The problem of pseudoclefts in French: intersection configurations and intervention in language acquisition

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Abstract

Intervention effects have been explored in the domain of language acquisition, suggesting that feature similarity between a moved element and an intervening constituent determines the occurrence of processing difficulties. A graded differentiation scale hierarchizing the different possible relations between feature sets defining the moved and the intervening constituents was suggested: disjunction>intersection>inclusion>identity (Belletti, Friedmann, Brunato & Rizzi 2012, Durrleman & Bentea 2021). In this study, we compare the comprehension of standard clefts and pseudoclefts by French monolingual children and argue that object pseudoclefts in French give rise to an intersection configuration, which is at the origin of milder difficulties for children.

Intervention: set-theoretic relations

(1)	X	Z	Y	Adults	Children
Identity	+A....	+A....	<+A>	*	*
Inclusion	+A, +B....	+B....	<+A, +B>	ok	*
Intersection	+A, +C....	+C, +D....	<+A, +C>	ok	ok
Disjunction	+A....	+B....	<+A>	ok	ok

Belletti et al. (2012)

Intersection arises when only some of the relevant features are shared, and both the moved and the intervening element carry a subset of distinctly specified features.

A graded differentiation scale: disjunction>intersection>inclusion>identity (Belletti et al. 2012).

Intersection requires a comparison between sets of features and should be harder to compute than disjunction (Bentea, Durrleman & Rizzi (2016)

French clefts : predictions and questions

Standard clefts:

(2) a. C'est la vache [qui ~~la vache~~ lèche la girafe].
   'It's the cow that licks the giraffe'

   b. C'est la vache [que **la girafe** lèche ~~la vache~~].
   [+NP, +Foc]   [+NP]
   'It's the cow that the giraffe licks'

Pseudclefts:
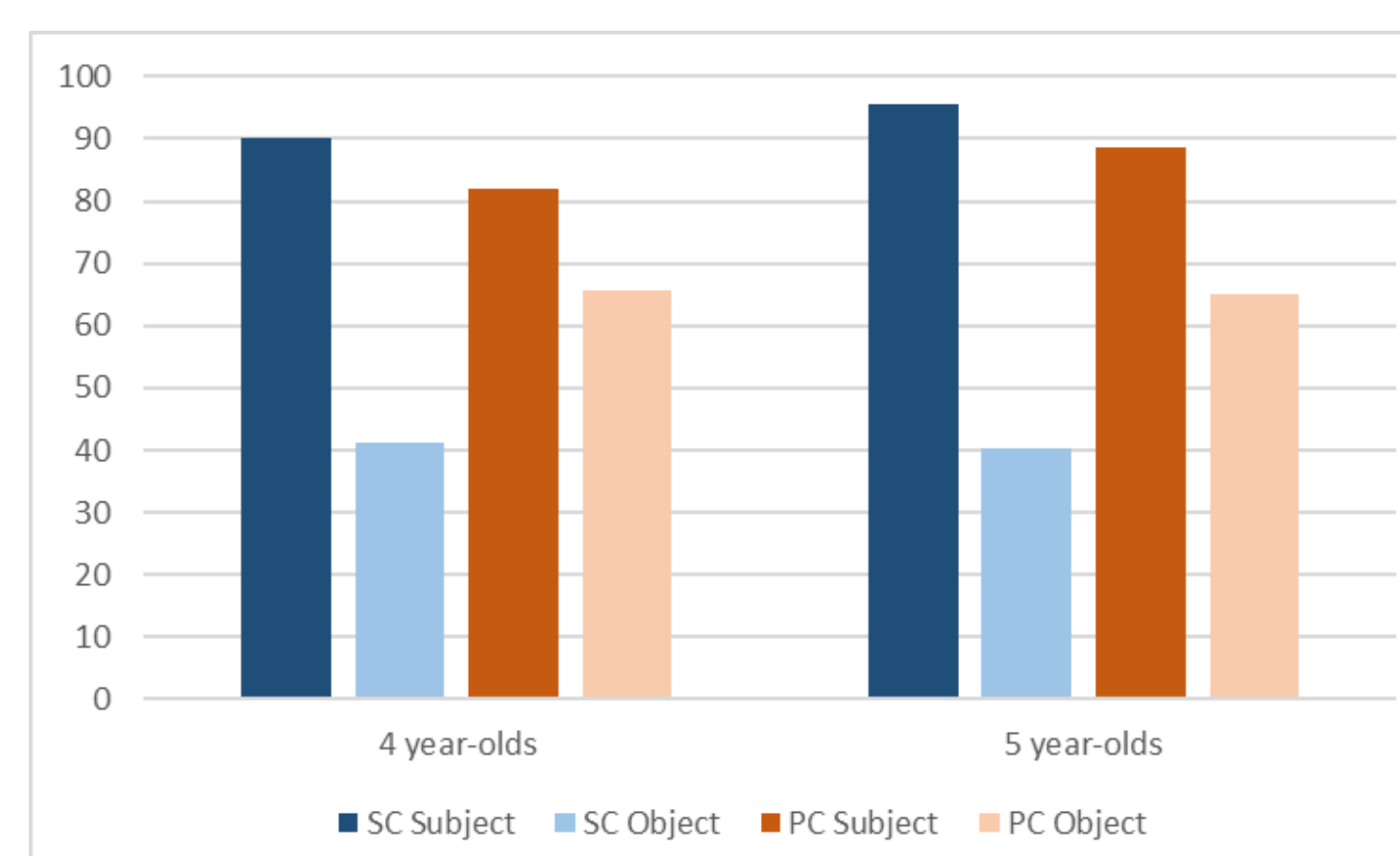
(3) a. [Celle[qui ~~celle~~ lèche la giraffe]][c'est la vache].
   'The one that licks the giraffe is the cow'

