

SHORT VISIT GRANT

Reference number: 3222

UNIT: SCH

Activity: Experimental Pragmatics in Europe

Project: **The acquisition of discourse pragmatics: the case of personal pronouns**

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Visit to Dr Martine Coene, University of Antwerp, Belgium

SCIENTIFIC REPORT

1. Purpose of visit

In this project, we test two hypotheses with respect to the role of syntactic and pragmatic knowledge in the acquisition of personal pronouns on the basis of experimental data:

(i) the natural order of acquisition of personal pronouns reflects their phonological deficiency irrespective of the cognitive information status of their intended referents

The hypothesis predicts that weak pronouns, which are acoustically less prominent than their strong counterparts, will be more easily missed in incoming speech. As such, they will be acquired after their strong counterparts.

(ii) the natural order of acquisition of personal pronouns reflects the discourse accessibility status of their intended referents, irrespective of their phonological deficiency

The hypothesis predicts different acquisition patterns for 1st/2nd vs. 3rd person accusative pronouns, due to their different discourse accessibility.

The aim of the visit was to make decisions with respect to the experiments which will be used in order to test these two hypotheses.

2. Work carried during the visit

During the visit the research questions have been discussed and predictions for acquisition have been formulated. The focus of the visit, though, was to design the experiments which will be used to test the hypotheses.

The relevance of the tasks planned in the project proposal for the aim of our research was evaluated:

- (i) comprehension tasks (a picture selection task and a truth value judgment task) (Gerken & Shady 1996, Gordon 1996)
- (ii) an elicitation task

Comprehension task 1

In order to test whether the acquisition pattern for 1st vs. 3rd person Accusative pronouns is different we decided on a *picture selection task*. This first task is a multiple-choice comprehension task of the forced-choice type, forcing selection from a closed set of four items. Together with a linguistic stimulus, the subject is given four pictures, showing events – kissing, pushing, pulling, hitting- performed by two persons; all in all, for this task the pictures will show, in turn, 1 young man, 2 young women and the researcher who is performing the elicitation task. The four pictures appear on the computer screen simultaneously. These four pictures are ordered on the screen in a random way. They show an event oriented to one of the persons in the picture, other than the researcher (e.g. one young woman pushing another woman), a researcher-oriented event (e.g. one person pushing the researcher), a neutral picture without an event and a non-related filler. The linguistic stimuli are matched with one of the visual stimuli:

e.g.

linguistic stimulus (Romanian): Anca mă lovește.
'Anca is hitting me.'

Photo 1: Anca is hitting the researcher.(under a tree) =MATCH

Photo 2: Anca is hitting Ioana.(under a tree)

Photo 3: Anca is sitting next to the researcher (under a tree, no action)

Photo 4: Anca and Ioana are sitting on a bench.

The subject is asked to locate the correct picture by pressing a button on a button-answer-box. For this purpose, each picture is associated with a particular colour (yellow, blue, orange and purple) which also appears on the button-answer-box. Scoring is automatically done via registering of the buttons pressed on the button-answer-box.

The experiment will be run in two parts. Each part includes 3 training items (1 model + 2 real training), 10 stimuli and 1 filler. The linguistic stimuli contain 1st and 3rd person Accusative pronouns. For 3rd person Accusative pronouns both feminine and masculine clitics are used in the linguistic stimuli, balancing for feminine subject-masculine object clitic/ feminine subject-feminine object clitic/ For Romanian in particular they contain either only clitic pronouns (1) – (2) or clitic pronouns doubled by strong pronouns (2) – (4), which allows a comparison of the acquisition pattern for weak vs. strong pronouns:

- (1) Ioana mă sărută.
Ioana 1st person clitic Acc kisses.
'Ioana kisses me.'
- (2) Anca o trage.
Anca 3rd person sg masc Acc clitic pushes
'Anca pushes her.'
- (3) Ioana mă sărută pe mine.
Ioana 1st person clitic Acc kisses Acc marker me
'Ioana kisses me'
- (4) Anca o trage pe ea.

Anca 3rd person sg masc Acc clitic pushes Acc marker her
'Anca pushes her.'

Comprehension task 2

A structure in which the clitic pronoun and the antecedent match across the agreement features of the subject has the flavour of Relativized Minimality configurations (Rizzi 1990), where a local relation between X and Y is disturbed when Z, a potential candidate for the local relation, intervenes. The intervention effects of the *phi*-features of the overt subject DP could make the feature matching relation between the clitic and the antecedent computationally complex. In (3) above, for example, the clitic *o* 'her', whose *phi*-features are identical to the *phi*-features of the overt subject, *Anca*. If the *phi*-features of the DP subject are not identical to those of the antecedent, the intervention effects will be either null or extremely weak. This predicts that those clitic configurations which involve higher computational complexity could be more problematic. In order to test whether there is any difference between the use of clitics with different intervener (1st person subject with 3rd person clitic – 3rd person subject with 3rd person clitic) we decided on a truth-value judgment task, of the forced choice type. This time the task forces selection from a closed set of two items. The subject is requested to judge whether there is a match or mismatch between the linguistic and visual stimuli that are presented. The subject is given one linguistic stimulus and one visual stimulus simultaneously. The visual stimulus consists of either an event oriented to a person different from the researcher or a researcher-oriented event. As in the previous task, the linguistic stimulus consists of a 1st or 3rd person strong, weak or clitic pronoun. The linguistic and visual stimuli may be either a match (e.g. a 3rd person clitic pronoun and an event oriented to a person other than the researcher) or a mismatch (e.g. a 3rd person clitic pronoun and a researcher-oriented event).

The subject is instructed to press one of two buttons on the button-answer-box. The red button is associated with a mismatch and the green button with a match.

e.g.

Photo 1: Researcher

Look, this is me.

Photo 2: Vasile and Anca

And here are Vasile and Anca.

Photo 3: Larisa is sitting between Vasile and Anca and is hitting Vasile.

Linguistic stimulus: *Eu o lovesc.* 'I am hitting her.' (MISMATCH)

Production task

In order to test the production of 2nd vs 3rd person Accusative pronouns we decided on an elicited production task run in two parts. Each part contains 2 training items, 1 filler and 8 elicited items (4 items eliciting a 3rd person clitic, 4 items eliciting a 2nd person clitic). The elicitation stimulus provides the antecedent and the beginning of the answer to the "why" question in order to prevent off-target answers:

e.g. Look, this is Anca. And here are Vasile and myself.

Can you tell me why I am upset in this picture

I am upset because Vasile....

expected answer: ... **te** lovește. 'you hits.'

Photo: Vasile hitting the researcher and she is upset.

We decided to test 10 children for each language, age 3;00-4;11.

3. Further collaboration

We will be working together on the pictures for all the tasks in order to ensure that we get comparable materials. Also, we will first pilot the tests with adults (n=10 for each language) and decide on possible adjustments according to the results which we obtain for each language.

The first task which will be piloted and run is the production task so that preliminary partial results can be presented at the workshop at the University of Leuven, June 10-12, 2010 and at the Annual Conference of the English Department of the University of Bucharest, June 3-5, 2010.

Feedback from the two meetings will be used in the final analysis of the production data, analysis which should be finalized by the next meeting in Bucharest (not later than November 2010). The comprehension tasks will also be piloted and run by the next meeting in Bucharest when we will be working on the analysis of the comprehension data.

Prof Larisa Avram

05.01.2010