Null arguments in successive child language acquisition

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One of the important issues in successive child language acquisition (cL2) research is the effect of age at which learners are first exposed to their L2. It is still very much an open question whether, up to which age and in which grammatical areas the age of onset (AO) of acquisition influences the language development (Schwartz 2004, Meisel 2008, 2011, Pirvulescu, Perez-Leroux, Roberge, Strik, Thomas 2014).

The current study aims at exploring the distribution patterns of null arguments in child successive acquisition of German, a topic-drop language, in comparison with first language acquisition. Monolingual German children omit subjects and objects in some contexts (Hamann et al. 1996, Jakubowicz et al. 1997). The L1 of the children under investigation is Polish. Polish is a language which allows null arguments in other contexts than German does. In Polish, there are referential null subjects conditioned by subject-verb agreement, and null objects which are conditioned by discourse. Monolingual Polish children show an early preference for object omissions in both specified and unspecified contexts (Author, Author 2015).

The present study investigates the longitudinal data from four children, who were first exposed to L2 German at the ages of 2;6 to 4;7 years. The variable of the AO is the main variable differentiating them. In other respects, i.e. their input situation, social background, they constitute a homogeneous group. Their language acquisition was investigated through the period of 10 months.

The results show that the cL2 development mirrors L1 regarding null subjects and differs from the L1 in the domain of object acquisition. The higher rate of post verbal object omissions in the data of all children under study regardless of their AO indicates that AO does not play a crucial role in the development of null arguments in cL2.

Keywords: null subjects, age of onset of acquisition, null objects, child successive language acquisition.