Null Subjects in Child and Adult French: Motivating a MAX-θ Constraint

Colloquial French differs from prototypical non-null subject languages in that it allows expletive subjects (as in 1) to be reduced (see 2) or deleted (see 3) (cf. Legendre et al. 2010). Nevertheless, while reduction is possible in any (syntactic) context in adult French, deletion is not. I maintain that expletive subjects may only be omitted in declarative matrix clauses; thus (4) is ungrammatical. Interestingly, null expletive (non-thematic) subjects in adult French pattern just like null (thematic) subject clitics in child French (see Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of Child and Adult Subject Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clause Type</th>
<th>Subject Type</th>
<th>Expletive Subjects</th>
<th>Subject Clitics (Child French)</th>
<th>Subject Clitics (Adult French)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matrix</td>
<td>Full/Reduced</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deleted</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embedded</td>
<td>Full/Reduced</td>
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<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deleted</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This connection between null subjects child and adult French may be explained by focusing on how French children represent clitics (null subjects are argued to be null clitic pronouns, cf. de Cat 2009). In adult French, expletives are non-thematic subjects, whereas all other subject clitics are thematic arguments (de Cat 2005). However, there is evidence to suggest that French children consider an affixal analysis for all subject clitics (cf. Legendre et al. 2010). This implies that in child French both expletive and non-expletive subjects may be represented as non-thematic functional elements.

Since subject clitics are associated with finiteness, and are licensed by agreement (cf. Guasti 2002), Dye (2011) claims that when you find a clitic before an infinitive, there must be a reduced auxiliary. This same argument may also be extended to explain null subjects. If the subject clitic is associated with agreement, but is missing before a finite verb, there is reason to believe that the clitic is still structurally there because agreement is specified. An analysis of the Palasis corpus on CHILDES (Palasis 2010) reveals that children often produce “doubled” constructions (as in 5), with a strong pronoun to the left of the clitic. Most of the finite phrases produced by the children include either a subject clitic or a doubled subject, however I found several examples of a strong pronoun without the subject clitic. In these cases, there is arguably still an overt subject (strong pronoun), but a reduced functional element (clitic qua affix).

Dye (2011) has proposed a “reduce functional head” constraint that is ranked higher in child French. However, this fails to capture how and why null expletive subjects in adult French pattern with null subjects in child French. I argue that the omission of subjects in French may be better captured with a different constraint, which I refer to as MAX-θ; this constraint prevents the deletion of thematic arguments. Since subject clitics may be analyzed as affixes (i.e. non-thematic elements) in child French, this constraint would not prevent children from deleting them. For this reason, I argue that no difference in constraint ranking needs to be posited. The difference in what may be phonologically deleted in the child and adult grammar results from what is affected by the MAX-θ constraint. Overall, I argue that the representation of functional material is crucial in explaining the nuanced behavior of children acquiring French.
(1) Il fait froid en hiver.
   EXP make.PRES.3SG cold in winter.
   It is cold in winter.

(2) Y fait froid en hiver.
   EXP make.PRES.3SG cold in winter.
   It is cold in winter.

(3) Ø fait froid en hiver.
   EXP make.PRES.3SG cold in winter.
   (It) is cold in winter.

(4) *Je pense que ø fait froid.
   SCL.1SG think.PRES.1SG that make.PRES.3SG cold
   I think that (it) is cold.

(5) Moi je veux une pomme.
   PRON.1SG SCL.1SG want.PRES.1SG an apple
   Me, I want an apple.

References: