Clitic production in monolingual and bilingual children with Specific Language Impairment

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Abstract

Introduction. Research has shown that the production of object clitics is particularly vulnerable for monolingual children with Specific Language Impairment (SLI) (e.g. Arosio et al., 2010; Paradis, Crago, & Genesee, 2005/2006). Studies on clitic production in Greek-speaking children with SLI have been contradictory, with some studies showing that clitics are omitted by the specific population (Tsimpli, 2001), and others failing to replicate this pattern (Terzi, 2007; Varlokosta, 2002). So far, there is no consensus on the exact pattern of clitic production in children with SLI that could clarify this issue neither a model of how language impairment and bilingualism interact, as these two processes have been studied separately. Our aim was to compare two clitic elicitation tasks, namely, the Production Probe for Pronoun Clitics task (PPPC; Tuller et al., 2004), which targets production of 1st and 3rd person accusative clitics, and the Short Form (SF) of the Clitic Production task (COST Action IS0804) that only targets 3rd person clitics. The two tasks differ in their complexity in that the instructions to the child in the PPPC task switch between trials and there is thus, more contextual processing and integration of instruction and visual cues compared to the SF task where perspective shift is not promoted as this task only requires production of 3rd person clitics. It was, thus, possible to expect differential performance of the same group between tasks but also different error patterns (omission vs. DP use vs. commission) between tasks.
Method

Participants. Our participants were four groups of children; forty-nine monolingual Greek-speaking children with SLI (henceforth, mosli; mean age: 9;9 yrs.), twenty-three bilingual children with SLI (bisli; mean age: 9;5 yrs.), and two groups of age- and language-matched typically-developing (TD) monolingual (monoTD) and bilingual children (biTD). Language matching was done on the basis of children's word finding (Vogindroukas et al., 2009) and sentence repetition (Stavrakaki & Tsimpli, 2000) abilities.

Results. Both SLI groups were found to perform considerably more poorly than TD groups across both tasks ($p < .002$). Results further reveal correlations in performance across groups in the two tasks ($p = .000$), although higher rates were found in the SF clitic task only for bilingual groups with and without SLI. Error analyses distinguishing between 1st and 3rd person clitics reveal within-group differences in mosli but not in bisli children, while both SLI groups were found to omit 3rd person clitics considerably more in the SF relative to the

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PPPC task (p=.000). Furthermore, while both SLI groups made significantly more gender errors on clitics relative to TD children, mosli tended to make significantly more case errors on DPs (p=.000) (once they produced a DP instead of a clitic) than the rest of the groups in the SF task.

Discussion. The results support the assumption that clitic production is a sensitive parameter for detecting SLI in both monolingual and bilingual Greek-speaking children. Results also suggest that the PPPC was more adequate in capturing mosli's greater vulnerability (than bilsi) to 1st person clitic production, suggesting that mosli were less sensitive to shifted perspectives over short stretches of discourse. Finally, mosli exhibited more erroneous performance than bisli in the morphosyntactic realization of 3rd person clitics, which rather implies stronger morphosyntactic deficits for this group in comparison to bisli children.

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