Object (Clitic) Omission in L2 French: Mis-setting or Missing Surface Inflection?

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1. Introduction

The acquisition of object clitic constructions in French, illustrated in (1a), has been the topic of a number of L2 studies, whose convergent finding has been that the productive use of object clitics sets in considerably later in L2 development than that of other functional categories, such as subject clitics or determiners (Adiv, 1984; White, 1996; Herschensohn 2004). Many of these studies have focused primarily on the placement of the clitic within the clause (White, 1996; Duffield, White, Bruhn de Garavito, Montrul & Prévost, 2002; Granfeldt & Schlyter, 2004), an interesting topic since object clitics are barred from appearing in the canonical object position (1c) and must be placed preceding the finite verb (1a). However, more recent studies have shown that the most frequent error involving object clitics does not concern their placement—placement errors are typically rare—but their omission. Examples of this error type are shown in (2). Table 1 presents a summary of omission rates found in the studies of Paradis (2004) and Grüter (2005), both involving 6– and 7–year-old anglophone learners of Quebec French in Montreal, and in that of Herschensohn (2004), who presents data from two teenaged learners of (European) French in the U.S. For all of these groups, omission rates are substantial, varying from 35% to 54%.

(1) a. Annie lave la.
   Annie cl-[3sg-fem] wash-[3sg] ‘Annie is washing her.’
   b. Annie lave la poupée.
   Annie wash-[3sg] the doll ‘Annie is washing the doll.’
   c. *Annie lave la.

(2) a. *J’ai encore fait trop grand.
   ‘I have made (IT) too big again.’ (White, 1996)
   b. *T’as placé sur le lit.
   ‘You have placed (THEM) on the bed.’ (Herschensohn, 2004)
   c. *Je vas donner au miss.
   ‘I will give (IT) to the teacher.’ (Paradis, 2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>age</th>
<th>L1</th>
<th>% omission</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paradis (2004)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Ø 6;8</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>~40% of pronominalization contexts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(estimated from her Figures 1 and 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grüter (2005)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Ø 6;8</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herschensohn (2004)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16-17</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(9/26 relevant contexts)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The question that immediately arises from these facts concerns the underlying representation of utterances such as those in (2), that is, utterances with a missing or null object (clitic). Two logically possible but fundamentally different positions will be considered here. The first, which I will call Hypothesis I, is that learners assume (at some point in development) that French is a null object language, similar to Chinese (Huang, 1984) or Portuguese (Raposo, 1986). This would constitute a case of ‘parameter’ mis-setting, a developmental scenario that has often been proposed in the context of other grammatical phenomena, such as null subjects (e.g., Hyams, 1986 for L1, White, 1985 for L2). The second possible position, call it Hypothesis II, would be to assume that L2 learners’ underlying representations of utterances missing an object (clitic) are target-like, that is, they include the correct syntactic clitic structure. However, the clitic is not phonetically realized, which would constitute an instance of missing surface inflection in the sense of the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (MSIH, Haznedar & Schwartz, 1997; Prévost & White 2000a, b). These two hypotheses and the predictions arising from them will be discussed in some detail in section 2. In section 3, I will present experimental data from elicited production and from a novel truth value judgment task that bear directly on the predictions of these hypotheses. Based on the data from the truth value judgment task, I will argue that Hypothesis I, ‘parameter’ mis-setting, cannot be maintained, while an account in terms of the MSIH (Hypothesis II) is able to capture the full array of results.

