

Resumptive Pronouns as a Last Resort: Implications for Language Acquisition

Intro: Shlonsky (1992) and Hornstein (2001) treat resumptive pronouns (RP) as last resort strategies, being licit only when movement is preempted. RPs are never part of the numeration; they are inserted only when the derivation without them does not converge. For example, sentence (1) is compared to its alternative without the RP. Given that movement is blocked due to the island, the alternative without the RP does not converge; (1) is then selected.

(1) This is the man that Mary doesn't know what **he** is eating.

In order to decide if a RP is licit in a given sentence, a reference-set needs to be established. Sentence (2)a, for example, has the reference-set in (2)b/c (irrelevant parts omitted):

- (2) a. I know the man that he's singing.
b. ... [_{DP} the man [_{CP} Op_i [_C that] t_i is singing]]
c. ... [_{DP} the man [_{CP} Op_i [_C that] he_i is singing]]

Having established the reference-set, we compare the derivations in (2)b/c. Both converge and have the same numeration (recall that the pronoun is not in the numeration). (2)b wins because it is more economical: movement of the operator is preferred over insertion of RP, which is costly.

Acquisition data: I compare both spontaneous and experimental data from children acquiring Brazilian Portuguese (BP) to the data reported in McKee and McDaniel (2001) study with children acquiring English. In a grammaticality judgment task with 11 children acquiring BP (ages 3;0 to 5;5), I found that children accept sentences like (2)a 57,5% of the time (although this is ungrammatical in BP). In McKee and McDaniel (2001), 38 children acquiring English from 3;5 to 5;11 years of age accepted sentences like (2)a around 50% of the time. Figures similar to these are found for the acceptability of RPs in other syntactic positions, such as direct object and oblique in both languages. However, children do not produce RPs that often. In the longitudinal data of one child, N., recorded from 2;0 to 4;0 years of age, I found 6 RPs in relatives (all of them in oblique position, which is licit in adult BP). This represents less than 5% of the total relatives. In an elicited production task, McKee and McDaniel (2001) investigated the production of RPs and report that children produced around 1% RPs in subject, DO and oblique positions.

Children are performing around chance level in the grammaticality judgment tasks reported above. I propose that children know the last resort character of RPs, but when faced with the task of deciding if a RP is licit in one sentence, they have problems in computing all the steps that are needed, get stuck in the process and guess. This proposal was suggested by Grodzinsky and Reinhart (1993) and Reinhart (1999) to explain children's chance level performance on the acquisition of condition B of the binding theory and stress shift operations, respectively. These authors claim that if reference-set computation exceeds children's processing ability, one should expect to find the guess pattern in every area where we assume this computation is involved. When children hear a sentence with a RP, they have to proceed as follows: while still holding the sentence under processing in memory, they must construct two representations, as in (2). Then they must compare the two representations and decide which one is more economical. Children know what they have to do, but their working memory is not big enough to hold the materials needed to complete the task. The computation required is beyond young children's abilities; so, they give up and guess. This explains the guess pattern found both in English and BP.

Concluding, children's intriguing behavior with respect to RPs can be explained if RPs are considered last resort, requiring reference-set computation. This proposal does not raise learnability problems, since we do not assume that children's grammar is different from adults', as proposed by others (Guasti and Shlonsky (1995), Labelle (1990) and Pérez-Leroux (1995)). As children grow older, their processing abilities get better and they are able to deal with these structures more efficiently. Also, we explain why children do not produce RPs so often as they judge them grammatical: they try to avoid what they cannot handle. So, they won't produce RPs, and we see problems when they are faced with the task of deciding if a RP is licit in a sentence or not, as in the grammaticality judgment task. Finally, we account for the fact that children acquiring divergent languages behave similarly with respect to RPs. Their problem resides in their processing ability, and not on the language being acquired. Thus we expect children acquiring any type of language to exhibit such behavior, be it a language with limited use of RPs or not.

References

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