

Heritage Romanian: the acquisition of object clitic pronouns

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This paper focuses on the acquisition of object clitic pronouns by 16 children (ages 8-11) who grow up in Toronto and are exposed to Romanian since birth (L1) in their home; this is the heritage Romanian (HR). These children use English outside the house (their dominant language). The investigation focuses on the use of single clitic pronouns, as in *L-am citit* 'it.CL-have.1 read'/ 'I read it'.

Objective. Considering that the parametric setting for clitic pronouns (vs. lack of clitic pronouns) is well set in dominant Romanian (DR), the aim of the paper is to establish if the same parameter is also well set in HR.

Background. The literature provides the following information: (i) simultaneous heritage speakers are more likely to exhibit language loss or attrition than older bilingual children who had a longer period of monolingualism in their heritage language (Montrul 2008; Flores 2010; Montrul and Bateman, 2020). (ii) The domain of pronominal object clitics is vulnerable to reduced language input and use (Pirvulescu et al. 2014). (iii) In DR the clitic pronouns are acquired very early (by age 3) and with few divergent forms (e.g. Avram et al. 2015).

Questions. (i) Is the acquisition of clitics different in HR and DR? (ii) What are the types of divergent forms (morphological or/and syntactic)? (iii) How is the use and interpretation of clitics related to the variables Working Memory and Use of HR?

Methodology. Since the heritage speakers' language proficiency and accuracy depend on task modality (e.g. Pérez-Cortés et al. 2019), both comprehension and production were measured: results were compared between a Clitic Elicitations Task and a Comprehension Task (picture choice). The tasks focused on syntax (i.e., whether clitics were or were not produced, and their correct location when produced) and on morphology (i.e., their inflection). In the Comprehension Task, clitic pronouns were compared with strong pronouns for reasons pertaining to their syntactic representation and their development in acquisition. We used a Working Memory Test and a questionnaire provided information on the amount of input and use.

Results. Tables 1 and 2 compare results from HR and DR children and show that HR speakers perform extremely well, but less so than DR speakers: the latter group performs at or near ceiling, while the former show, comparatively, lower clitic production, with clitic omission and non-target gender being the main divergence. The HR group displays divergent forms in production as well as in comprehension; the difference in means between the two tasks is not statistically significant ($t_{(15)} = 1.26$, $p = .227$). However, when looking at individual results, we see that more children have a higher percentage of divergent forms in the production than in the comprehension of clitics. Individual performance is also highly variable: some responses are entirely target (3 children), with the rest of the answers presenting different amounts of divergent forms. One child was not able to produce any target clitic, and his correct comprehension was around 50%. The (correct) production and comprehension of direct object clitics is characterized by a certain degree of optionality: while some children omit and/or produce divergent forms in at least one of the tasks, all the children are able to produce and comprehend at least around 50% of the clitics (with the exception mentioned above, in production). The variable Use of Romanian at home significantly predicts (correct) clitic production ($F_{(2,13)} = 3.79$, $R^2 = .369$, $p = .017$). Both variables Working Memory and Use of Romanian at home significantly predict correct clitic comprehension ($F_{(2,13)} = 10.13$, $R^2 = .609$, $p < .05$). For the HR group there is a significant

difference, in the comprehension task, between the correct clitic vs strong pronouns responses, children being much more accurate with strong pronouns than with clitics ($t_{(15)} = -4.563$, $p < .001$).

Analysis. The results provide two indications for syntax: (i) Clitics (when produced) are correctly located in the preverbal field, with no exception. (ii) However, clitics are unsystematically omitted. Although the HR group differs from the DR group of comparable age, the results are comparable with those obtained from previous studies on the L1 acquisition of Romanian object clitics: some omissions and some non-target gender forms (cf. Avram et al. 2015, 12.88% omission rate and 12% gender agreement errors for 3 year-old children). For morphology, the results show inflectional errors for gender, while number and person options are correct. Hence, the syntax of clitic pronouns is completely acquired but divergent forms arise and they seem to be placed at the Spell Out. There is no evidence for transfer from English, the dominant language.

Conclusions. These results confirm previous ones on effects of reduced input in heritage language acquisition and maintenance (e.g. Rinke and Flores 2014; Unsworth, 2013). Moreover, following Pérez-Cortés et al. 2019, the results are interpreted as resulting from difficulties in accessing and retrieving functional features in the less dominant source grammar.

Table 1. Clitic production task, overall results.

	CL responses	Null responses	DP responses	Pron responses
Heritage children (128 responses)	70.31%	15.60%	11.70%	2.30%
Romanian dominant children (40 responses)	95%	0.025%	0.025%	N/A

Table 2. Correct responses in the Clitic production task.

	Total CL responses	Total correct
Heritage children	90	73.10%
Romanian dominant children	38	100%

Table3. Clitic comprehension task

	Total	Total Correct	Correct %
Heritage children			
Clitics	192	157	81.7%
Pronouns	192	187	97.3%
Romanian dominant children			
Clitics	60	60	100%
Pronouns	60	60	100%

Selected bibliography

Avram, L., Coene, M. & Sevcenco, A. (2015) Theoretical implications of children's early production of Romanian Accusative clitics, *Lingua* 161:48-66.

Montrul, S. and Bateman, N. (2020) Vulnerability and stability of Differential Object Marking in Romanian heritage speakers, *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics* 5(1): 119. 1–35.

Pérez-Cortés, S., Putnam, M. & Sánchez, L. 2019. Differential access: asymmetries in accessing features and building representations in heritage language grammars, *Languages* 4. 81.