2. Hypotheses and Predictions

2.1 Hypothesis I: ‘Parameter’ Mis-setting

The hypothesis that L2 learners of French go through a stage where they (erroneously) assume that French allows null objects was originally proposed by Towell & Hawkins (1994, p.137): “one possibility is that learners initially hypothesise, on the basis of the absence of phonetically specified pronouns in this [=the post-verbal, T.G.] position, that French has object pro. Null objects are permissible within UG, and languages vary parametrically as to whether V0 licenses object pro or does not license object pro.” In fact, the learner will find plenty of evidence for this hypothesis in the input: in typical clitic constructions such as (1a), which are frequent in both spoken and written French, the canonical, post-verbal object position is indeed empty. Based on this evidence, it might be tempting for the learner to conclude that French allows null objects. However, the real generalization the learner needs to make about French is the following: a ‘null object’, i.e., an empty postverbal object position, is allowed if and only if there is a clitic in preverbal position. In other words, the learner must establish a biconditional relation between a property P, ‘null objects are allowed’, and a property Q, ‘there is a clitic in preverbal position’, i.e., P ↔ Q. Note, moreover, that the two properties the learner needs to associate relate to two non-adjacent positions/elements in the clause. If the learner is guided by the input alone, this is no easy task. It would therefore not be surprising to find a dissociation between P and Q in acquisition, that is, a learner may acquire P before Q, or vice versa. Hypothesis I presents precisely such a scenario, namely one where the learner has acquired P (‘null objects are allowed’), but not its biconditional relation to Q (‘iff there is a clitic in preverbal position’).

Hypothesis I leads to a straightforward prediction with regard to L2 learners’ performance on a receptive task. Given that learners who produce null objects are assumed to do so based on an underlying UG-convergent representation for null objects (analogous to native speakers of Chinese or Portuguese), these learners are expected to accept null objects on a receptive task by relying on this same representation, which must be available to them in comprehension as well. This prediction has not been tested to date. In section 3, I will present relevant evidence from a truth value judgment task.

1 To speak of a ‘null object parameter’, however, cannot be but a descriptive generalization, given the numerous well-attested differences between the various languages allowing null objects (see e.g., Cole, 1987; Farrell, 1990, inter alia).

2 For syntactic analyses of object clitic constructions, a continuously debated issue, see e.g., Belletti (1999), Roberge (1990), or Sportiche (1996). The choice of analysis does not affect the present study.

3 See Müller, Crysmann & Kaiser (1996), Hamann (2003), and Jakubowicz & Nash (to appear) for similar proposals in the context of L1 acquisition.
It seems, however, that Hypothesis I will lead to a learnability problem, which can be seen in terms of the classic subset-superset problem: the conditions under which \( P \leftrightarrow Q \) are true will always necessarily be a proper subset of the conditions under which \( P \) is true. Thus once a learner has posited a UG-convergent null object representation (i.e., \( P \)), there is no positive evidence in the input that could force him to abandon this representation in favour of the more restrictive (subset) \( P \leftrightarrow Q \). In consequence, the null object representation initially posited (\( P \)) should never be fully eliminated from the learner’s L2 grammar. This implies that null objects will coexist with target-like clitic constructions in the L2 grammar even at the most advanced stages of L2 acquisition. The predictions of such a scenario for language production are hard to determine, as an advanced learner might have a strong preference for the clitic construction over null objects. However, the prediction for a receptive task is clear: if a null object representation continues to be sanctioned by the grammar even of advanced L2 learners, null objects should continue to be accepted on a receptive task, even if the learner no longer produces them. In sum, the prediction of Hypothesis I is that L2 learners of French should accept null objects on a receptive task, even after clitics become productive and null objects disappear from their speech.

2.2 Hypothesis II: Missing Surface Inflection

An approach to missing object clitics in L2 French in terms of the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (MSIH) was proposed by Herschensohn (2004, p. 218): “the clitic is not realized (…), it is null. I attribute this lack to the idea of missing inflection (Lardiere, 1998) in that the learners are not able to produce the clitic consistently at this point, just as L2 speakers produce non-finite forms in place of finite verbs.” This proposal builds on the assumption that L2 learners are able to acquire the target structures and conditions for preverbal clitics and empty postverbal object positions. As pointed out above, however, it is questionable whether this is possible based on the input alone. Thus it seems that a further assumption is required, namely that the L2 learner is constrained in her hypothesis space by the variation allowed within Universal Grammar (White, 2003), a hypothesis also known as ‘Full Access’ (e.g., Schwartz & Sprouse, 1994). This entails that if we find empirical support for Hypothesis II, it will also lend indirect support to the more general hypothesis that second language acquisition is constrained by UG.

