

The role of DOM in Spanish children's comprehension of ORCs

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It is well-known that object relative clauses (ORCs) are typically difficult for children to comprehend (Tavakolian 1981; Friedmann and Novogrodski 2004). Still, some language-specific morphological cues can make ORCs easier (Adani et al. 2010; Belletti et al. 2012; Guasti et al. 2012). I argue that Spanish differential object marking (DOM) belongs to such set of cues, and eases children's comprehension of ORCs. Specifically, my hypothesis is that DOM facilitates children's comprehension because it unambiguously indicates the object status of a constituent: constituents introduced by DOM can be nothing but direct objects. As such, the parser can rely on this cue and accurately assign theta-roles to the nominals at stake, leading to a correct interpretation of ORCs. Further, I claim that DOM is only helpful once it is fully acquired. If it is not, the child parser will simply neglect it and face the usual difficulty associated with ORCs. Two experiments run with Spanish monolingual children support these predictions, showing significant DOM-effects only with children who fully integrated DOM in their grammar. Additionally, a clear-cut subject-object asymmetry in children's comprehension is observed, extending the empirical coverage of such a broad generalisation.

In Spanish, DOM is (roughly) realised on [specific, animate] direct objects (Aissen 2003; Leonetti 2004) via an *a* morpheme preceding the constituent to mark (1):

- (1) El niño saluda a Pedro
The boy greets DOM Peter
The boy greets Peter

In ORCs, DOM (optionally) precedes the relativiser *que* (2):

- (2) El niño al que saluda Pedro
The boy DOM-the that greets Peter
The boy that Peter greets

To test my hypothesis, two experiments were run with 57 Spanish children aged 4, 5, and 6. Both were built on a sentence-picture matching task, along the lines of Friedmann et al. (2009). The first experiment tested the comprehension of SRCs like (3) and ORCs like (4), to appreciate whether SRCs are easier than ORCs in Spanish, too.

- | | |
|---|---|
| (3) El niño que saluda al futbolista
The boy that greets DOM-the footballer
<i>The boy that greets the footballer</i> | (4) El niño que saluda el futbolista
The boy that greets the footballer
<i>The boy that the footballer greets</i> |
|---|---|

The second experiment tested the comprehension of 4 types of ORCs, varying with respect to the position of the subject, either preverbal (5, 6) or postverbal (7, 8), and the presence (6, 7) or absence (5, 8) of an overt *a* morpheme in front of the relativiser *que* (i.e. DOM). Furthermore, I assessed whether children acquired DOM by administering a sentence-repetition-task (SRT) which included 8 DOM-structures in different syntactic configurations.

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|--|--|
| (5) El niño que el futbolista saluda
The boy that the footballer greets
<i>The boy that the footballer greets</i> | (6) El niño al que el futbolista saluda
The boy DOM-the that greets the footballer
<i>The boy that greets the footballer</i> |
| (7) El niño al que saluda el futbolista
The boy DOM-the that greets the footballer
<i>The boy that the footballer greets</i> | (8) El niño que saluda el futbolista
The boy that greets the footballer
<i>The boy that the footballer greets</i> |

A preliminary analysis shows that SRCs were better comprehended than ORCs by Spanish 4-6-year-olds (**Fig. 1**), an expected, yet so far unconfirmed result. Moreover, the presence of DOM produces a clear-cut asymmetry in children's accuracy rates, but only among 6-year-olds (**Fig. 2**), who were the ones that achieved the best performances in the production of DOM in the SRT. A further analysis will inspect whether DOM interacts with the position of the subject.

These results provide a) evidence that a SRC-ORC asymmetry holds in children's comprehension in Spanish, a language hardly ever explored in this respect; b) support to the hypothesis that Spanish DOM ameliorates the comprehension of ORCs; and c) novel insights on the very nature of ameliorating cues in intervention effects. Specifically, the idea is supported that a morphological cue is only effective when it is fully acquired and successfully related to its function in the grammar; an insight that can lead to refinements of our current understanding of intervention effects in both syntactic theory and language acquisition.

APPENDIX

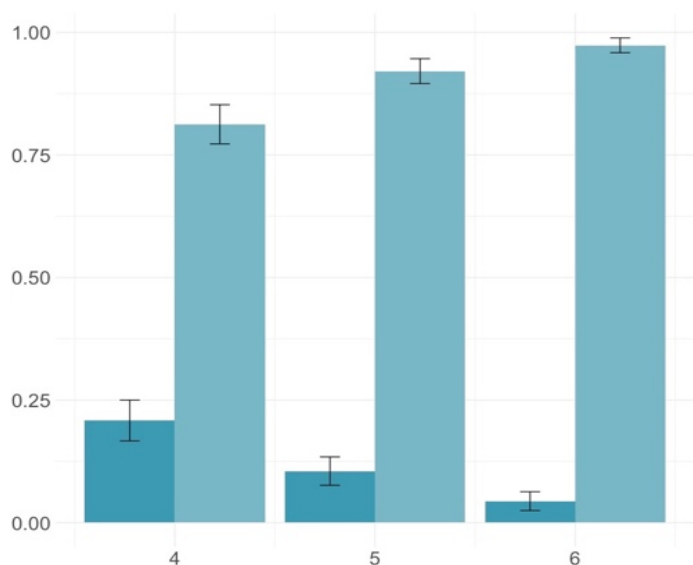


Fig. 1 Accuracy rates in SRCs and ORCs across the three age groups

- ORC (see 4 above)
- SRC (see 3 above)

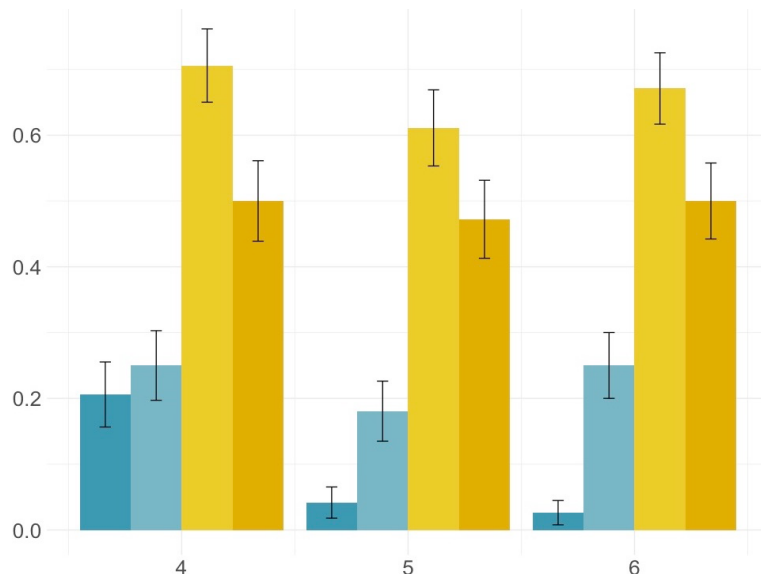


Fig. 2 Accuracy rates in different types of ORCs across the three age groups

- No DOM, postverbal subject (see 8 above)
- DOM, postverbal subject (see 7 above)
- No DOM, preverbal subject (see 5 above)
- DOM, preverbal subject (see 6 above)

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