

Animacy does not affect the production of relative clauses: evidence from French

A well-known finding from acquisition, adult processing and pathological populations is that object relatives are more difficult to parse, comprehend and produce than subject relatives. Mainly in connection with the acquisition results, the featural Relativized Minimality approach (fRM, Rizzi 1990, 2004, Starke, 2001, Friedmann et al. 2009) ascribes this asymmetry to a grammatical constraint bearing on intervention configurations. Headed object relatives with a preverbal lexical subject involve an inclusion configuration between the feature specification of the target and the intervener, which is particularly difficult to compute. A manipulation of the features (relevant for fRM) of target and intervener, such as modulating the inclusion configuration, facilitates the computation of the structure.

Animacy would seem to affect ORs' parsing and comprehension in both adults and children. ORs with an inanimate head and an animate subject are easier to parse and comprehend compared to ORs with an animate head and an animate subject, and they are the most frequent type of ORs found in corpora (Brandt et al. 2009, Arosio et al. 2011, Bentea 2015, Hamann, Tuller 2015, Kidd et al. 2007, Mak et al. 2006, Traxler et al. 2002). But what is not clear is whether a mismatch in animacy play a role in terms of fRM. ORs with an inanimate head and an animate subject could be easier to compute simply because this particular animacy mismatch facilitates theta-role assignment. This mismatch condition was the only one observed in the studies mentioned above. Results from other studies in which the effect of the animacy feature was systematically explored show that a match/mismatch in animacy *per se* does not affect participants' performances (Belletti, Chesi 2014 on adults, Adani 2012 on children).

In this poster, we present the results from an elicited production study carried out with 54 French-speaking children aged 4;7-9;2 (within subject design). Children were divided into three age groups: the 5 y.o. group (11 participants aged 4;7-5;10, MA: 5;1), the 6 y.o. group (22 participants aged 6;2-7;3, MA: 6;4) and the 8 y.o. group (21 participants aged 8;4-9;2, MA: 8;7). We elicited the production of subject and object relatives using a preference task of the kind in (1) and (2), inspired by Friedmann & Novogrodsky 2006. The animacy feature of the subject and the object was manipulated, in order to obtain the four possible combinations both in SRs and ORs (see tables below). All the other morphosyntactic features were in a match condition.

Bentea (2015) shows that in 7 and 9 year old French-speaking children the comprehension of ORs improves when the head is inanimate and the subject is animate; this effect was absent from the 5 year old group. If animacy in French belongs to features relevant for fRM, we expect to find out better performances in the mismatch conditions (intersection configuration) compared to the match conditions (inclusion configuration). As grammar is involved in both modalities of performance, features relevant for fRM should affect both comprehension and production.

As tables 1 and 3 show, the asymmetry between SRs and ORs is evident across all age groups. Children produce SRs most of the time, whereas ORs are produced in very few cases, mainly by the older children. A match or mismatch in animacy between target and intervener does not affect either SRs or ORs production. As well attested in the literature, in place of the elicited ORs children produce structures in which intervention is totally absent: subject relatives and passive object relatives/PORs (see example in (2)). As table 4 shows, the use of SRs decreases with age and PORs production increases. It is thus clear that also in an animacy mismatch condition these answer strategies are preferred over ORs. Animacy does not seem to play a role in manipulating intervention or if it does, its effect is overwhelmed in production by the availability of more optimal structures.

(1) SR elicitation: There are two girls. A girl strokes a friend, a girl hugs a friend. Which girl would you rather be?

Target SR: I would rather be the girl that hugs a friend (or ...the girl that strokes a friend)

(2) OR elicitation: There are two women. A woman applauds a girl. A woman films a girl. Which girl would you rather be?

