses]? *Jo no <u>ho</u> parlo.
'Do you talk [about stuff]? I don't talk it.'
(4) Penses [en coses]? *Jo no <u>en</u> penso.
'Do you think about stuff? I don't think about them.'

Results also showed a great degree of within- and between-subjects variation in their degree of accuracy. This study discusses the patterns of replacement of these clitics and defends the potential of a hierarchical structure of morphological features for Catalan clitics based on previous proposals (Harley & Ritter 1998, 2002; Heap 2005). Feature geometries allow us to differentiate the markedness of these oblique clitics and, in doing so, accounts for both the lateness of their acquisition and most of their patterns of replacement, showing that clitic substitution is most often a case of feature underspecification (McCarthy, 2006). Our account assumes that both *en* and *hi* share the node [OBLIQUE] and that *en* has in addition the terminal feature *de*, which makes it the most complex clitic in the inventory (paradigm).

However, one type of clitic recycling process cannot be accounted for with our proposed feature geometry: the substitution of *hi* for *en*. In this case, acquirers produce a clitic that is more specified than the target item. We propose that this unexpected outcome is due to frequency effects (Bybee, 2008). Oblique *en* is homophonous with partitive *en,* which is very consistent in the Catalan input (Perpiñan, 2017). According to our proposal, frequency effects would override morphological complexity in this case, and feature geometries motivate most of the other cases of clitic recycling as seen in these data.

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