Child Comprehension of Displacement Patterns in L1 Greek

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0. ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine the ability of Greek children aged 3-6 years old to comprehend dislocation patterns, such as wh-constructions, topics & foci, relatives and passives in their mother tongue and then to report the findings of this study.

In order to assess children's syntax, 35 kindergarten children have served as subjects in undertaking two tasks, namely the picture selection task and the truth-value judgment task.

Finally, the empirical findings of this study are considered, showing a developmental sequence in children's comprehension of dislocation patterns on a par with their age. It also becomes evident that certain construction items remain difficult even for the latest ages, while others seem to be acquired relatively early.

1. THEORIES OF L1 ACQUISITION (L1A)

The beginning of an infant’s life is not characterised by the linguistic capability of an adult. With the aid of some primary linguistic data (PLD) the child will make the transition from the initial state (So) of its linguistic knowledge to the steady state (Ss) of its ‘linguistic maturation’. Nevertheless, the data the child receives are not sufficient to account for final mastery, a fact that gives rise to the poverty of the stimulus problem: how is this final stage reached when so few data are available? The answer to this question is the assumption that some innate formal principles exist in the child’s brain from the very beginning, constituting Universal Grammar (UG).

Language acquisition is a process of fixing parameters to the values of the target grammar. UG decides the number of values these parameters will have and the principles are the ones that define the nature of the grammar that will finally be developed. In the literature of language acquisition there is divergence only to the extent of how available these UG parameters are throughout the acquisition process. The continuity hypothesis and the maturation hypothesis are the two major theories adopted.

- **Continuity hypothesis:** It conforms to the Instantaneous Model of Acquisition (Chomsky 1986): So + PLD → Ss, according to which parameter setting (language acquisition) is the learning process of matching syntactic features to the correct functional category. The
continuity hypothesis claims that UG principles exist from the very beginning but for some the parameters are not yet fixed to the correct value, having an unmarked, default value. Early data (acquisition stages before the setting of the parameters) can be attributed to this default parametric value, available in the absence of triggering data. When triggering data appear, they cause the switch to the right value and then parameter setting occurs.

Yet, triggering data are not always present, which raises the question of how learning takes place. Even in the case that they are available, it’s still questionable how and when they become triggering data (Borer & Wexler 1987). Besides, some phenomena appear already set to the marked value, making one wonder what determines those to be immediately set to the correct value and leaves others with the default one. These are some of the reasons there is a feeling the maturation hypothesis gains some advantage over the continuity one. Throughout this paper we will try to give credit to the maturation hypothesis.

Maturation hypothesis: It conforms to the Innateness Hypothesis, which claims that language acquisition is also a biological process and is therefore subject to maturational constraints, like other aspects of anatomical and cognitive development. Constraints are linguistic principles governing a range of linguistic phenomena, a prohibition against certain sentence-meaning pairs, leading to reduction of language. They can be of two types: (a) ill-formed sentences and (b) well-formed sentences that can only be interpreted in one way. Constraints are part of UG but cannot be learned, due to poverty of stimuli. Nor can they be learned inductively via negative evidence, since the latter is not abundant and even if it were, children resist correction. Consequently, in the maturation hypothesis the transition from So to Ss is not instantaneous but developmental. There is the assumption that certain constructions will appear at a given predetermined time, without any need for learning or evidence from the environment, that is triggering data, to take place.

More specifically we are going to adopt Crain & Wexler’s (forthcoming) Modularity Matching Model, according to which children’s grammars match adults’, as they both share a common language processing system with the same processing capacity and memory limitations, and are aware of the grammatical principles governing their language. Child behaviour is consistent, even if not on a par with that of adults. The human language-processing system is modular in that the language faculty operates according to principles specific to it, not shared by other cognitive systems. This is why considerations about plausibility of sentences do not influence the grammatical representations constructed
by them. Experience plays little role on linguistic performance; there are some linguistic properties that make some sentences more difficult than others.

