

Variability and Gradience of Object Clitics in Young Spanish Heritage Language Learners  
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**BACKGROUND.** Object clitic acquisition in Romance languages makes a particularly salient testing-ground for questions on variable syntactic knowledge. In developing grammars, clitic structures are noted to be susceptible to increased optionality (Sorace 1999; Müller 2003; Cuza, Pérez-Leroux & Sánchez 2013; Pirvulescu, Pérez-Leroux, Roberge, Strik & Thomas 2013; Shin, Requena & Kemp 2017). The current research focuses on ‘stabilized’ grammatical variability in object clitic placement and morphology in U.S. child heritage Spanish. Using Wexler’s (2003) Clitic Acquisition Theory (CAT) as the basis for clitic development in Spanish, we ask how and when clitic variability re-surfaces in ‘post-CAT’ child grammars once checking mechanisms have matured to ostensibly block optionality. We then test the notion of Competent Gradience (Duffield 2003) as a model of linguistic competence with two distinct macro- and micro-representational levels of syntactic knowledge in order to make nuanced predictions for ‘stabilized variability’ in children’s object clitic structures.

**METHODOLOGY.** To test knowledge of clitics, we analyze spontaneous child-to-child speech in a novel United States immersion setting for Spanish heritage speakers (SHS). Original corpus data from this 13-month observational study of 60 U.S.-born SHS, ages 4 – 7 with advanced Spanish proficiency are analyzed and compared to existing object clitic data on adult L1/L2, child L1 and bilingual first language acquisition. Naturalistic data from triads of children in spontaneous Spanish discourse and interactions were gathered bi-weekly in a 60-minute Saturday Spanish classroom setting. Twenty data collection sessions were transcribed and coded. Production data analyzed include the following variables, among others:

- Predicate class - Simple (“*¡Y la salvó!* (‘And she saved her!’) (101610:26B-6).”)
- Predicate class - Complex (“*Puedo hacerlo* (‘I can do it’) (2511:10A-6).”)
- Grammaticality of clitic omission: “*Voy a colorear* (‘I’m going to color’) (61210:19B-5).” versus “*\*Tú tienes que poner*. / (“\*You have to put (112010:5A-6).”)
- Grammaticality of clitic placement-Proclisis “*No lo puedo hacer* (‘I can’t do it’) (52210:16C-5).”)
- Grammaticality of clitic placement-Enclisis (“*Puedo hacerlo* (‘I can do it’) (2511:10A-6).”)
- Reflexive and dative clitics forming part of a clitic cluster (“*Se lo dije* (‘I said it to them’) (52210:6A-5).”)

**RESULTS.** (See graphs on p.2). Study findings show that the 4 -7 year-old SHS at all proficiency levels spontaneously produce clitics to some degree. While SHS simple predicate tokens contain 36.8% of CAT-like ungrammatical clitic omissions (e.g., “*\*Pongo en la bolsa* (‘I put in the bag’) (21211:19B-5),” the remaining 63% of SHS simple predicate data reflect a high percentage of grammatical and ‘adult-like’ clitic variability, including resumptive clitics (2.1%), grammatical clitic doubling (2.8%), clitic clusters (4.2%) and grammatical null objects (3.5%). SHS complex predicate tokens contain 100% grammatical variability in enclitic (13.4%) and proclitic (17.9%) constructions, utilizing modal and auxiliary verbs interchangeably across the two constructions. The grammatical occurrences of the data largely support the concept of macro-knowledge (Underlying Competence) in that in the majority of instances, child SHS in the study demonstrate categorical knowledge of Spanish object clitic constructions. Their ‘mature’ grammatical output of clitic doubling and clitic climbing (proclisis versus enclisis) likewise demonstrates a nuanced micro-knowledge (Surface Competence), appropriately variable and context dependent.

