EDITORIAL:
THE L1 ACQUISITION OF DIFFERENTIAL OBJECT MARKING

LARISA AVRAM


DOM has been extensively studied in L2 learning and heritage speakers research (Guijarro-Fuentes 2011, 2012, Guijarro-Fuentes and Marinis 2007, 2009, Montrul 2004, 2011, 2014, Montrul and Bowles 2008, 2009, Montrul and Sánchez-Walker 2013), as well as in early bilingualism studies (Ticio 2015), but the topic has not received equal attention in the domain of L1 acquisition (see, however, Rodríguez-Mondoño’s 2008 paper on DOM in child L1 Spanish). With few exceptions (Bohnacker and Mohammadi 2012, Ciovânache and Avram 2013, Avram et al. 2014, forthcoming, Montrul et al. 2015) the available studies focus on DOM in Spanish. The goal of this special issue is to fill in this gap by offering a cross-linguistic picture of the L1 acquisition of DOM.

DOM refers to the phenomenon whereby only a subset of direct objects are differentially case marked. This definition has been a matter of some dispute in the literature. One of the disagreements regards the association of DOM exclusively with overt case marking. This taps into the issue of whether DOM is a parameter which distinguishes between DOM and non-DOM languages (Bossong 1985, 1991, 1998, Aissen 2003) or whether it is a universal phenomenon (Torrego 1998, Carnie 2005, Rodríguez-Mondoño 2007, 2008). According to the universal approach every language evinces a form of object split, reflected either in the morphological marking of the object or in its occurrence in a designated syntactic position. From the perspective of language acquisition, one plausible prediction of this approach is that DOM should be acquired early. The child would have to

1 The name of the workshop was inspired from the title of the talk ‘Variation in Differential Object Marking” by von Heusinger et al. (2008).
2 I would like to thank Wolfgang Dressler, the coordinator of the “Crosslinguistic Project on Pre- and Protomorphology in Language Acquisition”, at the University of Vienna, for his constant support and guidance throughout our small DOM project. I also thank all the reviewers of the contributions to this issue for their comments and suggestions. I am grateful to the contributors for participating in the symposium “Variation in the acquisition of differential object marking” and for writing up their papers for this special issue. A big thank you goes to Sigal and Nihan, for their positive attitude and constant support all along.

RRL, LX, 4, p. 331–338, București, 2015
identify only how the split is marked in the target language. This prediction is indeed borne out by the data reported in the only previously published study on the L1 acquisition of DOM. Rodríguez-Mondoñedo (2008) investigates the early use of the differential marker a by six monolingual Spanish children (age range 0;9–3;0). His analysis, which relies on longitudinal data, reveals that “children master Spanish DOM virtually without mistake” before age 3;0.

Languages, however, differ with respect to the conditions which constrain their DOM systems as well as with respect to type of marking. One standard assumption is that the semantic properties of the noun phrase which appears as a direct object in the sentence are an important DOM trigger. Features such as animacy, definiteness and specificity have been argued to constrain DOM systems (Aissen 2003). Which and how many of these semantic features trigger the differential marking of objects is subject to language variation. Other studies propose that the variation of DOM systems is better accounted for in terms of the information status of direct objects. Topicality, in particular, has been argued to determine object marking (see lemmolo 2010 and references therein). The semantic features of the predicate, such as affectedness (Naess 2004, von Heusinger and Kaiser 2011) and telicity (Torrego 1998) also interfere in differential case alternations. Some DOM systems are constrained both by the semantic features of the object noun phrase and by the semantic properties of the verb phrase. Mood and negation, i.e. clausal properties, have also been shown to affect DOM (see, e.g., the paper by Argus in this issue). In terms of type of marking, some languages will use adpositions, others case inflection and still others agreement markers. Languages can have symmetric and asymmetric DOM systems. Marking can be obligatory or optional. Such data show that how the object split is marked is subject to important cross-linguistic variation. It is therefore not implausible to assume that variation in DOM systems might be reflected in variation in the acquisition path.

The results reported for the L1 acquisition of DOM by Rodríguez-Mondoñedo (2008) convincingly show that the use of the Spanish marker a is mastered surprisingly early. But given the differences among DOM systems, the results might not be (fully) corroborated by acquisition data coming from other languages. A cross-linguistic investigation is the only one which can offer an empirical background allowing the identification of the role of universal features and language-specific properties in the acquisition of DOM.

The papers presented in this special issue provide a generous empirical picture of the acquisition path of DOM in L1. They investigate acquisition data from languages in which objects are overtly marked, but whose DOM systems differ with respect to: (i) the relevant semantic feature(s) of the object noun phrase (e.g. animacy in Croatian and Russian, definiteness in Hebrew and Lithuanian, specificity in Turkish, both animacy and specificity in Romanian and Spanish); (ii) the morpho-syntactic means of marking the object (case inflection in Russian, Croatian and Lithuanian, or a “fake” preposition in Spanish and Romanian); (iii) whether DOM is constrained by semantic properties of the object alone or compositionally by the verb and its direct object, or by the mood or polarity of the clause. In Estonian, for example, both the definiteness of the direct object and the telicity of the predicate play an important part in case marking, but polarity and mood are also relevant. This empirical diversity, we hope, can shed light on whether the DOM acquisition path is the same across languages, irrespective of the nature and of the number of triggering factors. The findings are strikingly uniform. All the papers which use corpora of
spontaneous child-adult interactions report early emergence and early target-like production of DOM, with a very low number of errors, in support of Rodríguez-Mondoñedo’s (2008) findings.