Target OR: I would rather be the girl that the woman films (or ...the girl that the woman applauds)

SR: ...the woman that films the girl / ...the girl that films the woman

POR: ...the girl that is filmed (by the woman)

Simple sentence: the woman films the girl

Table 1. % of target SRs produced across conditions

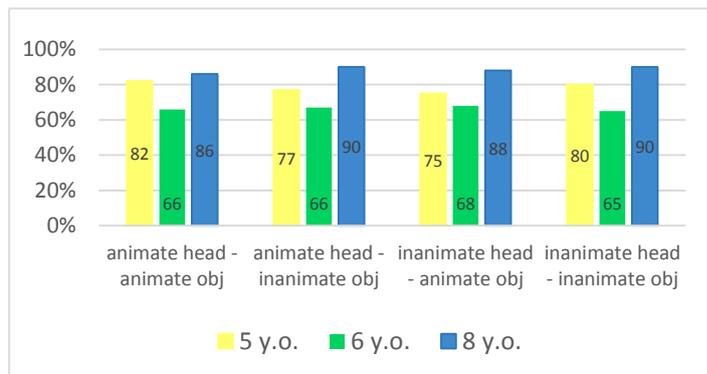


Table 2. Types of answer used in the elicitation of SRs

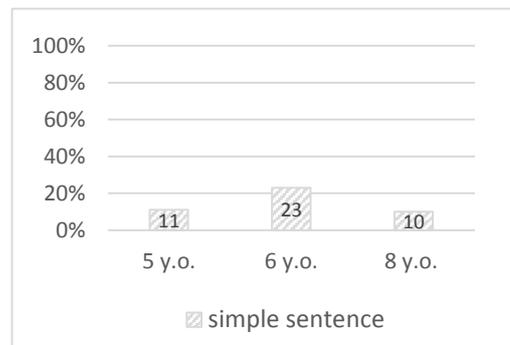


Table 3. % of target ORs produced across conditions

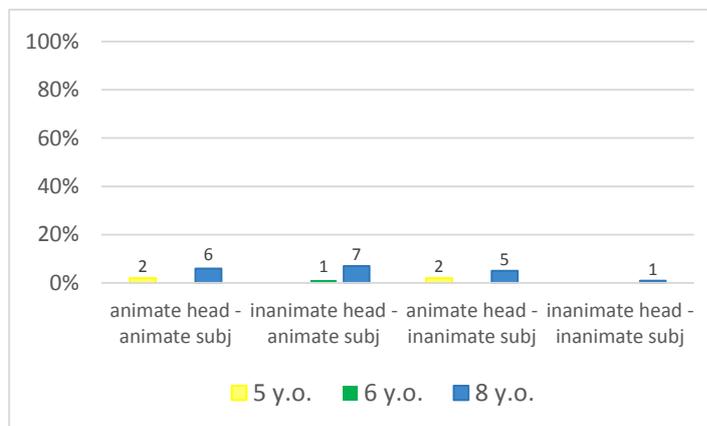
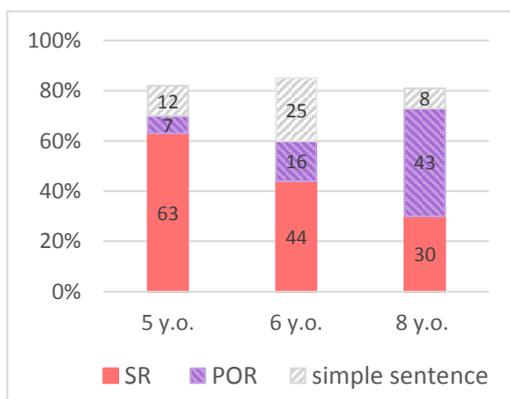


Table 4. Types of answer used in the elicitation of ORs



Selected References

Friedmann, N., Belletti, A., & L. Rizzi (2009) Relativised relatives: Types of intervention in the acquisition of A-bar dependencies, *Lingua* 119, 67-88; **Belletti A., & C. Chesi (2014)** A syntactic approach toward the interpretation of some distributional frequencies: comparing relative clauses in Italian corpora and in elicited production, *Rivista di Grammatica Generativa* 36, 1-28; **Bentea, A. (2015)** *Intervention effects in language acquisition. The comprehension of A-bar dependencies in French and Romanian*, Phd dissertation, University of Geneva, Geneva. **Rizzi, L. (1990)** *Relativized Minimality*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press; **Rizzi, L. (2004)** Locality and the left periphery, in Belletti A. (ed.) *Structures and Beyond: the Cartography of Syntactic Structures*, 3, Oxford-New York, OUP, 223-251; **Starke, M. (2001)** *Move Dissolves into Merge: A Theory of Locality*, Phd dissertation, University of Geneva, Geneva.