

Using experimental data to check the transmission of language change: a case study about the acquisition of relative clauses in Brazilian Portuguese

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This study concerns the acquisition of relative clauses by Brazilian-Portuguese-speaking children based on a sentence-repetition task proposed by Diessel and Tomasello (2005). Brazilian-Portuguese-children are exposed to a variable input in which relatives present three variants as Tarallo (1993) claims. Non-prepositioned relatives whose heads are relative pronouns functioning as subject or direct object may vary in the oral production, so standard relatives alternate with resumptive relatives (*Esta é a menina que me chamou* – This is the girl who called me; *Esta é a menina que ela me chamou*). Moreover, Prepositioned-relatives also present another possibility together with these variants: the Prepositional-Phrase-chopping strategy, in which the prepositions and relativized NPs are absent (*Este é o sorvete de que gosto* – This the ice-cream that I like; *Este é o sorvete \emptyset que eu gosto dele*; *Este é o sorvete \emptyset que gosto*). According to Tarallo (1983), speakers prefer the standard variant in non-prepositioned relatives while standard piedpiping clauses have been replaced by PP-chopping clauses. Therefore, in order to check the acquisition of relative clauses in this context of variation and change a sentence-repetition-task similar to Diessel and Tomasello (2005) was elaborated resulting in 78 single-proposition stimuli constructed according to the relative type (subject, direct object, indirect object, adverbial and genitive) and the variant (standard, resumptive pronoun strategy and PP-chopping), controlling for structural, semantic and pragmatic factors. Accuracy in the repetition-task is conceived as the reflection of the acquired linguistic knowledge. Forty seven children between 4-7years old, 21 girls and 26 boys, recruited in two primary schools of Nova Iguaçu-Rio de Janeiro, were asked to repeat the stimuli, which were distributed in three equivalent lists following the Latin square design. The children were recruited in two primary schools of Nova Iguaçu-RJ. The stimuli were recorded by a female voice and presented randomly by DMDX software. The test was applied individually in a quiet room and a headphone with microphone was provided. Each child was exposed to 26 test-clauses and 9 fillers in the same conditions, but not to different variants of the same sentence. ANOVA revealed relative-type, variant and age effects. Children presented higher accuracy levels repeating subject and direct object standard relatives and PP-chopping variants related to piedpiping stimuli that tended to substitute Standard piedpiping stimuli together with resumptive pronoun, except for genitives that presented high levels of repetition failure, showing they are acquired later due to structure dissimilarity and low token frequency. The observed pattern of acquisition of standard relatives reflects the completion of a change: only Subject and Direct Object standard relatives are acquired. For piedpiping relatives, the PP-chopping variant is acquired before the resumptive variant. Substitutions among the available variants indicate that they participate in the abstractions and categorizations of the constructions that children are acquiring. Genitives are considerably more difficult to process, due to their dissimilarity to other syntactic constructions, and they are acquired later (token frequency and structural similarity effects). These results reflect the observed changes in BP reinforcing the importance of the input in the acquisition process.

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