Acquiring a null-object-language: when children sound target-like, but really aren’t
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It is quite well established in the literature that children acquiring languages with object clitics go through a clitic omission stage (Avram, 2000; Hamann, 2003; Jakubowicz et al., 1998; Schmitz & Müller, 2003; Tsakali and Wexler, 2003; among many others), which is not attested in children acquiring languages with a strong and/or weak pronoun paradigm for object, such as English (Huang, 1999; Hyams, 1983, 1989; Wang et al., 1992; among others). It has also been shown that children acquiring Chinese, a null object language, produce null objects from the onset and are quantitatively close to the production of adults (see Wang et al., 1992; Yip & Matthews, 2000).

Our aim here is to examine the acquisition of the null object in Brazilian Portuguese (BP). As is well known, BP exhibits null objects in any syntactic context, as opposed to other languages that allow the phenomenon (1), but one striking aspect of BP null object is that it occurs more freely when the antecedent has a [-animate] feature (2):

(1) O rapaz que trouxe [ ] agora mesmo da pastelaria
    era o teu afilhado
    The boy that brought_3sg [ ] now just of the pastry shop
    was your godson

(2) O Emilio perdeu [a carteira] e não consegue achar [ ]/? ela
    Emilio lost_3sg the wallet and not can_3sg find_inf [ ]/? pronoun fem

On the other hand, BP allows for strong and/or weak 3rd person pronouns (henceforth, lexical pronouns) in object position; nevertheless, the distribution between a null object and a lexical pronoun is not free in the language, but is restricted to the semantic features of the antecedent, namely, animacy and specificity. The default null objects replace [-animate] antecedents as in (2) above, whereas a [+animate] antecedent will be null only if [-specific] (3a), being realized as a lexical pronoun if [+specific] (3b):

(3) a. O policial insulta [presos] antes de torturer [ ]/? eles
    The policeman insults prisoners before of torture_inf [ ]/?pronoun_masc_pl
    The policeman insults prisoners before torturing (them).

   b. O policial insultou [o preso] antes de torturer *[ ]/ele
    The policeman insulted_3sg the prisoner before of torture_inf*[ ]/pronoun_masc
    The policeman insulted the prisoner before torturing him.

This picture allows us to make the following prediction: Since children acquiring BP will not have to deal with the complexities involved in deriving clitics, they will exhibit the expected adult-like pattern for objects. In other words, the null option will be produced from the onset and the lexical pronouns will also be an option, just as they are in English child language. In order to check the prediction, spontaneous production data from two children (AC and R), ages 1;8 to 3;7, were analyzed. Table 1 shows the overall percentages for null and pronominal objects for each child developmentally:
Both children start out with 100% of null objects, a figure that tends to decrease when pronouns start to be used. Although all the sentences are grammatical, the next natural question is: are we dealing with one and the same null category or does its status change over time? Looking at the data, what we see is that the initial null objects are instances of deictic-like elements in imperative contexts (4) only, but at the same age when pronouns start to be produced in object position (at 2;3 for AC and at 1;10 for R), the null category becomes anaphoric (5):

(4) Garda (= guarda) aqui. (R., 1;9)
   Keep  here
   Keep it here. (The child is holding her pacifier, obviously referring to it)

(5) Não vou guarder (AC, 3;7)
   not will_1sg keep
   I won’t put them away. (referring to her toys that are in a different room)

Our hypothesis is that the null object in BP has to be locally licensed by an Asp(ect) category (see Cyrino & Matos, in press), in order for the specificity feature of the object to be checked. Imperative sentences lack such category, therefore, the only null objects derivable by the grammar are deictic ones. In fact, ca. 20% of both children’s utterances with a verb are instances of imperative sentences, a figure that drops to ca. 5% when anaphoric objects are found. During the “deictic-object” stage, the children have produced 68.4% of state verbs in the present tense and 11.6% of verbs in the simple past tense all of them achievement verbs. The latter forms are clearly used to mark perfective aspect and telicity, and all of them contain a null deictic object as well. We assume that initially the Asp head has a default [+perfective] feature, which does not trigger checking of the features of the object. The interesting fact is that the age at which children start producing lexical pronouns and the objects become anaphoric coincides with the age when imperfective forms are found (“imperfect preterite” and present continuous); achievement verbs drop from around 75% to 17.3% and activity and accomplishment verbs are attested as well. These results show that the Asp head, and its relevant features, have become fully operative in the children’s grammar, thereby licensing the anaphoric null objects.

As for the use of pronouns, both children initially associate them with a [+human] feature of the antecedent and expand the use of the null category for other non-human [+animate, + specific] antecedents (ca. 50% of all cases, lasting until the 2;8 files), the only cases that truly don’t sound adult-like.