

Acquisition of the Left and Right Peripheries in European Portuguese

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Introduction

This study is concerned with preschool children's understanding of sentences with constituents on the left and right peripheries involving changes in the basic word order (SVO) in European Portuguese (EP).

The recent debate about structures with constituents on the left and right peripheries is centered in their informational and syntactic status.

A: Informational Status: Discourse-New or Discourse-Given?

- For Italian, Brunetti (2009) argues that the constituents on the left and right peripheries have different informational status, specifically the material on the right periphery (contratopics) can never be interpreted like a contrastive topic, since it is always discourse-given material, differently from the material that occurs on the left periphery.

B: Syntactic status: Merge or Move?

- For Spoken French, De Cat (2007) argues that French dislocation does not necessarily involve movement.

- For EP, Duarte (1987) had already shown that there is left peripheral material either derived by Move (topicalized) or by Merge.

This kind of structures are in the center of the recent debate about **acquisition of interfaces** (namely, syntax/discourse).

- For French, De Cat (2008) presents experimental evidence for the mastery of the discourse notion of topic by monolingual preschool children (2;6 to 5;6), confirming previous results in De Cat (2002).

- For EP, Adragão (2005) also argued in favor of the early acquisition of structures with changes in the basic word order, showing, however, that topicalizations are less problematic than subject-verb inversions (with a focused subject). Carrilho (1994) and Soares (2006) assume the sensitivity to topic/comment structures by preschool children as well, although topicalizations present low rate in the spontaneous production corpora.

Objectives

(i) Discuss children's comprehension of structures with constituents on the left and right peripheries of the sentence.

(ii) Discuss the syntactic and informational status of constituents on the left and right peripheries of the sentence in both child and adult grammars.

Methodology

Test

Truth Value Judgment Task (Crain & Thornton, 1999) using pictures.

32 items:

21 target-sentences (3 for each condition: two false and one true);
4 control items and 7 distractors (about a third of the total number of items).

Conditions

Test conditions were selected according to the periphery of the sentence involved in the word order change and the type of argument involved:

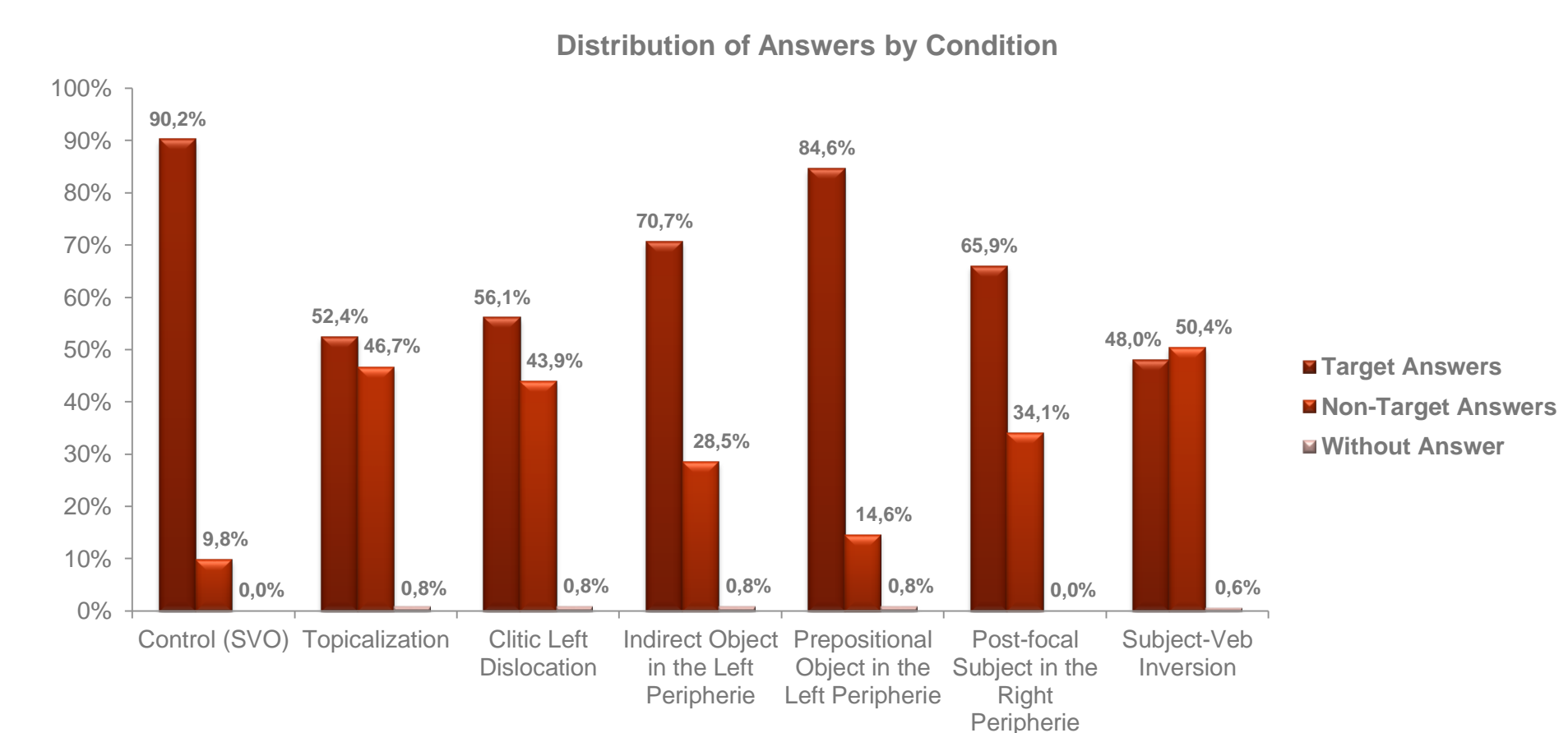
- Direct Object with Gap in the Left Periphery (Topicalisation);
- Direct Object with Clitic in the Left Periphery (Clitic Left Dislocation);
- Indirect Object in the Left Periphery;
- Prepositional Object in the Left Periphery;
- Post-focal Subject (with two and three-place predicates) in the Right Periphery;
- Subject-Verb Inversion with a focused subject (additional condition).

Subjects

Test Group: 39 monolingual EP preschool children (between 3;5 and 6;3 years of age, mean: 5;1).

Control Group: 30 monolingual EP adults with no background in linguistics.

Results



- Asymmetry between subjects on the right periphery (65,9%) and direct objects on the left periphery (52,4%), since preschool children comprehend earlier right peripheral material.

- Clear asymmetries between the constituents that occur in the left periphery: children have a better performance on structures with prepositional (84,6%) and indirect (70,7%) objects than with direct objects (52,4%).

- Subject-verb inversions with focused subjects (48,0%) are much more problematic than structures with post-focal subjects on the right periphery (65,9%).

Conclusions

The comprehension of structures with changes in the basic word order in EP is probably not completely stabilized in the preschool years.



The asymmetries between the right and the left periphery can be explained if there are differences between the constituents that occur in both peripheries not only in terms of informational status, but also in terms of syntactic status.

If right peripheral post-focal subjects are not derived by Move, but are merged in that position and interpreted as co-referent with a *pro* subject in the clause, a preference for Merge over Move (see the Derivational Complexity Hypothesis of Jakobowicz, 2005) may explain a preference for right peripheral subjects over topicalizations.

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