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Topicalisation in Catalan agrammatism

Salmons I.,*, Gavarró A.

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Introduction

Romance presents a range of syntactic constructions with specific pragmatic content that display non-canonical word order. These have been seldom investigated with agrammatic subjects, and our goal in this paper is to undertake this investigation for Catalan. In particular, we consider the comprehension of topicalisations, with a topicalised subject (1a) or a topicalised object (1b) – so called Clitic Left Dislocation (CLLD).

(1) a. La nena, pentina   l'àvia.
     D-fem   comb-3s   D-fem grandmother
     'The girl, (she) is combing the grandma.'

   b. L'àvia, la pentina la nena.
     'The grandma, the girl is combing her.'

There is only one study concerning aphasic comprehension of CLLD in Romance: Beretta et al. (2001), where the comprehension of two Spanish-speaking patients was tested, but the sample was small, and the results were mixed.

Method

Here we present new data from a picture-matching task with 10 Catalan-speaking agrammatic patients (one left-handed, mean age of 60.8, affected by CVA) and 10 age-matched control subjects. We tested 20 contextualized subject and object topicalizations, as well as declarative sentences.

Results and discussion

The individual results obtained show that the 10 patients presented similar patterns of performance. By condition (Table 1), control subjects performed at ceiling, while the agrammatic subjects performed above chance on the declarative and subject topicalization conditions, but their performance dropped significantly on the object topicalization condition, which indicates that the participants tend to interpret such sentences as subject topicalizations.

	Decl SVO	Top SVO	CLLD OclVS
Control	100.00%	100.00%	95.00%
Aphasic	91.87%	92.18%	32.81%

Table 1. Mean percentatge of correct responses

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* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: io.salmons@gmail.com .

For CLLD we looked at the impact that the resumptive clitic – in agreement with the object – could have had on the results, comparing the comprehension of those sentences where the subject and the object had the same gender and number (1c) to the comprehension of those sentences where there was a gender mismatch. The percentages of correct responses did not depend on the matched/unmatched factor: they were 66.45% correct with matched subject/object and 69.88% with unmatched. Our results uncover, then, miscomprehension of CLLD regardless of gender and number feature (mis)match, while subject topicalisations, which retain the canonical thematic role assignment, appear to be well comprehended

There is on-going debate as to the correct analysis of CLLD in Romance: either as base-generated (Cinque 1990), or derived by movement (Belletti 2008, López 2009). If we assume, with Grodzinsky (2000), that XP movement is problematic in agrammatism due to trace deletion, we would expect CLLD to be impaired if and only if CLLD is derived by movement. CLLD is predicted to be comprehended below chance (2).

(2) L'àvia$_i$, la$_i$ pentina$_v$ la mare$_j$ t$_v$ t$_j$ t$_i$.
   agent   theme   >below chance

Below chance performance is indeed what is found for our subjects (CLLD: mean 0.301, CI=0.2115, 0.4085), and not simply chance performance. Thus to the theoretical arguments in favor of a movement analysis of Romance CLLD, we would like to add a new one coming from the empirical field of agrammatism: CLLD patterns with structures derived by movement.