

Clitic production in L2 immigrant children and in children with SLI

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The production of clitics is an excellent clinical marker of SLI in Italian at 5 years (Bortolini et al., 2006) and at 7 years (Arosio et al., 2010). However, clitic production is problematic in other conditions (Leonini, 2006), one of which is early L2 acquisition. This is a serious problem for the identification of L2 children with SLI. It also raises the question of why clitics are vulnerable in both acquisition modes. This paper aims at providing a viable solution to the first problem and an explanation of the second question. It will also deal with the question of why clitics are vulnerable in some early languages, but not in others.

The research is based on various studies on children with SLI (aged 5 and 6 years) and on immigrant children with three different L1 background (Arabic, Albanian, Roumanian). Results show that both children with SLI and early L2 children do not use clitic consistently. However, quantitative and qualitative differences are observed. Developmental differences are also observed. Thus, the profile of children with SLI and early L2 is different and this can help in differentiating the two populations. It is expected that early L2 children with SLI will be more similar to monolingual SLI. Second, clitic production involves a number of skills: phonological (clitics are weak syllables), morphosyntactic (clitics have case, number and gender features) and syntactic (they give rise to a non canonical word order SOV). Phonological skills are also involved in NW repetition, which is typically problematic for children with SLI, but not for typically developing L2 children. Thus, one may suggest that clitic production is taxing for children with SLI because of the complexity it involves at all linguistic levels (from phonology to syntax). By contrast, the difficulty for L2 learners stems from the morphosyntactic or syntactic complexity. Finally, it will be suggested that differences among languages in clitic use depend on the kind of movement involved in cliticization.