The predictions of the MSIH with regard to receptive tasks have remained somewhat unclear, as pointed out by White (in press):

As for the MSIH, predictions are less clear. Conceivably, mapping or access problems might be expected regardless of task. On the other hand, such problems might be greater in production than in comprehension, for the following reason. When speaking, the learner must construct a syntactic representation and insert appropriately inflected forms. When listening, the situation is slightly different: the learner hears an inflected form and has to construct a representation appropriate for that form. It is conceivable that the former is harder than the latter, in which case performance in production should be depressed relative to other tasks.

Thus, White suggests that the minimal prediction of the MSIH is that comprehension should be somewhat better than production. This prediction is difficult to test since a comparison between performance in production and comprehension will always involve a comparison between two different tasks, and thus different dependent variables. It seems to me, however, that a stronger prediction can be derived from White’s discussion. As White points out, there is a crucial difference between speaking and listening when it comes to inflection: the speaker must choose the correct form of the inflection from a paradigm, whereas the listener does not need to make a choice, since he hears, i.e., is given, the (correct) form. If we assume that the problem underlying missing surface inflection

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4 In Grütter (2006b) I argue that this learnability problem is detrimental to the ‘parameter’ mis-setting hypothesis on null objects in the L1 acquisition of French (see also note 3).
lies at precisely this point, namely in choosing the correct form from a paradigm, this leads to the prediction that comprehension should be entirely unaffected.

To flesh out this proposal, I will adopt a model of the grammar as assumed in Distributed Morphology (Halle & Marantz, 1993, 1994). Within this model, functional heads are characterized only by features or features bundles, rather than fully specified lexical items, during the course of the narrow syntax, that is, until the derivation enters the morphological component (MS). At this point, the process of Vocabulary Insertion (VI) applies, by which the feature bundle on the syntactic head is compared against the list of items in the relevant Vocabulary Entry. The item chosen for insertion will be the one whose features constitute the largest proper subset of those on the syntactic head (see Halle & Marantz, 1993 for further detail).

Consider now the consequence of the suggestion made above, namely that missing surface inflection is the result of a problem at the point of Vocabulary Insertion. For the derivation to pass the PF interface, the functional head must receive a phonological representation, that is, it must be assigned a vocabulary item. If Vocabulary Insertion does not function properly – for reasons that are open to further investigation (see Grüter, in progress) – it is reasonable to assume that what will end up being chosen for insertion is the default, or least specified, item in the Vocabulary Entry. In the case of French object clitics, I have argued elsewhere (Grüter, 2006a, in progress) that the default item must be the zero morpheme. Thus the interpretation of the MSIH outlined here makes the correct prediction for language production, namely that the clitic will be spelled out by the zero morpheme, which will appear as an utterance with no overt object, as in (2).

Under this scenario, the learner’s grammar does not sanction a null object representation. What appear to be null objects in production are in fact null clitics, which are the result of a problem with Vocabulary Insertion, a process that does not apply in this form in a receptive task. In consequence, the learner has no grounds on which to accept utterances with a null object in a receptive task, and thus the prediction of Hypothesis II is that L2 learners of French will reject null objects on such a task.

3. The Experiment

It is important to note that Hypotheses I and II are both descriptively adequate when it comes to accounting for null objects in production. As shown in the previous section, however, their predictions differ when it comes to a receptive task. While Hypothesis I predicts acceptance of null objects on such a task, Hypothesis II predicts rejection. Yet evidence from receptive tasks has not been available until now. The experiment presented here was designed to obtain precisely such data.

3.1 Participants

Nine school-aged children (mean age 7;7, range 7;0–8;8) participated in this study. All of them reside in the Montreal area, are native speakers of English, and attend French-language schools (either immersion, core French or bilingual programs). According to parental report, none of these children had had regular exposure to French before entering kindergarten, with English being the only language spoken in the home. Their length of exposure to French thus varies between two and three years.

3.2 Method and Procedure

Participants took part in two tasks, administered by a francophone research assistant in one videotaped session of approximately 30 minutes at the child’s home. Children and parents were recompensed for their time.

3.2.1 Task 1: Elicited Production

The aim of this task was to elicit object clitics. Participants were presented with a picture story which was constructed so as to contain a number of object pronominalization contexts, i.e., contexts where a question asked by the experimenter required a response containing an object clitic. An
example is given in Figure 1. Responses were transcribed by the experimenter, and checked by a second native speaker. Disputed cases were excluded from the analysis.

question: Que fait Caillou à Dora?
(‘What is Caillou doing to Dora’)
expected answer: Il la pousse dans l’eau.
(‘He is pushing her into the water.’)

**Figure 1. Example of an object pronominalization context in the elicited production task**

### 3.2.2 Task 2: Truth Value Judgments

The aim of this task was to investigate whether learners accept null objects. For this purpose, the following optionally transitive verbs were used: *plonger* (intr. ‘to dive’, tr. ‘to plunge’), *sortir* (intr. ‘to come out’, tr. ‘to move (sth) out’), *monter* (intr. ‘to climb up’, tr. ‘to move (sth) up’), and *descendre* (intr. ‘to climb down’, tr. ‘to lower’). Using these verbs, it is possible to create sentences that differ minimally by the presence or absence of an object, as illustrated in (3). The crucial experimental condition, the **NULL OBJECT CONDITION**, consists of an utterance without an (overt) object (3a) coupled with a picture illustrating the transitive use of the verb (Figure 2).

(3) a. Dora monte sur le rocher.
   ‘Dora is climbing up onto the rock.’

   b. Dora monte le sac sur le rocher.
   ‘Dora is pulling the bag up onto the rock.’
   (NB: (3b) does not entail that Dora is climbing up herself.)

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5 For a more detailed rationale and description of this task, see Grüter (in progress).
These utterances were presented to the child by a puppet. After describing a preceding picture showing the agent (here: Dora) performing another action on the object (here: the bag), the puppet would offer a description of the experimental picture (Figure 2). The learner’s task was to indicate whether this description was true (by feeding the puppet a cucumber), or not (by feeding him a lemon). For example, in the **NULL OBJECT CONDITION**, the puppet’s description of Figure 2 would be the utterance in (3a). In a grammar that disallows null objects (including adult French), this utterance is false. However, if the learner’s grammar sanctions null objects, the utterance is expected to be judged true.

In addition to simple clause utterances such as those in (3), the experiment also contained potential null objects in an embedded clause, illustrated by the utterance in (4) and the picture in Figure 3. The potential null object in this clause would have to be coreferential with the matrix subject in order for the utterance to be a true description of the picture. However, under a topic-drop analysis of null objects, such as that of Huang (1984) for Chinese, such coreference is ruled out (as it incurs a strong crossover violation). Thus if learners’ grammars sanction a Chinese-type representation of null objects, these utterances should be judged false, in contrast to the simple clause utterances shown above.

(4) Le chien jappe quand Dora monte (Ø?) sur le rocher.  
‘The dog barks when Dora climbs/(pulls him?) up onto the rock.’

Four different control conditions were included in the experiment, all of which are described in Table 2. The task consisted of a block of 20 simple clause items (four in each condition), and 10 embedded clause items (four in the **NULL OBJECT CONDITION**, one or two in each control condition).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>expected judgment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>NULL OBJECT</strong></td>
<td>picture: Dora pulling bag up with a rope.</td>
<td>Hyp. I: true</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>utterance: ‘Dora monte sur le rocher.’</td>
<td>Hyp. II: false</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CLITIC</strong></td>
<td>picture: Dora pulling bag up with a rope.</td>
<td>True</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>utterance: ‘Dora le monte sur le rocher.’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INTRANSITIVE</strong></td>
<td>picture: Dora climbing up. (bag remains on ground)</td>
<td>True</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>utterance: ‘Dora monte sur le rocher.’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SUPERFLUOUS CLITIC</strong></td>
<td>picture: Dora climbing up. (bag remains on ground)</td>
<td>False</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>utterance: ‘Dora le monte sur le rocher.’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SUPERFLUOUS DP</strong></td>
<td>picture: Dora climbing up. (bag remains on ground)</td>
<td>False</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>utterance: ‘Dora monte le sac sur le rocher.’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Summary of experimental conditions

3.3 Results
3.3.1 Elicited Production

The results from the elicited production task are presented in Table 3. An average omission rate of 31% was observed, yet individual variation was substantial (range: 0–100%). Note also that five learners produced no clitics at all (=subgroup 1), while the other four used them at rates of 62% and above (=subgroup 2).
3.3.2 Truth Value Judgments

The results from the truth value judgment task are presented in Table 4. Percentages of expected responses are given for subgroups 1 and 2 separately. Those learners who produced clitics in the elicitation task (=subgroup 2) performed with accuracy rates of 79% and above in all four control conditions. Crucially, they rejected null objects at a rate of 81%, indicating that their grammars do not sanction null objects. Interestingly, rejection rates were lower for null objects in embedded clauses (69%) than for those in simple clauses (94%). While the source of this difference remains unclear, this finding is exactly opposite to what one would expect if learners adopted a Chinese–type representation of null objects (see above).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>subgroup 1 (n=5; no clitics in prod.)</th>
<th>subgroup 2 (n=4; clitics in prod.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NULL OBJECT</td>
<td>80% rejection (simple cl.: 90%, embed. cl.: 70%)</td>
<td>81% rejection (simple cl.: 94%, embed. cl.: 69%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLITIC</td>
<td>52% acceptance</td>
<td>95% acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRANSITIVE</td>
<td>100% acceptance</td>
<td>95% acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUPERFLUOUS CLITIC</td>
<td>23% rejection</td>
<td>79% rejection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUPERFLUOUS DP</td>
<td>83% rejection</td>
<td>100% rejection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Results form truth value judgments

Subgroup 1, the learners who did not produce any clitics in the elicitation task, did not perform well in all control conditions. In particular, they performed poorly when the utterance to be judged contained a clitic: they rejected utterances with a superfluous clitic only 23% of the time, and they failed to accept utterances with a correct clitic 48% of the time. A potential explanation for this pattern might be that these learners have not acquired any knowledge of clitics (yet), and therefore simply ignore them in the input. Indeed, ignoring the clitic in the CLITIC CONDITION makes the utterance false, while in the SUPERFLUOUS CLITIC CONDITION, it makes it true. However, if this were what subgroup 1 was doing, we would expect them to show no difference between the SUPERFLUOUS CLITIC and the INTRANSITIVE CONDITION on the one hand, and the CLITIC versus the NULL OBJECT CONDITION on the other. In both cases, the only difference between the two conditions is the presence or absence of a clitic in the utterance to be judged (see Table 2). Yet when the performance of subgroup 1 on these conditions is compared, we find considerable differences: 23% rejection of superfluous clitics vs. 0% rejection of intransitives, and 52% acceptance of clitics vs. 20% acceptance of null objects. This indicates that the presence of a clitic does make a difference to this group’s performance, implying that

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6 These results are very similar to those from a group of 4-year-old monolingual French children who completed the same task. See Grüter (2006a, in progress) for further detail.
they have acquired at least some knowledge of object clitics. However, this knowledge may be incomplete or not applied consistently. Crucially, however, this less advanced subgroup rejected null objects at an equally high rate (80%) as their more advanced peers in subgroup 2, suggesting that their grammars do not sanction a null object representation either.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The results presented in the previous section show that neither learners who produce object clitics in their speech, nor those who do not, are willing to accept null objects on a receptive task. Learners in both subgroups rejected items in the NULL OBJECT CONDITION at rates around 80%. This finding constitutes counterevidence to Hypothesis I (‘parameter’ mis-setting), which predicted acceptance of such items. Moreover, if learners adopted a Chinese-type analysis of null objects, we would expect an asymmetry between acceptance rates in simple versus embedded clauses, with acceptance in the former and rejection in the latter. A small asymmetry was indeed found in both subgroups, yet precisely in the opposite direction, making a Chinese-type representation unlikely. Thus it appears that object (clitic) omissions observed consistently in the speech of second language learners of French are not due to an underlying null object representation in their L2 grammars. The findings of the present study are in accordance with the predictions of Hypothesis II (missing surface inflection). It seems that L2 learners’ problems with the overt realization of object clitics is limited to the domain of language production. An account in the spirit of the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis, as outlined in 2.2 above, thus appears to be superior. Whether the source of the problem lies indeed in the process of Vocabulary Insertion, as suggested here, and if yes, what causes this problem, will have to remain for future work to explore.

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