The acquisition of recursive locative PPs and subject relative clauses by Romanian-Hungarian bilingual children - the view from comprehension

The production and comprehension of recursive structures is turning into a widely researched topic in language acquisition. One particular concern in this context has been to determine the role that language specific cues play in the acquisition of recursion. It has been shown that the presence of overt functional markers of recursion (di Sciullo 2015) help with the comprehension of recursive configurations in child language. English overtly marks recursion in the complementizer system, but PP recursion is covertly marked. Sevcenco et al. (to appear) suggest that, in English, relative clause recursion has a headstart over its PP counterpart. Romanian overtly marks recursion both in the clausal and PP domain and no significant difference has been noted in the acquisition of relative clause and PP recursion (Sevcenco & Avram 2016). Most of these previous studies focus on monolingual development from monolingual children, with few exceptions (see Limbach & Adone 2010 on recursive possession in L2 English, Nelson 2016 on PP recursion in L2 Spanish).

The current presentation focuses on the comprehension of recursive nominal modifiers, locative PPs and subject relative clauses in Romanian by Romanian-Hungarian bilingual children. The syntactic status of nominal modifiers in these two languages is different. Romanian has postnominal prepositional and relative clause modifiers. Recursion in the locative PP domain is overtly marked by means of a functional preposition, *de/of*, that precedes the lexical preposition denoting location [1]. With relative clauses, the relative complementizer *care/that* instantiates the functional category that overtly marks recursion [2]. Hungarian has (i) embedded postpositional phrases adjectivized by the suffix *–i* and (ii) embedded postpositional phrases in *levő* participial structures (Tóth, Kiss & Roeper 2016) [3]. Recursion in the relative clause domain is rendered by mixed syntactic structures that involve (i) a postnominal finite relative clause and prenominal participial structures or (ii) a postnominal finite relative clause and embedded postpositional phrases adjectivized by *–i* [4a,b]. Our study aims to determine whether Romanian-Hungarian bilingual children use the language specific cues present in Romanian in the comprehension of Romanian recursive structures with locative PPs and subject relative clauses or whether the syntactic differences in the domain of PP and relative clause modification between Hungarian and Romanian interfere with the use of these language specific cues.

Ten bilingual Romanian-Hungarian children (mean age:5;02, SD:.295) and 10 age-matched Romanian monolingual children took part in the study (mean age: 5;01 SD:.292). They had to form arrays with animals on an iPad after listening to a prompt sentence [5].

The number of recursive answers overall is low with both groups: 32.5% with monolingual children and 46.25% with their bilingual peers. The difference between recursive and conjunctive answers does not reach a significant level either with the monolingual group (p = .32) or with the bilingual one (p=.06). The number of recursive answers given by monolingual and bilingual children, respectively, is not significantly different (p= .12). No significant difference was found for recursive answers with PPs vs. relative clauses with either monolingual children (p =.15) or bilingual ones (p = .47). The comparison between groups showed no significant effect of participant and structure (PP/relative clause) on the score obtained and no significant interaction effect between participant and structure on the score obtained. The results from the bilingual group and their age-matched peers fall in line with those coming from a study with a larger number of monolingual speakers of Romanian, (Sevcenco & Avram 2016), which present an identical picture: (i) no significant difference between recursive and conjunctive answers (p=.65) and (ii) no significant difference between recursive answers with PPs and relative clauses (p=.32). On a general note, our currently in progress study indicates that there are no substantial differences in the comprehension of recursive structures between monolingual and bilingual child speakers.

1. o găină de lângă un cal de lângă un porc
   a chicken de next.to a horse de next.to a pig
   'a chicken next to a horse next to a pig'
2. un porc care este lângă o găină care este lângă o pisică
   a pig that is next.to a chicken that is next.to a cat
   'a pig that is next to a chicken that is next to a cat'
3. a. a egy disznó melletti ló melletti csirke
      a pig near-ADJ horse near-ADJ chicken
      'a chicken next to a horse next to a pig'
   b. egy lovon levő macskán levő disznó
      a horse-on being-PRT cat-on being-PRT pig
      'a pig on a cat on a horse'
4. a. egy macska amelyik egy disznón levő lovon van
      a cat which a pig-on being-PRT horse-on is
      'a cat that is on a horse that is on a chicken'
   b. egy disznó amelyik a macska melletti csirke mellett van
      a pig which the cat near-ADJ chicken near is
      'the pig that is next to the chicken that is next to the cat'
5. Prompt: Arată-mi puiul de pe calul de pe porc
           show me chicken.the de on horse.the de on pig
           'Show me a chicken next to a horse next to a pig'.

References

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