Input variability and late acquisition: clitic misplacement in European Portuguese

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Studies on the acquisition of clitics report that, although there are problems in some languages with the acquisition of clitics (e.g. clitic omission), in most languages there are no problems with clitic placement (see Guasti 1993/94; Wexler, Gavarrò & Torrens 2004; Pierce 1992; Grüter 2006; Marinis 2000). Italian, Spanish, French and Greek children place clitics in preverbal or postverbal position in a target-like manner.

Patterns of clitic placement in the majority of the Romance languages are linked to finiteness. In European Portuguese, however, as in Cypriot Greek (see Petinou & Terzi 2002), clitic placement, as is well known, is syntactically conditioned. In European Portuguese, clitics may be proclitic in a set of contexts (e.g. 1a) (in the presence of negation, certain adverbs, embedded contexts with a lexical C, wh-questions or quantified subjects), enclitic in all the other contexts (e.g. 1b), and mesoclitic in enclitic contexts with the verb in the future or in the conditional (1c):

(1) a. A Maria não **te** viu / *viu-**te**.
     the Maria not you saw / saw you
   b. A Maria viu-**te** / ***te** viu.
     the Maria saw you / you saw
   c. A Maria ver-**te**-á. / ***te** verá / *verá-**te**.
     the Maria see-**you**-future

There are several analyses of clitic placement in adult grammar (Rouveret 1992, Madeira 1992, Barbosa 1996, Martins 1994, Raposo & Uriagereka 1995, Duarte & Matos 2000, among others), but there is no systematic study on the acquisition of placement. In fact, only sparse observations saying that children generalize enclisis are found in the literature on the basis of some spontaneous productions (Faria et al. 1994, Duarte & Matos 2000). However, if one looks for occasional productions, all types of misplacement can be found, as illustrated in (2):

(2) a. *enclisis pro proclisis:*
     O mano <u>não</u> deixa-**me** dormir (J. 3; 8)
     The brother not let-CL1sg sleep
      "My brother does not let me sleep"
   b. *proclisis pro enclisis:*
     Eu **te** empresto um, pai. (J. 3;7)
     I CL2sg borrow one, daddy "I will borrow you one, daddy"
   c. *mesoclisis in the absence of future or conditional:*
     Ai, duas pessoas a agarrar-**me**-m! (J. 3; 5)
     Oh, two people to grab-CL1sg-Agr3pl
     "Oh, two people grabbing me!"

Given this variation in data from spontaneous production, it becomes relevant to find out, in a more controlled way, how children deal with clitic placement. In particular, this study aims at providing answers to the following questions:

   A. Is the performance in clitic placement similar across contexts?
   B. Do different patterns of clitic placement follow from language acquisition or do they mirror variation in adult grammar?
   C. Can data from the acquisition of clitic placement help us choose between different theoretical proposals for clitic placement?

In order to provide answers to these questions, we ran an elicited production task targeting SE clitics in proclitic and enclitic contexts (we left mesoclicis out of the study, since independent studies (Santos 2002) show that mesoclicis is only learnt in school). We opted for eliciting SE clitics, since it is known that these are not generally omitted by children (Costa & Lobo 2009) and we wanted to make sure children would produce clitics. The task included the following conditions: Simple clauses with no proclisis trigger (enclisis) – 8 items; Coordinate clauses with no proclisis trigger (enclisis) – 4 items; Simple clauses with negation (proclisis) – 4 items; Simple clauses with negative subjects (proclisis) – 4 items; Simple clauses with DP quantified subjects (proclisis) – 4 items; Simple clauses with adverb 'já' – *already* (proclisis) – 4 items; Complement subord. clauses (proclisis) – 4 items; Adverbial subord. clauses (proclisis) – 4 items.

Participants: we tested 22 children aged between 5;0 and 5;11 (mean 5;4), 20 children aged between 6;0 and 6;10 (mean 6;4), as well as a control group of 20 adults.

Results:

a) Confirming the observations made in the literature and the idea that enclisis is overgeneralized, a preference for enclisis was found: 5 year old children produced proclisis instead of enclisis only at the rate of 0,5%, but they were target deviant in proclitic contexts 64% of the time; 6 year olds were at ceiling in enclitic contexts, but still had 46,2% deviant patterns in proclitic contexts;

b) However, not all contexts were identical; the rate of target production in children varies with the different contexts, as shown in the table below, according to the following ranking:

Neg >> Neg Subj, Embed. Compl. >> Adv >> Embed. Adv, Q Subj

	Neg	Neg Subj	Emb. Compl	Adv	Emb. Adv	Q Subj
5 year olds	61%	48,3%	46,7%	36%	14%	9,9%
6 year olds	87,5%	69,2%	74,6%	58,2%	20%	12,2%
adults	97,4%	96,1%	97,3%	93,6%	77,6%	70,8%

c) Interestingly, the control group also produced 11% of enclisis in the proclitic contexts, mainly in embedded adverbial clauses and with quantified subjects.

Going back to our original questions, our results show that enclisis is not overused across-the-board at identical rates. Instead, overuse of enclisis is context-sensitive, and it reflects the variation in adult grammar. Actually, the scale of development reflects the complexity of the input. When we consider each context, we see that the easier contexts are more specified:

Negation: no variation – earliest acquisition of proclisis**. Negative subjects:** other subjects do not trigger proclisis – acquisition requires defining subset of subjects that do trigger proclisis. **Embedded complement clauses:** only embedded clauses with a lexical complementizer yield proclisis – acquisition requires defining subset of embedded contexts that do trigger proclisis and distinguishing dependent clauses from non-dependent ones. **Adverb:** only a restricted set of adverbs are proclisis triggers – acquisition requires identifying subset of adverbs that do trigger proclisis. **Embedded adverbial clauses and quantified subjects:** variation between different types of quantifiers and variation in the status of adverbial clauses – slowest acquisition of proclisis. This variation in the input follows independently from the ambiguous status of some adverbial clauses – making them closer or more distant to coordination structures (cf. Lobo 2003), and from the different readings assigned to different quantifiers.

It follows from these results that children's developmental path mirrors complexity in the target grammar, reflecting some earlier sensitivity to patterns of complexity. Interestingly, some of the cases where more instability is found are also contexts in which proclisis was not so categorical in old stages of Portuguese (Martins 1994, 2011, Fiéis 1997, 2003).

In line with previous findings for other domains (Costa & Lobo 2011), or for other languages (Grohmann et al. 2012; Miller & Schmitt 2010), these results indicate that complexity – induced by grammatical factors and by input variability – is a good predictor of delays in acquisition.