2. **DISPLACEMENT PATTERNS**

In order to show that parameters are subject to maturation, we will consider displacement phenomena of both A’/ A-movement. Rizzi (1995) proposes the division of the CP (the complementizer layer, that is the interface level between IP (the inflectional layer) and the subordinate structure)) and claims that the left periphery consists of the Force-Finiteness system, with Force (Chomsky 1995) occupying the higher and Fin the lower position:

(1) **Force... (Topic)... (Focus)... Fin IP**

Force is responsible for the specification of the outside information and the type of sentence, while Fin, closely related to the content of IP, provides the inside data and mood/ tense specifications as well as subject agreement.

2.1. **A’ movement**

(a) *Quantificational and non-quantificational operators*

In all peripheral constructions (wh, topic/ focus and relative structures) an operator is involved. Operators can be quantificational, in which case they bind a true variable and have a functional reading.

Interrogatives and RRCs belong to this category. A wh-operator unselectively binds all true wh-variables. The set of possible referents that a functional quantifier like a wh-phrase can have is restricted by the A’-chain. RRCs also have a quantificational operator binding a true variable (Tsimipl 1999). However, the restriction of the possible set of referents is now done by the ‘subject’ of predication, due to their referential index. These relative operators are called *linking operators* since they must be co-indexed with a variable and an antecedent, that is the relative head. (Lasnik & Stowell 1991, Kayne 1994):

(2)(a) **wh-Opi ..........ti**

(b) **Npi .......Opi ..........ti**

Foci and topics, on the other hand, are non-quantificational operators that bind a null epithet/ constant (Lasnik & Stowell 1991) with non-anaphoric, non-pronominal and non-variable properties [-a, -p. -v]. They have individual readings and bind an individual variable.
(b) Wh-constructions, foci and RRCs

Wh-phrases are governed by the Wh-criterion (May 1985, Rizzi 1991), according to which a [+wh] Xo must be in spec-head agreement with a wh-operator (Tsimpli 1998, reduced version). Wh-movement is a trace-binding relationship that takes place to satisfy the above criterion and supply C with the uninterpretable wh-feature.

Concerning foci, Tsimpli (1995) proposes the F-Criterion, where a [+f] Xo must be in Spec-Head agreement with an F operator. Parameterising the F-criterion with respect to level (Brody 1989), the focus phrase is either obligatorily preposed in the syntactic level or moves at LF and remains in-situ. In Greek the value is set either positively or negatively and the focus phrase can either be preposed or remain in-situ. Contrary to the wh-morpheme, the F morpheme is never realised overtly in Greek.

Wh- and foci are incompatible in a single clause, as they occupy the same position, FP, either specified for [+f] or [+wh] (Tsimpli 1995). In embedded structures, however, they can co-occur iff the wh-phrase is in the embedded clause. This is because foci have always a wide scope reading and even when they occur in an embedded clause, they raise to the matrix clause at LF. If the wh-phrase occurred in the matrix clause, their scope properties would coincide, resulting in ungrammaticality. Foci will therefore always precede wh-phrases, occupying SpecCP and wh- will occupy the SpecFP position (also Rizzi 1995), enabling this way the intermediate trace left by movement of focus at LF to be properly governed by the matrix verb (Rizzi 1990). If wh- occupied SpecCP and focus SpecFP, the trace would be left ungoverned as the head of C could not govern the spec of its complement via spec head-agreement with an operator in SpecCP, as the latter would be filled by a category different from focus (Tsimpli 1995):

![Diagram](image)

Concerning relatives, Chomsky (op.cit.) claims that relative heads are CP-adjoined to the head noun. The wh-word in SpecCP is related to an internal
position and wh-movement marks the relation between wh- and the clause internal position. The base generated NO moves to SpecCP and is co-indexed with the head via predication.

(c) Topics

Rizzi (1995) proposes the SpecTopP position for topics and the YP one for comments:

(4)  
```
  TopP  
   \   /  
  XP   Top'  
   \ /    
  Topo  YP
```

Topics are movement constructions but their individual operator moves at LF and not in syntax. Tsimpli (1990, 1995) shows that they are not ungrammatical if extracted out of Complex Noun Phrases and adjunct clauses, thus displaying no syntactic movement, but they do obey the strong island effect. As for what moves at LF, that cannot be the topic, as the latter is base-generated in its surface structure position. An operator at SpecCP (Browning 1987) is then present, since there is a predication relation between topic and the rest of the sentence. This operator could be either a resumptive pronoun or pro, doubled by the clitic.