**CONCLUSIONS.** It is possible that the effects are wholly maturational, such that both CAT and dual competence operate in tandem at a late developmental stage. The overarching benefit of implementing both CAT and Competent Gradience models in child language acquisition is that it

becomes possible to begin to tease apart optionality—grammatical and ungrammatical—from variability (non-categorical) in young children’s language competence and performance.

#### 4.1 Clitic production data (simple and complex predicates)

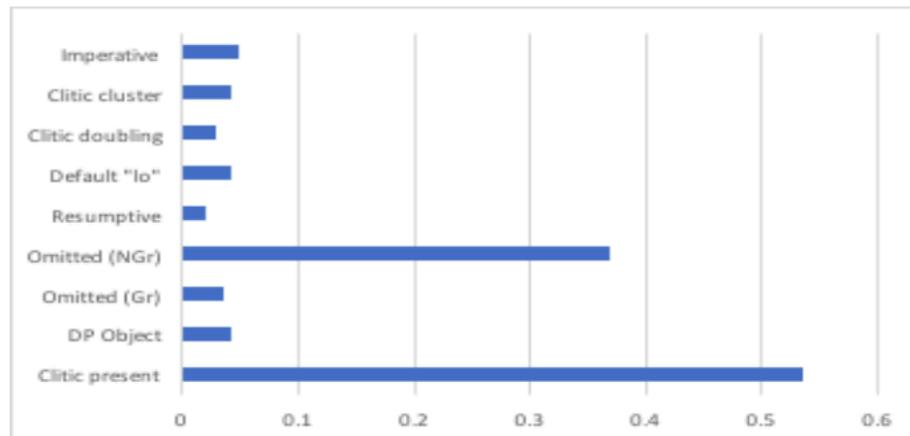


Figure 1. SHS production of clitics and DP objects out of 144 total tokens containing a simple predicate requiring a clitic or DP object, mean age: 5;8.

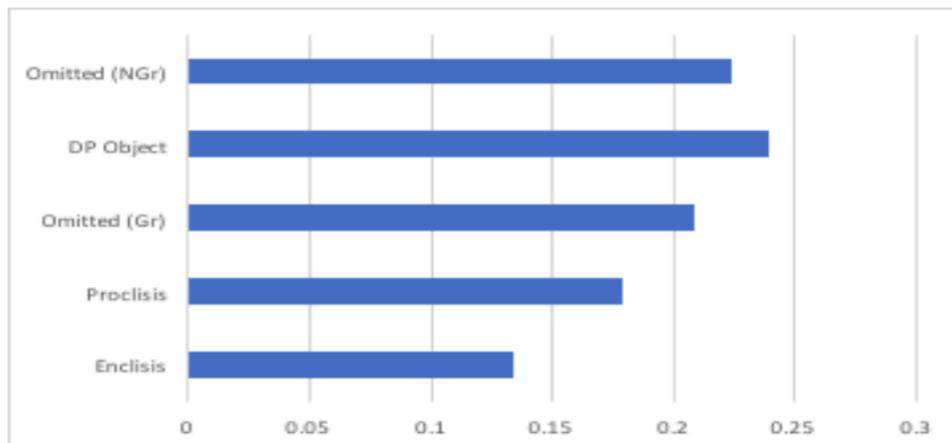


Figure 2. SHS production of clitics and DP objects out of 67 total tokens containing a complex predicate requiring a clitic or DP object, mean age: 5;8.

#### SELECTED REFERENCES

- Duffield, Nigel. 2003. “Measures of Competent Gradience.” *The Lexicon-Syntax Interface in Second Language Acquisition* ed. by van Hout, Roeland, Aafke Hulk, Folkert Kuiken & Richard J. Towell, 97–127. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
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- Wexler, Kenneth., Anna Gavarró & Vincenç Torrens. 2004. “Feature checking and object clitic omission in child Spanish and Catalan”. *Romance language and linguistic theories 2002* ed. by Bok-Bennema, Reineke, Bart Hollebrandse, Brigitte Kampers-Manhe & Petra Sleeman, 253–269. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.