Pronominal Clitic Placement is Phonological: Evidence from Romanian Adult and Acquisition Data

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This talk is concerned with the issue of clitic placement, which will be examined from the perspective of both adult and language acquisition patterns. Using evidence from both adult and child Romanian, it will be argued that an adequate account of pronominal clitic placement requires mechanisms specific to morpho-phonology rather than to syntax. Furthermore, this talk will address problems of previous analyses of Romanian pronominal clitic placement – specifically, the apparently idyosyncratic placement of the Romanian feminine singular accusative clitic *o*, proposing an analysis that is adequate in both dealing with the adult data and in predicting the developmental pattern experimentally observed.

The Romanian feminine singular accusative clitic *o* has an idiosyncratic behavior in that it is a proclitic when combining with most verbal forms (1a), but enclitic when combining with verbal forms containing the auxiliary HAVE (1b), while the other pronominal clitics are proclitic in this context (1c). Previous accounts (cf. Legendre 2000, Monachesi 2000, Popescu 2000) fail in adequately analysing the feminine clitic *o* and its special placement requirements. Empirically, these analyses fail to differentiate between a structure where the clitic *o* combines with lexical HAVE (2a) and a structure where the clitic *o* combines with auxiliary HAVE (2b), hence failing to predict the grammaticality of one structure with the simultaneous ungrammaticality of the other. To account for the data in (2), as well as for additional clitic combinations and restrictions, I propose, using an Optimality Theory approach, that the apparently idiosyncratic placement of *o* is driven by the interplay between a highly ranked markedness constraint (3), that can be motivated both theoretically and experimentally (cf. Chitoran 2002) and alignment constraints responsible for clitic ordering and clitic syllabification.

The acquisition data comes from 580 relevant tokens obtained in an elicitation study with 25 monolingual Romanian children aged 2;0 to 3;10 (cf. Babyonyshev and Marin, in progress). The main result is that children do not make clitic placement mistakes, which was expected given previous reports of other languages (e.g. Guasti 1994, Schaefer, 2000). However, it can be surprising that Romanian children make no placement mistakes even in the case of the vaccilating feminine clitic *o*. Furthermore, they seem to employ no strategies to avoid the feminine clitic, in either enclitic or proclitic positions (see Tables 1 and 2 for statistical analyses). A readily available reason for why children do not use such avoidance strategies is that they do not need to avoid the structure, i.e. the enclitic placement is not more difficult for children than the proclitic placement (or vice versa). Therefore, the mechanism forcing enclitic placement of the feminine clitic *o* (1b) must be as readily available to children as the mechanism that forces proclitic placement in the other conditions (1a) (or vice versa).

This pattern receives a natural explanation given the proposed analysis for the placement of the feminine singular clitic *o*, which crucially relies on a high ranking of a markedness contraint (3). Thus, it is likely that children start with the relevant markedness constraint highly ranked (given the general intuition that early grammars prefer unmarked forms to marked forms even if this implies going against faithfulness to input) and, based on the input, they never get to demote this markedness constraint. It should therefore come as no surprise that children are error-free in clitic placement even in the case of the vacillating feminine clitic *o* in Romanian. Thus, the proposed analysis for the placement of the feminine singular clitic *o*, while adequately predicting the attested patterns in the adult language, also predicts the observed developmental pattern that children exhibit.

(1) a. *Îl* / ***o*** /*ii* /*le* văd
Him-A / her-A /them-A-M /them-A-F see-1sg
'I see him/her/them'

b. Am văzut- ***o***
Have-1sg seen- her-A
'I have seen her'

c. *L-* /*i-* / *le-* am văzut
Him-A /them-M-A /them-F-A have-1sg seen
'I have seen him/them-M/F'

(2) a. *o* am aici
her-A have-1sg here
o- am aici
her-A- have-1sg here
*am- o aici
have-1sg- her-A here
'I have her/it here'

b. *o am vazut
her-A have-1sg seen
**o-* am vazut
her-A- have-1sg seen
am vazut- o
have-1sg seen- her-A
'I have seen her/it'

(3) *OA-CLITIC Ban dipththongs containing a back mid glide and only clitic material

Omission rates	Fem	Masc	One-way ANOVA	Fem Procl. (present)	Fem Encl. (past)	One-way ANOVA
General	29%	43%	F= 1.53, p= 0.22	32%	22%	F = 0.91, p= 0.35
2 year old.	54%	75%	F= 2.08, p = 0.16	58%	38%	F= 1.33, p = 0.26
3 year old	5%	13%	F= 0.88, p= 0.36	8%	6%	F= 0.05, p= 0.83

Table 1. Clitic omission by clitic position. Children do not omit significantly more feminine enclitics than proclitics or vice versa.

Gender mistakes	M>F	F>M	One-way ANOVA	F>M Pres	F>M Past	One-way ANOVA
General	42	36	F= 0.11, p = 0.74	14	22	F= 0.69, p= 0.41
2 year old	18	8	F= 0.92, p= 0.35	3	5	F= 0.24, p= 0.63
3 year old	24	28	F= 0.07, p = 0.79	11	17	F= 0.5, p = 0.49

Table 2. Gender mistakes. Children do not make more mistakes turning feminine clitics into masculine ones, or feminine enclitics into proclitics, as it would be expected if they were to avoid all or some feminine clitics.

Selected references:

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