In the following examples we can see that tonic pronouns can only be construed with non-operators, versus clitic pronouns and pro, which are not sensitive to the status of the antecedent (Tsimpli 1995). This verifies the existence of an operator in topicalization, as tonic pronouns are ungrammatical in these constructions:

(5)(a)  
{o}  
janisi  
ipe  
oti  
imaria  
toni  
tiēe
the John say-P-PERF-3SG that the Mary CL-ACC see-P-PERF-3SG
‘John said that Mary saw him’

(b)  
*ton  
Petroi,  
simba@un  
aftoni
the-ACC Peter-ACC like-Pr-IMP-3PL him
‘Peter, they like him’

Assuming that Binding Theory applies both at syntax and LF (Chomsky 1982) and that clitic pronouns are transformed into variables (hence receive a bound variable interpretation at LF, according to McCloskey 1990), the ungrammaticality of tonic pronouns in topicalization is due to their inability to receive a bound variable reading (Montalbetti 1984, Ouhalla 1988).
2.2. A-movement: Passive constructions

In Greek passives the 'subject' need not be overtly stated, if it is unimportant, obvious or unknown; in other words agentful passives are rare in Greek and only exist iff the agent is in plural/ a collective noun or an authority with some general over specific reference (Tzartzanos 1946, Mirambel 1959 and Philippaki 1975). For that reason we only examined adjectival passives, as we considered verbal ones marginal and mostly used in formal settings, to which small children barely have any access.

(a) Adjectival passives

Adjectival passives are the *ime*-constructions (Philippaki 1975, Lascaratou & Philippaki 1982, Kakouriotis 1989, 1993 and Markandonatou et.al 1996) that are lexically derived and of a stative character (Wasow 1977, Chomsky 1995). -MENOS participles range from fully to less adjectival, emotives being the most and non-statives the least adjectival group (Kakouriotis, op.cit)

- The major characteristic of verbal passives is the absorption of the external Θ-role by passive morphology, without violating the Projection Principle (Chomsky 1981), as the former can also be expressed by a by-phrase adjunct. For Chomsky this is the unique property of passivisation, as case cannot be assigned without Θ-role assignment. Adjectival passives eliminate their Θ-subject, since they behave like standard adjectives and thus violate PP, having eliminated a lexical feature.

- In adjectival passives there exists a categorial change, as the former become deverbal: [+V -N] → [+V +N]. Their categorial change and the fact that in the above process accusative case is also eliminated reveal their lexical status (PP is once more violated; lexical features must be represented at every syntactic level).

- Having eliminated the external Θ-role, the adjectival passive places the object in that position and leaves the post-verbal position empty without further subcategorisation, something ungrammatical in purely syntactic terms. In verbal passives, however, there still is an internal Θ-role, thus a subcategorised [VP NP] position. As this preservation is coupled by the fact that accusative cannot be assigned, movement is obligatory. The object position is occupied by the trace that forms a chain with its antecedent in the [NP S] position and the internal argument role is assigned to the whole chain by the participle. In adjectival passives, however, no movement takes place.

(b) Reflexives

We will also consider reflexive constructions, which possess a passive morphology but are of a middle diathesis. They appear in the active with a
reflexive pronoun acting as an object but they sound odd with an apo-
phrase:

(6)(a) xenizo ton eafto nu/ xenizome *apo emena
comb-Pr-IMP-1SG the-ACC myself-ACC CL-GEN/ be-combed-Pr-IMP-1SG by me
‘I comb myself/ *I am combed by me’

3. PILOT STUDY
3.1. Subjects
In order to check children’s ability to comprehend dislocation patterns, 35
preschool children aged 3-6 were tested in a private kindergarten. The
children were divided into the following four groups, according to age: 3-
3;6, 3;7-4, 4;1-5 and 5;1-6. There were only five children in the first group,
due to a shortage of children at that age. All the other groups equally
consisted of ten children.

