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Acquisition of Differential Object Marking in Argentine Spanish

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1. Introduction

Being able to identify who throws a football to whom seems like an easy task when listening to a sports commentary. Languages find ways to make this task easier by signaling who is the subject (S) and who is the object (O) in a sentence. Linguists refer to this signaling as Case marking. When an element is marked for Case it conveys information about the grammatical function of that element in the sentence (e.g., being the S, or the O). English accomplishes this marking through the use of different words (*I*=Subject, *me*=Object) or strict word order (SVO). Whereas Spanish also uses different words sometimes (*yo*=Subject, *me*=object), flexible word order doesn't help Spanish, so one way that Spanish accomplishes case marking is through Differential Object Marking. Here we ask: How do Spanish-speaking children learn this important aspect of their grammar?

2. Differential Object Marking (DOM)

- DOM is a phenomenon that marks certain direct objects with a case marker that distinguishes them from the Subject of the sentence (Bossong, 1991).
- In Spanish, this marker is "a" (also known as "a personal") and its use is considered to depend on several factors such as:
 - Animacy of the direct object (human>animate>inanimate)
 - Definiteness/specificity of the direct object (+Def>-Def)

- DOM
↓
- (1) Sara escucha **a** Jorge (Human, Def)
Sara listens to George
- (2) Sara escucha una canción. (Inanimate, Indef)
Sara listens to a song

Theoretical descriptions of Spanish DOM try to concentrate on predicting when it must occur (1) and when it cannot occur (2) (Aissen, 2003). However, except for some contexts, Spanish DOM proves to be variable. Also, in dialects such as Argentine Spanish, DOM has been attested with inanimates, and is strongly influenced by the doubling of the direct object with the clitic pronoun (**La cerré a la puerta** 'I closed the door').

3. Child Language Acquisition

Very little research exists on how children acquire adult-like use of Spanish DOM. DOM emerges very early in child language (1;7 - 1;11), with virtually errorless productions (Ticio, & Avram, 2015; Rodríguez-Mondoñedo, 2008). However, previous acquisition studies look at DOM only in categorical contexts and do not consider parental input. This research provides a limited view of how DOM is acquired, leaving out all variation.

4. Research Questions

1. What is the parental input like? Does it present variation?
2. Does the child's DOM use match the parental input?



5. Methods

Materials: The *Remedi* longitudinal corpus of the Spanish of a monolingual Argentine child (Remedi et al., in prep) available via the *Child Language Data Exchange System* (CHILDES) was used. The corpus contains 14 transcripts of naturalistic conversation between a child (VIC) aged 1;10-2;11 and her father. It consists of 1,870 utterances and 5,614 words.

Procedure: All utterances containing a transitive verb were manually extracted and coded for: the presence of DOM marking; direct object animacy, definiteness, and specificity; as well as clitic doubling. Utterances with direct object clitics were excluded because they cannot take DOM.

This process resulted in N=174 tokens produced by the child and N=396 produced by the father.

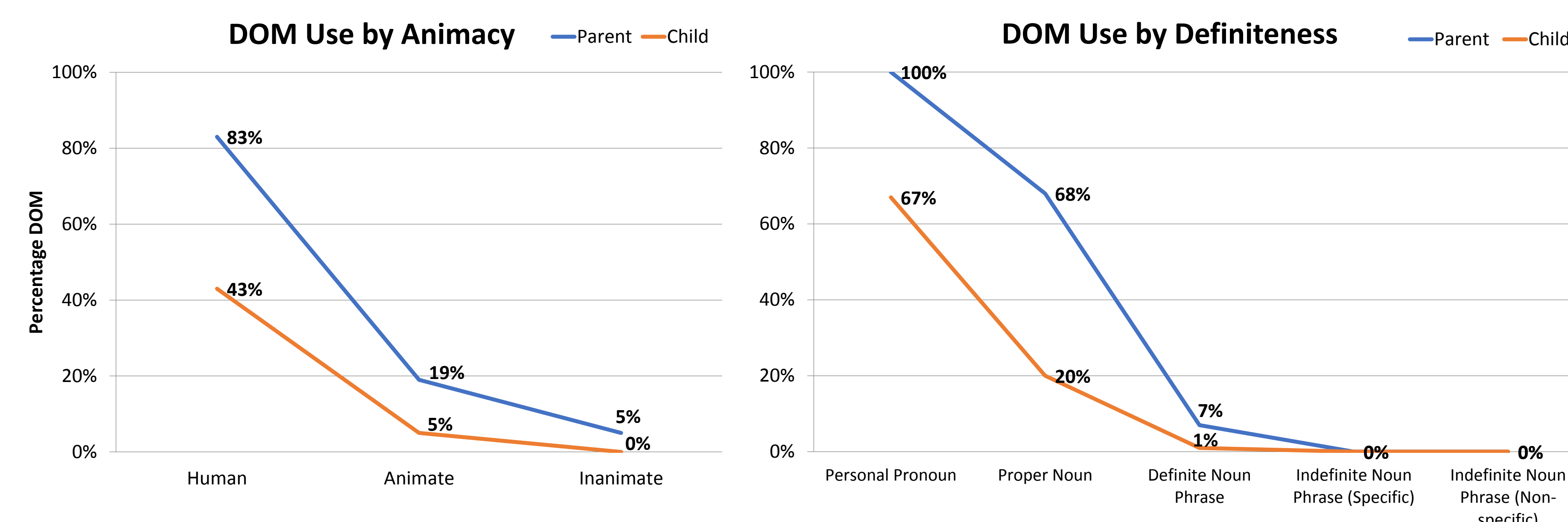
Llévala a Lila. (Victoria, 2;5, file 020511.cha, line 263)

Take Lila.

*Note: Lila refers to an inanimate doll.

6. Results

In both the parent and child, DOM was not committed or omitted 100% of the time in categorical contexts.



7. Discussion and Conclusion

- The input is variable, as opposed to categorical.
 - Neither the parent nor the child used DOM categorically in a particular context (e.g., proper nouns, humans, inanimates).
 - No single factor appears to be categorical in itself. There is no one factor (e.g., animacy, definiteness, etc.) that can determine DOM marking.
 - The input variability reinforces the need for more research of child DOM acquisition that examines the input the child receives.
- The child's DOM use seems to match the parental input in Animacy and Definiteness
 - Though the child produced very few DOM tokens, she seems to only mark those where the direct object is human and specific (in 3 out of 4 cases).
 - In 3/4 cases of child DOM marking, the token contained clitic doubling. Dialectal variations are attested in early DOM use.
 - The first uses by the child include "a mí" which is also used with Indirect Objects. DOM acquisition may begin in a piecemeal fashion.

Children seem to acquire DOM by looking at their input and variation in the input is soon attested in child language. However, early use of DOM occurs with fixed forms ("a mí") and with human and specific objects first. Further research using experimental designs is needed to make up for the scarcity of data points in naturalistic production in order to fully specify how acquisition proceeds.

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Acknowledgments

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