

Child Comprehension of Marathi Gapped Relative Clauses

Anupama Reddy and Kamil Deen

Filler-gap dependencies, in particular relative clauses (RCs), are a widely studied area in syntax, largely because they show cross-linguistic asymmetries in processing due to the distance of the dependency. This has often been explained using Keenan & Comrie's Accessibility Hierarchy (1977), arguing that positions higher in the hierarchy (i.e. Subjects) are easier to process than positions lower in the hierarchy (i.e. Objects). However, in languages with non-canonical subjects and objects like Marathi, this asymmetry may not be as prevalent. In this study, we find that rather than a subject advantage, Marathi children's behavioral responses were affected by verb-type. We explore questions of whether these facts are best understood through the lens of processing issues versus grammatical knowledge.

Lau & Tanaka (2021), in their meta-analysis of the subject advantage in relative clauses, show an overall ease in the processing of Subject RCs (SRCs) as compared to Object RCs (ORCs). They do point out that specific languages show differences depending on their features. For example, languages with ergative alignment and ergative subjects may prevent SRC formation due to difficulties in extracting an ergative argument outside of its clause. Thus, the subject relative clause advantage is not ubiquitous, but is (in part) dependent on particular grammatical features of individual languages.

In this paper we examine RC comprehension in Marathi, a split-ergative language from India. Crucially, Marathi has both accusative (NOM-ACC) alignment and ergative (ERG-ABS) alignment, and two relative clause formation strategies: a (more frequent) gapped RC and a (less frequent but more applicable) correlative construction (Damle, 1965; Pandharipande, 1997). We specifically

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focus on the gapped RC, as the more frequent, though limited, construction, and investigate if Marathi children show similar the now-familiar asymmetry in comprehension between SRCs and ORCs. As Marathi is a split ergative language, we test both the imperfective (NOM-ACC) and perfective (ERG-ABS) aspects, as well as a quirky-case phenomenon of stative verbs (DAT-NOM in both aspects). Our findings indicate that Marathi children do NOT show a subject-advantage, though do show better performance with stative verbs. We speculate that this may be due to less computation required in the RC formulation for stative verbs over eventive transitive verbs.

1. Background

Relative clauses, a type of filler-gap dependency, are widely studied in syntactic literature (Alexiadou *et al.*, 2000; de Vries, 2002; others) in part because they offer a unique opportunity to test theories of long-distance dependency processing. In a language like English with post-nominal RCs, a listener will hear an NP (the filler) in the matrix clause and then encounter the embedded clause in which there is a gap. Therefore, the listener must identify that there is a gap and correctly associate the filler with the gap and determine what role the NP plays in the subclause. For example, in (1) while the girl is the subject and theme of the matrix sentence, it is the object of the RC.

- (1) The girl who [the boy pushed ____] fell

Studies investigating the syntactic structures of RCs and their processing have most often compared RCs with a subject-gap (SRCs) illustrated in (2) and RCs with an object gap illustrated in (1).

- (2) The boy who [____ pushed the girl] fell

Keenan and Comrie's (1977) proposed Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy (3) aims to capture a cross-linguistic implicational relationship for the relativization of different constituents. They argue that positions higher in the hierarchy are more accessible to certain operations (e.g. relativization) than those lower in the hierarchy. Hawkins (1999) postulates that relativization of positions higher in the Accessibility Hierarchy are easier to process due to smaller filler gap dependencies. Indeed, we can see from the SRC and ORC examples from English that the distance between the filler and gap in (2), an SRC, is shorter than the filler-gap distance in (1), an ORC.

- (3) Subj > Direct Obj > Indirect Obj > Genitives > Obj of Comparison

In their review paper, Lau and Tanaka (2021) find that there is a cross-linguistic subject advantage in the acquisition and processing of relative clauses. Their survey finds a subject advantage for both comprehension and production in

over 35 languages, including English, Russian, Korean, Quechua, and Tagalog. There are some languages, that report either no difference or an object preference. Suzuki (2011) finds that Japanese children do comparatively better with ORCs than English children, which he attributes to facilitation from case marking. And Lakshmanan (2000) finds no difference in comprehension of SRCs and ORCs in Tamil, though Tamil children did produce more SRCs.