3.2. Tests
Two tests were applied to children, namely the picture selection task and
the Truth Value Judgement task. Apart from wh-constructions, which were
16 in the picture selection task and 12 in TVJ task, both tests contained the
same number of test items, that is 2 focus and 2 topic constructions, 6
relatives and 4 passive constructions. Let us now cast an analytic look at
these tests.

(a) Picture selection task
In picture selection task the examiner utters each test sentence while
showing the child four pictures. On hearing the test sentence, the child has to
point to the picture that best represents the sentence. It goes without saying
that there is only one correct picture, all the others being distractors. That
was the way all constructions were examined, apart from wh-ones.
For the latter the question-after-stories technique was followed, according
to which 6 short stories were read to the child and the latter was then asked a
couple of questions based on these stories. The child was also given visual
support of three or four pictures that depicted parts of each story.
The picture selection task takes approximately fifteen minutes. An
example of a passive and a wh- construction are given below:

7) a. Η μαμά πλένει τη μικρήγη μη μαμά της πλένονται
b. Η μικρή πλένει τη μαμά της
c. H mikrη plēnetai
8) Η μικρή κι ο μικρός έτρωγαν παγωτό. Το παγωτό του μικρού, όμως,
έλεσε κι ο μικρός λερώθηκε. Το είπε στη μικρή κι η μικρή το είπε στη
μαμά. Τότε η μαμά απαγόρευε στα παιδιά να ξαναφάνε γλυκά στο δρόμο
για να μην λερώνονται.
(b) TVJ task

In TVJ task a short story is played in front of the child with the aid of some puppets. Then, a puppet that has been observing the story utters the test statement. The child has to evaluate this statement, either positively or negatively. A puppet is employed (and not the examiner herself) simply because children tend to be hesitant to indicate that an adult is wrong. Each story has two basic meanings.

• Meaning1 is true in the story but ungrammatical. It is therefore an accurate description of the story but verifies the Null Hypothesis (Ho) that supports that children lack UG principles and as a result, a sentence can be ambiguous for them but not for adults, as children allow both interpretations.

• Meaning2 is the grammatical answer which is always negative, that is false in the context and this is so because children often tend to say ‘yes’; if ‘yes’ was the correct answer, it would be evidence in favour of the Experimental Hypothesis (child grammar is part of UG as much as adult grammar), when children would have possibly not understood the actual test sentence. Therefore, H1 is associated with the negative answer. When the child rejects the test sentence uttered by the puppet, the latter being a grammatical but inaccurate version of the story, it shows that it is aware of the constraint behind it and proves H1 correct.

Finally, the test is considered properly constructed if two conditions of vital importance are met:

(a) The condition of falsification. This is satisfied iff the context makes the negation of the test sentence a true description of the story.

(b) The condition of plausible dissent. This requires Meaning 2 be under consideration at some point in the story, thus satisfying Russell’s maxim (negative judgment only if positive judgment has been into consideration).

Last but not least, the event corresponding to Meaning 1 should come last, as last mentioned events are more salient and we do not wish to prove H1 correct just because the last event of the story corresponded to it.

This test, being quite a big one, is done in two sessions, taking around twenty-five minutes each. An example of a story now follows:

9) Ο παππούτσιος ο πάνθηρας κι ο ελέφαντας συζητούν για το πόσο τραγουδάει καλύτερα. Παππούτσιος: Εγώ τραγουδώ αρκετά καλά. Να, ακούστε με! (Τραγουδάει) Πάνθηρας: Σιγά τι φανή! Εμένα η δική μου είναι η πιο οραία και δεν κουράζομαι και καθόλου! (Τραγουδάει κι αυτός)
Ελέφαντας: Ναι, αλλά αν είχα φάει όλο μου το πρωινό, εγώ θα είχα τώρα την πιο ωραία φωνούλα!
Διαβολάκι: Ξέρω ποιος τραγουδάει πιο ωραία. Ο ελέφαντας (OXI)

4. RESULTS
4.1. Wh-constructions
Considering wh-constructions in picture selection task, we will see that there is a clear developmental pattern according to age. That is the older the children, the better they comprehend the given constructions. There is significance between groups 1 & 2, 1 & 3, 1 & 4, and 3 & 4, showing thus a developmental pattern. In TVJ task a similar developmental pattern is displayed. There is significance between groups 1 & 2, 1 & 3, 1 & 4 and 2 & 4. The fact that in both tests there is no significance between groups 2 & 3 could be attributed to the fact that most possibly there is not a transitional period between these two groups, or to put it otherwise, the age of 4 does not constitute a turning point for the comprehension of wh-constructions.

