

Null indirect objects in Quebec French

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The notion that a transitive verb can appear without a direct object (DO) has been widely explored throughout various experimental and theoretical studies in French (Jakubowicz et al. 1996; Hamann 2003; Cummins & Roberge (C&R) 2004, 2005; Pérez-Leroux et al. 2008). Previous analyses have construed this object to have a generic, non-referential interpretation (1) or to be classified as referential null objects (NOs) as in (2); both cases have been identified in French (cf. C&R 2004, 2005). The goal of this presentation is to expand the analyses of NOs from transitive to ditransitive constructions and observe how they can account for missing indirect objects (IOs) in Quebec French.

(1) Wild Guns est un jeu qui défoule _____. (Larjavaara 2000: 88)

‘Wild Guns is a game that distresses ____.’

(2) “Tu as lu les pages?” Il avait lu _____. (Larjavaara 2000: 43)

“Did you read the pages?” He had read ____.’

I adopt C&R’s (2004: p. 133) approach and assume that all nominals should be interpreted as ‘coreferential’: [lexical noun...pronoun...NO]

If we take the idea that a NO must have a referent that is salient in the previous discourse, then the absence of the object clitic (whether direct or indirect) should not render the sentence to be considered ungrammatical. Note that the difference between direct and indirect objects is of a structural nature, in terms of argument position and their association with the verb (i.e., DO merges with V while IO merges with P). Thus, this presentation will focus on analyzing the structural representation of transitive and ditransitive constructions and see how this could affect child language acquisition of object clitics in Quebec French.

In acquisition, Pérez-Leroux and her colleagues (2008) propose that a null object stage exist in child grammar. The notion is that a child has the option of producing a referential null object N or a clitic. Then, it is the experience, depending on the context presented, that guides the child into producing a null object. Using transitive constructions, they found that French and English-speaking children (i.e., 34.5% and 8.3%, respectively) start off by omitting DOs early on. Costa and his colleagues (2007, 2008) conducted an experiment eliciting ditransitive constructions in European Portuguese. Their results suggest a high rate of IO omissions (~52%) in 3-4 year-olds. Finally, I conducted an experiment using ditransitive verbs in obligatory contexts and found that 3-4 year-old French-speaking children omit IOs 83% of the time (3). These findings suggest that children go through a null object stage where they generalize NOs (direct or indirect) in obligatory contexts until they have acquired the adult grammar.

(3) Question: Qu’est-ce que Marc fait pour que Julie puisse manger ses céréales?
‘What does Mark do so that Julie can eat her cereal?’

Child: elle Ø donne du lait. (C17, 3;09)

She Ø-DAT gives some milk

‘She gives Ø some milk.’

This presentation provides structural and experimental evidence on null objects in Quebec French. Such a study is fundamental to understanding the role of the verb, the status of the verb’s internal arguments, and ultimately, what causes children’s grammar to diverge from the adult grammar.

References

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