These differences may be due to the typological differences between languages like English and SOV languages like Japanese and Tamil. English, as described above has post-nominal RCs whereas SOV languages tend to have prenominal RCs. If we calculate filler-gap distance linearly, prenominal RCs show a much smaller difference between SRC and ORC filler-gap length. However, Hansen (1986) also found a subject advantage in the child comprehension of RCs in Hindi, an SOV language which might indicate that subject preference may not be solely determined by length of the dependency, but also some intrinsic feature that is somehow salient to children. In general, we see a strong tendency for subject preference in RC processing, though there are exceptions.

As such, the question our research aims to address is whether Marathi children, who speak a language that is similar to Hindi, and also Tamil and Japanese in a broader typological sense, show a similar subject preference in the comprehension of RCs as their Hindi counterparts. We also ask how do the aspectual alignment and case marking differences impact children's comprehension of SRCs vs. ORCs. In this study we examine SRC and ORC comprehension of gapped Marathi RCs across different aspects: Imperfective (NOM-ACC) vs. Perfective (ERG-ABS), and verb types: Eventive (NOM-ACC or ERG-ABS) vs. Stative (DAT-NOM). Before describing the details of our experiment, we turn to a description of the key grammatical structures in Marathi

2. Marathi

Marathi is a Southern Indic language, spoken in Western India. It has approximately 83 million first language (L1) speakers in India according to the 2011 census (Eberhard *et al.* 2020). Typologically an SOV language, Marathi has case marking and postpositions and does not have determiners. Verbs mark gender and number through affixation. Though it does not have a completely free word order like Sanskrit, word order is freer when case marking is present. Marathi is a null-argument language so omitted subjects and objects are commonplace. As with many SOV languages, Marathi has prenominal RCs in both the gapped and correlative constructions. We discuss only the specific features of Marathi grammar relevant to this study below.

2.1. Case and Verb Type

Marathi sentences either show accusative alignment or ergative alignment depending on the aspect (Wali, 2006). NOM-ACC alignment occurs in the

imperfect in which the nominative case is null-marked (4). In the perfective, Marathi shows ERG-ABS alignment with the agent marked with an overt ergative marker (5). Accusative and absolutive marking show syncretism and have specific rules based on the animacy of the object (Damle, 1965; Wali, 2006). In short, while accusative/absolutive marking is mandatory on human objects and optional on non-human animates (e.g. animals), it is prohibited on inanimate objects. For that reason, all of the stimuli used in our study were animals to allow for felicitous use of ACC/ABS marking when needed.

- (4) Bai mul-a-la uchəl-t-e
 Woman.NOM child-MASC-ACC lift-IPFV-FEM
 ‘The woman lifts the boy’
- (5) Bai-ni mul-a-la uchəl-l-ə
 Woman.FEM-ERG child-MASC-ABS lift-PFV-NEU
 ‘The woman lifted the boy’

In contrast to eventive transitive verbs, Marathi also has a small class of stative transitive verbs which take so-called ‘quirky’ case (DAT-NOM). This small but frequent group of stative verbs take dative subjects and nominative objects (Wali, 2004) regardless of aspect (6a, 6b)

- (6) a. Bai-la mulaga awad-t-o
 Woman-DAT boy.NOM like-IPFV-MASC
 ‘The woman likes the boy’
- b. Bai-la mulaga awad-l-a
 Woman-DAT boy.NOM like-PFV-MASC
 ‘The woman liked the boy’

2.2. Relative Clauses

Marathi has two distinct relativization strategies, a gapped RC similar to the English construction shown in example 1-2, as well as a correlative construction. Based on a corpus analysis of 1234 children’s stories¹ published between Jan 2013 – Jan 2022 in *Sakal Balmaifal*, a Marathi children’s magazine, while RCs were rare in general, gapped RCs occurred at a normalized frequency of 22 per 1000 clauses, whereas correlatives only occurred at a rate of 9 per 1000 clauses. As this study primarily concerns the gapped RC in Marathi, we briefly describe the

¹ As the authors do not have access to spoken Marathi child or children-directed corpora, we elected to simulate a corpus of Marathi child directed speech (CDS) through children’s stories as these are often read aloud. While we acknowledge that the distributions may not exactly reflect those of causal spoken CDS, this analysis does allow a more equitable comparison to determine how many RC constructions children might be exposed to.

correlative construction in section 2.2.1 before focusing on the gapped construction in 2.2.2. The correlative is described chiefly so that we can highlight the differences between the two strategies.

2.2.1. Correlatives

As Marathi is an SOV language, both relativization strategies use prenominal relative clauses. Unlike gapped RCs, correlative clauses have two distinct clauses with the ability to fully express all arguments in both. Liptak (2009) notes that correlatives may not have the same subordinating relationship that gapped RCs do due to lack of embedding, diagramming a correlative clause as two separate clauses with a coreference indicated via a resumptive pronoun (7).

(7) [_{correlative clause...} relative phrase...][_{main clause...}correlate...]

In Marathi, a correlative clause begins with a relative pronoun and uses either standard SOV or scrambled OSV order, depending on the type of relative clause, followed by the matrix sentence which has a resumptive pronoun as the head (8, 9)

(8) Zo mulaga mul-i-la dhakəl-t-o
REL.MASC boy.NOM child-FEM-ACC push-IPFV-MASC
to pəd-l-a
PRN.MASC fall-PFV-MASC
‘The boy who pushes the girl, he fell’

(9) Jya mul-i-la mulaga dhakəl-t-o
REL.NEU chil-FEM-ACC boy.NOM push-IPFV-MASC
ti pəd-l-i
PRN.FEM fall-PFV-FEM
‘The girl who the boy pushes, she fell’

Though the correlative construction is less frequently used, it is available for all combinations of RC type (SRC and ORC) for all verb types (eventive and stative) and aspects (imperfective and perfective) as there is no extraction required in the correlative.

2.2.2. Gapped RCs

In contrast to the correlative, the gapped RC pattern in Marathi is more frequent, but has more limitations. Unlike the correlative, the gapped RC uses either SVO or OVS order in the RC and has a gap in the subordinate clause that is filled by the head noun in the matrix clause (10), much like in English. There is

no overt relativizer therefore a listener may not know they are hearing an RC until they encounter the participial form on the verb inside the RC.

- (10) Mul-i-la dhakəɭ-nar-a mulaga pəd-l-a
 Child-FEM-ACC push-PTCP-MASC boy.NOM fall-PFV-MASC
 ‘The boy who pushes the girl fell’

There are two distinct participles used for the RC based on aspect. The participle *-nar* for the imperfective and the participle *-lel* for the perfective.

Because the gapped RC is formed using a filler-gap dependency, it requires argument extraction from its original position to the position it occupies in the matrix sentence. While this is possible for nominative arguments in Marathi, the non-canonical subjects resist extraction resulting in limited accessibility for the gapped RC pattern (Wali, 2004). Although Marathi is considered morphologically (rather than syntactically) ergative (Deo & Sharma, 2006), the language has been claimed to disallow gapped Subject RCs (SRCs) when the target of relativization is an ergative subject (Damle, 1965). Surprisingly, stative verb RCs seem to similarly disallow SRCs, where the target of relativization is a dative-marked experiencer subject (Damle, 1965). And, finally, it has been observed that ORCs with eventive verbs in the imperfective are unacceptable, arguably because nominative subjects are morphologically null-marked, resulting in two null marked NPs in the sentence, causing severe processing difficulty (Dhongde & Wali, 2009). Therefore, contrary to Keenan & Comrie’s hierarchy, this means that while ORCs are available for perfective eventive verbs and all stative verbs, SRCs are not possible (Dhongde & Wali, 2009; Pandharipande, 1997), and the imperfective eventive SRC is available but the ORC is not, resulting in more grammatical ORCs than SRCs in the gapped construction. Table 1 shows the grammaticality of the gapped RCs and an example sentence of each by verb and RC type.

Considering these restrictions, if Marathi children find SRCs easier to process, they are at a disadvantage with the gapped RC even though it is the more frequently used relativization strategy.