   b. [Celle [que **la girafe** lèche ~~celle~~]] [c'est la vache].
   [+R, +sg]   [+NP, +sg]
   'The one that the giraffe licks is the cow'

In subject standard clefts (2a), no intervention effects are expected to arise. In object standard clefts (2b) intervention effects are expected [**inclusion**]. Object French pseudoclefts (3b) should give rise to an **intersection** configuration. This configuration could be the cause of milder processing difficulties.

(i) Do subject-object asymmetries arise in the comprehension of standard clefts and of pseudoclefts? **(ii)** Do object clefts entail a weaker performance? **(iii)** Are the difficulties found in object standard clefts as pronounced as in the case of object pseudoclefts?

References

Belletti, A., Friedmann, N., Brunato, D. & L. Rizzi. 2012. Does gender make a difference ? Comparing the effect of gender on children's comprehension of relative clauses in Hebrew and Italian. *Lingua* 122: 1053-1069. **Durrleman, S. & A. Bentea. 2021.** Locality in the acquisition of A'-dependencies: insights from French. *Glossa: a journal of genera linguistics.* **Belletti, A., Friedmann, N., Brunato, D. & L. Rizzi. 2012.** Does gender make a difference ? Comparing the effect of gender on children's comprehension of relative clauses in Hebrew and Italian. *Lingua* 122: 1053-1069.

Experiment

Goal: To assess children's comprehension of French standard clefts and pseudoclefts

Participants: 37 French children (aged 4;2-6;2) and 20 adults

Method: Truth-value judgment task

Design: two linguistic factors – type of cleft and grammatical relation of the clefted constituent. 4 experimental conditions. 24 items (6 per condition), 12 fillers.

A standard cleft experimental item:

Researcher:
Ici, le singe serre le garçon.
'Here, the monkey is hugging the boy.'

Researcher:
Ici, le garçon serre le singe.
'Here, the boy is hugging the monkey.'

The puppet:
Ici, **c'est le garçon qui serre le singe**.
'Here, it's the boy that is hugging the monkey.'

Results

All adults provided 100% correct answers.

A general subject-object asymmetry was identified in the data.

Object pseudoclefts received more correct answers than object standard clefts (4 years t(877)=3.653, *p*<.001: 5 years t(877)=4.267, *p*<.001).

Discussion

Both standard clefts and pseudoclefts in French create intervention configurations. Object standard clefts create an inclusion configuration and a subject-object asymmetry is naturally expected. Difficulties with object pseudoclefts are weaker. French object pseudoclefts illustrate an **intersection** relation, which entails milder intervention effects. The results support a graded differentiation scale where inclusion relations are harder to process than intersection relations.

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