On the L1 acquisition of Differential Object Marking: the role of semantic universals

In a significant number of languages, direct objects prominent on the animacy and/or the specificity scale are differentially (case-) marked (Bossong 1998). Another feature involved in differential object marking (DOM) is topicality (e.g. Spanish, Leonetti 2004). In many languages, marking is optional in some contexts. DOM systems, therefore, seem to have the ingredients of delayed acquisition. However, Rodríguez Mondoñedo (2008) offers data from child Spanish which show that the DOM preposition a is used target-like early.

Extending the investigation to other languages might contribute to our understanding of the acquisition of this interface phenomenon. This is precisely the goal of the present study. We focus on DOM in Romanian, whose system is similar to the Spanish one, compared to Hebrew and Turkish. DOM is constrained by animacy and specificity in Romanian, by definiteness in Hebrew and by specificity in Turkish. In Romanian the marker is the preposition pe (1), in Hebrew the particle et- (2), and in Turkish the suffix -(y)I (3).

Our data come from four longitudinal corpora (Table 1). The marked objects have been uniformly coded for: (i) semantic features: [+/-animate], [+/-definite], [+/-specific]; (ii) lexical category: proper name, pronoun, noun phrase, partitive, quantifier; (iii) omissions, overgeneralizations, and substitutions.

Despite the differences between Romanian, Hebrew and Turkish, the acquisition pattern is similar and corroborates the results previously reported for Spanish. Children begin to mark objects early (Hebrew - 1;3; Turkish - 1;6; Romanian - 2;1). DOM applies earlier and more robustly to proper names, pronouns and definite DPs (over 90%) and is then extended to DPs lower on the specificity scale. The number of omissions and overgeneralizations is low (below 8%) and substitutions are not attested.

Our data reveal the possible facilitating role of semantic universals whose interpretability boosts the acquisition of case, irrespective of language specific properties. (299 words)

(1) Romanian: specificity and animacy (Farkas & von Heusinger 2003)
   a. Dani a mîncat (*pe) banana.
      Dani has eaten pe banana.the
      ‘Dani ate the banana.’
   b. Dani o caută pe o secretară.
      Dani her looks pe a secretary
      ‘Dani is looking for a (specific) secretary’
   c. Dani caută o secretară.
      Dani looks a secretary
      ‘Dani is looking for a secretary.’

   a. Dani axal et ha banana.
      Dani ate ACC the banana
      ‘Dani ate the banana.’
   b. Dani axal banana
      Dani ate banana
      ‘Dani ate a banana.’
   c. Dani axal (*et) banana
      Dani ate *ACC banana
   d. Dani axal *ha banana
      Dani ate *the banana.
      ‘Dani ate banana.’

(3) Turkish: definiteness (Hon et al. 1991)
   a. Dani on *vakıf halı.
      Dani on *is a carpet
      ‘Dani has a carpet.’
   b. Dani on vakıf halı
      Dani on vakıf halı
      ‘Dani is a carpet.’
(3) Turkish: *specificity* (Aissen 2003)
   a. Dani muz-u yedi
      Dani banana-ACC ate
      ‘Dani ate the banana.’
   b. Dani bir muz yedi.
      Dani a banana ate
      ‘Dani ate the banana.’
   c. Dani bir muz-u yedi.
      Dani a banana-ACC ate
      ‘Dani ate a specific banana.’
   d. Dani muz yedi.
      Dani banana ate.
      ‘Dani banana-ate.’ (Dani performed banana eating)

Table 1. Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>MLU</th>
<th>TOTAL number of marked objects</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Romanian</td>
<td>1;10-3;1</td>
<td>1.11-2.85</td>
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<td>1;5-2;11</td>
<td>1.30-2.79</td>
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<td>Hebrew</td>
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<td>Turkish</td>
<td>1;3-2;0</td>
<td>1.26-4.32</td>
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References