Table 1: Grammatical Gapped RCs in Marathi

Imperfective		
Eventive	Subject RC	
	[Bai-la dhakəl-nar-a]	manus
	Woman-ACC push-PTCP-MASC	man.NOM
“The man who pushes the woman”		
Stative		
	[Bai-la awad-nar-a]	manus
	Woman-DAT like-PTCP-MASC	man.NOM
“The man who the woman likes”		
Perfective		
Eventive		
	[Mans-a-ne dhakəl-ləl-i]	bai
	Man-MASC-ERG push-PTCP-FEM	woman.NOM
“The woman who the man pushed”		
Stative		
	[Bai-la awad-ləl-a]	manus
	Woman-DAT like-PTCP-MASC	man.NOM
“The man who the woman liked”		

3. Methodology

To test comprehension of RCs, we used a character selection in which Marathi children listened to gapped relative clause while being shown two images with 4 distinct characters. In one image character X was doing the action to character Y, whereas in the second image character Y was doing the action to character X, alternating agent/experiencer and patient/theme roles. Each character was labeled with a number, and children had to select which character was being indicated in the sentence. Children heard both types of RCs (subject and object) in both aspects (perfective and imperfective) and verb types (eventive and stative).

If children were to show greater ease in SRC comprehension, similar to cross linguistic tendencies, we expect better performance in the imperfective eventive SRC than any of the other conditions, as it is the only grammatical gapped SRC.

3.1. Participants

Thirty-seven Marathi children (age range 3;6-7;1 yrs; M= 5;4) participated in the study. All children were living in Pune, India and attended a primary school or daycare that had some Marathi instruction. We excluded four children as they either did not speak Marathi in the home (n=3) or did not perform well on the control items (n=1). Of the remaining children, 22 were female, resulting in an unequal gender distribution, though we do not expect gender to have any effect on performance.

The results reported below are of the remaining 33 participants. Data from ten Marathi-dominant adults and 15 older children (10-12-year-olds) also from Pune, India was collected as a baseline comparison.

3.2. Materials

We tested children on the four grammatical gapped RC conditions: (a) imperfective eventive SRC, (b) perfective eventive ORC, (c) imperfective stative ORC, and (d) perfective stative ORC. As we were only interested in the comprehension of the relative clause structure, the stimuli presented only the RC subclause rather than an entire sentence with a matrix clause. As a gapped RC can be used as an adjectival phrase to describe something, this was not an awkward usage and was completely intelligible in isolation. Additionally, it avoided issues of processing complications due to further reasoning required to comprehend the matrix clause and reduced difficulties in depiction for the picture selection task. Table 2 below shows an example of each condition.

Table 2. Sample items and conditions

Conditions	Sample Sentence		
IPFV Eventive SRC	Kawala-la Crow-ACC	mar-nar-i hit-PTCP-FEM	məgər crocodile.NOM 'The crocodile who hits the crow'
PFV Eventive ORC	Kawala-ni Crow-ERG	mar-lel-i hit-PTCP-FEM	məgər crocodile.NOM 'The crocodile who the crow hit'
IPFV Stative ORC	Kawala-la Crow-DAT	dis-nar-i see-PTCP-FEM	məgər crocodile.NOM 'The crocodile who the crow sees'
PFV Stative ORC	Kawala-la Crow-DAT	dis-lel-i see-PTCP-FEM	məgər crocodile.NOM 'The crocodile who the crow saw'

Target items used 4 different verbs in each condition, yielding 16 critical test items. Participant also saw control items with declarative sentences to ensure they could comprehend declarative sentences as well as filler items with intransitive and causative verbs in complex clauses. Two images with a total of four characters were presented with each audio item, featuring either named animal in both the agent/experiencer or patient/theme roles. Image order and position were counterbalanced to avoid order effects. Figure 1 shows an example of what each participant saw.