4.2. Foci
In both picture selection and TVJ tasks foci display the same performance. They are thus considered stable. There is a developmental pattern, judging by the significance between groups 1 & 4, 2 & 4 and 3 & 4. This pattern, however, seems to be a very slow one. Again, groups 2 & 3 display no significance.

4.3. Topics
Concerning topic constructions now, we can see that in both tests there doesn’t seem to be any developmental pattern, whatsoever. Neither in picture selection task nor in TVJ task is there any significance between any groups. That could either mean that the cross group difference is so tiny that it cannot be captured or that both tests have failed to measure children’s ability to comprehend topics. This is a point we shall have to return to later.

4.4. Relatives
The case of relatives is also problematic for the picture selection task, as there is absolutely no significance between any groups. In TVJ task, however, relatives display a very clear developmental pattern, showing significance between all groups, apart from groups 2 & 3, once more. It could be that the notion of relativeness is easier to establish via an acted-out story or that there is a major problem with the relatives of the picture selection task.
4.5. Passives

Finally passives present the exactly opposite picture of that of relatives: a much clearer developmental pattern in picture selection task than in TVJ task, where the only obvious difference in behaviour is between groups 2 and 4.

5. CONCLUSION

The first thing one could possibly say is that there seem to be certain fallacies in the test items themselves, judging by the fact that we do not get similar results for the same construction by both tests. Specifically the case of relatives and passives are problematic and it is possible that the test items under discussion need to be reconsidered.

Besides, although topics display a similar behaviour in both tests, there is no significance between any age groups, which leads to their reconsideration as well.

On the other hand, the small number of children (35) could also be a reason why we can see no significance even when small differences exist. Thus in the main study these differences will show much more clearly.

The other point to be made concerns the total absence of significance between groups 2 and 3. Being an almost general phenomenon, the latter could indicate that the age of 4 is not so critical after all; that is group 3 could start half a year later.

In general, one could say that comprehension of wh-constructions begins at the age of 3;6, along with that of relatives, since they are both quantificational operators. One can note that there is no significance between the two constructions from the age of 3;6 and on. Foci, that is non-quantificational operators involving movement in syntax start to be comprehended at the age of 4. Passives must be comprehended at some point between the age of 4 and 4;6, as there is no significance between them and quantificational operators in picture selection task, but there is some displayed in TVJ task, as far as the second age group is concerned—the time when quantificational operators are comprehended. Finally, topics (non-quantificational operators) must also be comprehended at some point between the age of 4 and 4;6, as they behave similarly to passives compared to wh- and relatives. One can then note that although both foci and topics are non-quantificational operators, the ones involving movement at LF are understood after movement in the level of syntax has been comprehended.

Below one can see the two tables displaying the statistical significance of cross group and within group analysis of both picture selection and TVJ task.
CROSS GROUP ANALYSIS

a.) Picture selection task

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructions</th>
<th>Groups 1+2</th>
<th>Groups 1+3</th>
<th>Groups 1+4</th>
<th>Groups 2+3</th>
<th>Groups 2+4</th>
<th>Groups 3+4</th>
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<td>0.025</td>
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<td>ns</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passives</td>
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<td>0.0002</td>
<td>0.0006</td>
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b.) TVJ task

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<th>Constructions</th>
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<th>Groups 1+3</th>
<th>Groups 1+4</th>
<th>Groups 2+3</th>
<th>Groups 2+4</th>
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WITHIN GROUP ANALYSIS

a.) Picture selection task

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<th>Group 2 (3.7-4.4)</th>
<th>Group 3 (4.1-5)</th>
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<td>Foci + relatives</td>
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b.) TVJ task
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<th>Group 3 (4.1-5)</th>
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<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wh + relatives</td>
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<td>Wh + passives</td>
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