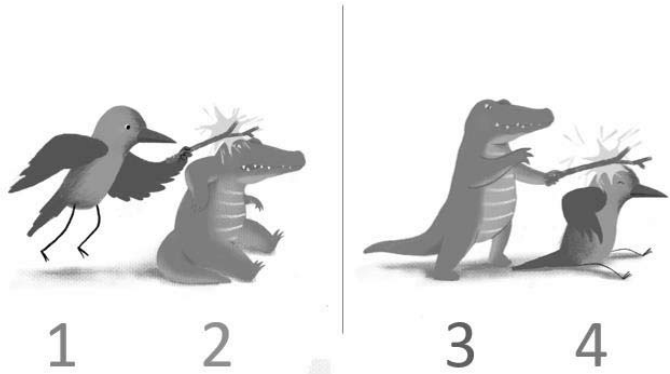


Figure 1. Character selection options seen with eventive sample items in Table 2

3.3. Procedure

As external baseline measures of child language proficiency (e.g. cloze test) are not available for Marathi, we followed the procedure in Reddy and Deen (2023) to gauge language ability of our participants by having children identify all the animals used in the experiment character selection display. In addition to a picture naming task, we also had a 3-item picture description task of declarative sentences with different verb types to assess grammatical knowledge.

For the main task, we used a character selection paradigm (as seen in Tanaka *et al.*, 2019) wherein participants were instructed to listen to a phrase and then select the character (one out of four) matching the interpretation. All stimuli were recorded by a native speaker, and each target utterance was solely the relative clause rather than a complete sentence with the matrix clause. Children were presented the sentences by a “puppet” character who was learning Marathi, allowing for felicitous use of the paradigm as the puppet did not know which character he might be describing. Children were asked to help the puppet by listening to the utterance and indicating which picture matched the sentence he produced.

4. Results

All analyses and visualization were produced using R (R Core Team, 2021). We see no discernable subject advantage, though children perform better overall in the stative verb conditions as compared to the eventive conditions.

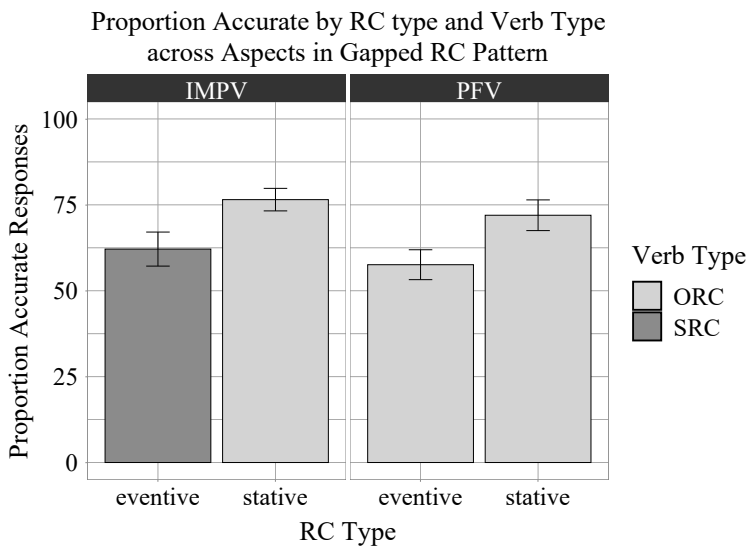


Figure 2. Mean percentage of accurate responses by condition and aspect. Error bars show SE.

Though not depicted in the graph, our baseline comparisons of Marathi-adults and older Marathi children are at ceiling as reported in Table 3.

Table 3. Mean accuracy results by age group and condition

Condition	Target Marathi children (age 3;6-7;1, 5;4)	Control Older children (age 10;2 – 12;5, M 11;6)	Control Marathi Adults
IPFV Eventive SRC	61.1%	100%	100%
IPFV Stative ORC	76.5%	100%	100%
PFV Eventive ORC	57.6%	98.2%	100%
PFV Stative ORC	71.9%	95.8%	100%

A further look at comprehension accuracy by aspect across age (Figure 3) does not shed light on what factors might influence comprehension. Children improve on the imperfective over time, consistent with developmental theory that children do better with the perfective than the imperfective at young ages (Shirai & Anderson, 1995; Wagner, 2001), however, accuracy in both aspects stays below 80% for the majority of participants. We do see a dip in the accuracy of the perfective at the highest end (age 7yrs) however, that is only based on modeling of one participant’s performance and should not be used for generalization.

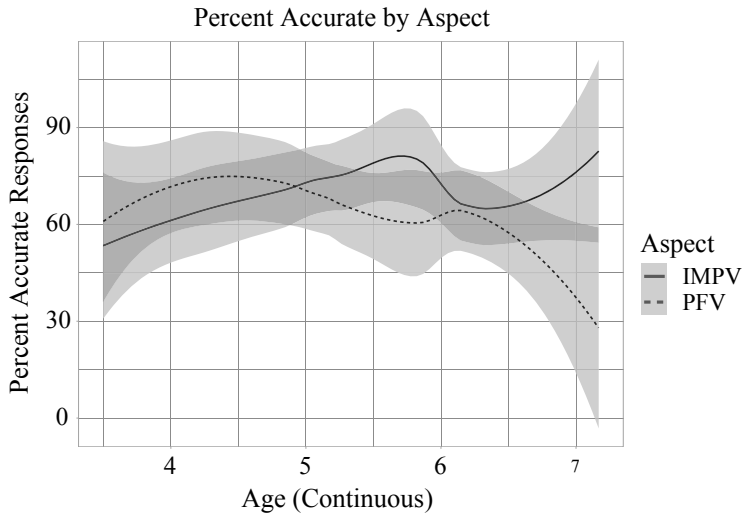


Figure 3. Mean percentage of accurate responses by aspect across age

In general, while we do not see a subject advantage, we do see something that resembles an eventive disadvantage, regardless of RC type or aspect.

5. Discussion

In this study, we investigated child comprehension of gapped RCs in Marathi. Though there is a cross-linguistic subject preference in the comprehension of RCs, the gapped construction only allows for one SRC due to the nature of non-canonical subjects, while there are three grammatical ORCs. Unlike Hindi findings by Hansen (1986), we do not see a subject advantage for Marathi children, nor do we see an object advantage. Instead, Marathi children performed significantly better in the stative verb conditions as compared to eventive verbs.

This eventive disadvantage may not be due to verb and case interaction. One potential explanation for the higher performance on the stative verb conditions is the role of the participle. Marathi has two participles used in the formation of the gapped RC, the imperfective participle *-nar*, and the perfective participle *-lel*. Because stative verbs only allow gapped ORCs, regardless of aspect, both participial constructions result in an object clause. Some of our fillers tested intransitive verbs, which by their nature of only having a subject, only allow for SRCs. Similarly, in that case, both participials are subject clauses for intransitive verbs. However, for our target eventive transitive verbs, due to the split-ergative nature of Marathi, the *-nar* participle is used with an SRC in the imperfective, and the *-lel* participle is used for ORCs in the perfective. Therefore, only eventives show an interaction between participle and role of the NP in the RC. This uniqueness of the eventive verbs pose a challenge for children, making them more challenging than stative or intransitive verbs. Analysis of the fillers shows

similarly higher rates of intransitive RC comprehension, lending support to this line of reasoning.

That being said, the results reported are still not at ceiling even for 6-7-year-olds. While RCs tend to be some of the later acquired syntactic phenomena, typically developing children often show adult-like understanding by age 6yrs (Friedmann & Novogrodsky, 2004; Özge *et al.*, 2009). However, there might be a few mitigating factors for Marathi children that lengthen the timeframe for acquisition. First is that there are two distinct strategies for relativization which differ in accessibility and frequency. Children have to acquire both and learn which conditions can grammatically form a gapped RC. Second, Marathi children, though Marathi dominant, are rarely monolingual. All children in this study, were regularly exposed to both English and Hindi in school and the community in addition to Marathi. These three languages all have different relativization patterns, and while Hindi has both gapped RCs and correlatives, the formulation and conditions are different from Marathi. Therefore, Marathi children have to both determine the relativization strategies of Marathi, and keep them distinct from the other languages they are regularly exposed to. This might in part explain why Marathi children aged 6-7yrs still show lower than adult-like accuracy in RC comprehension. Our results from the older control group show that children do reach ceiling performance by age 10-12yrs.

Regardless, our study indicates that Marathi children do not show a subject preference in RC comprehension, though there seems to be an eventive disadvantage. We believe that this disadvantage is due to increased processing cost in the comprehension of eventives because of an interaction with the aspectual participles. Our conclusion is that children are able to process both SRCs and ORCs with equal ability comprehend the four grammatical conditions of gapped Marathi RCs, thus providing a rare exception to the widely attested subject advantage in relative clauses.

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