**Sigal Uziel-Karl** investigates the acquisition route of DOM in L1 Hebrew in naturalistic speech samples of three Hebrew-speaking girls (age range 1;5–3;0). In Hebrew, the triggering factor is definiteness. Object case-marking is obligatory with definite direct objects. The author addresses two main questions: (i) do the data from child Hebrew corroborate the findings reported for L1 Spanish?; (ii) to what extent does the development of DOM in child Hebrew reflect Aissen’s definiteness scale from the onset of acquisition? The results are similar to those reported for L1 Spanish by Rodríguez-Mondoñedo (2008). The three girls begin to differentially mark objects very early (1;5–1;8) and marking is practically errorless. With respect to the order in which marking is attested in relation to the various definite noun phrase types, in two of the corpora case marking applies exclusively to pronouns for a period of several months and is then extended to definite noun phrases and proper names. In one corpus, case-marking of both definite pronouns and proper names precedes the case-marking of definite noun phrases. The author concludes that the order of emergence of DOM follows the definiteness hierarchy proposed by Aissen (2003).

**Gordana Hržica, Marijan Palmović, Melita Kovačević, Maria Voeikova, Kira Ivanova, and Elena Galkina** explore the acquisition of DOM in Croatian and Russian. In both these languages, DOM is determined by animacy: animate masculine direct objects are assigned genitive case (homophonous with the accusative), whereas inanimate masculine direct objects are assigned accusative case (homophonous with the nominative). The only difference is that in Russian, nouns of all genders are differentially case marked in the plural, whereas in Croatian DOM is restricted to singular masculine nouns. The central question addressed in this study is whether animacy determines case marking from the onset of acquisition. The data come from three longitudinal corpora of child Croatian (age range 0;10–3;2) and two of child Russian (age range 1;5–4;1). The findings clearly indicate very early emergence of DOM (Croatian: 1;6–1;10, Russian 1;9–1;10) and a low overall error rate. Case marking is constrained by animacy at all stages. The error pattern, however, seems to be somewhat different. The Croatian children mark inanimate masculine nouns as if they were animate. Similar errors are attested in Croatian child directed speech (CDS). The main error type in child Russian goes in the opposite direction: animate nouns are marked as if they were inanimate. Inanimate nouns marked as if they were animate are also attested, but they are extremely rare in child speech and absent in the Russian CDS. Such errors are, however, found with pronouns both in child speech and in CDS. Given the individual variation with respect to error type and error rate in both the Russian and the Croatian corpora, it would not be surprising to find out, on the basis of data coming from larger corpora, that actually both error types occur in the two languages, i.e. that similar DOM systems are reflected in a similar acquisition route.

**Ineta Dabašinskienė** analyzes the early use of DOM in L1 Lithuanian in the spontaneous speech of two monolingual Lithuanian children (age range 1;7–2;6). The DOM system of this language is constrained by the semantics of the object noun phrase (objects are assigned accusative case when denoting a definite quantity and the partitive genitive case when they are quantitatively indefinite) and by polarity at clause level (in negative clauses the object must be assigned genitive case irrespective of whether it is definite or indefinite). The two children begin to mark direct objects with the correct
accusative or genitive case very early (1;9–1;10); the error rate during the observed period is very low at all stages. The analysis of the attested errors reveals a slight delay in the acquisition of case marking in relation to polarity. In negative sentences, children occasionally incorrectly use the accusative instead of the required genitive, which suggests that clause level DOM triggers are acquired after the triggers at the level of the noun phrase. One should however mention that the errors are far from numerous and disappear by the end of the period investigated. The analysis of CDS reveals that there is no correlation between frequency in the input and early case marking, since the child whose mother uses the higher number of genitive marked objects in negative clauses is the one who erroneously uses the accusative in negative contexts more frequently.

The paper by Emma Ticio and Larisa Avram explores the acquisition of DOM in Spanish and Romanian. The most important triggers in these languages are animacy and specificity but there are important differences in the way in which the two semantic features are implemented. The two related questions which the paper addresses are whether the acquisition path follows the animacy and the specificity scales and whether it is constrained by the underlying feature of each scale at all stages. The longitudinal data coming from six corpora (three for each language, age range 1;1–2;5 for Spanish and 1;5–3;1 for Romanian) reveal very early emergence and high rate of correct marking in both languages. Variation with respect to feature implementation in the DOM system of the target-language is reflected in variation in early marking strategy. With respect to animacy, child Spanish is stricter: DOM is used (almost) exclusively with animate objects. With respect to referential stability, child Romanian is the stricter of the two: DOM is used (almost) exclusively with referentially stable objects. Animacy effects are transparent in the child’s DOM system in both languages at all stages and DOM is constrained by referential stability from the very early stages. But the acquisition path does not follow the strict ordering predicted by the animacy or the referentiality scale. Building on these results the authors argue that semantic hierarchies are not spontaneously manifested in child speech. The true semantic universal is the underlying feature of each scale while the scales themselves only capture general tendencies.

Reilli Argus investigates the acquisition of DOM in L1 Estonian, a language whose symmetric DOM system is constrained by telicity of the verb phrase, definiteness (or boundedness) of the direct object, as well as the mood and the polarity of the clause. The data show that, in spite of the complexity of the triggering factors, object case marking is acquired early. The two Estonian children (age range 1;3–2;4) whose DOM production is analysed in the study correctly associate telicity with total case marking and atelicity with partitive case marking at a very early age. No telic predicates with unbounded object noun phrases are found in the two longitudinal corpora, indicating an early association between the +/− telicity of the verb phrase and the +/− boundedness of the direct object. The author argues that initially children operate with two prototypical categories: atelic situations with object noun phrases which express unspecified amount and telic situations only with noun phrases which express specified amount. An interesting finding targets the time lag between the acquisition of case marking constrained by the semantics of the predicate and of the object noun phrase, on the one hand, and the acquisition of case marking constrained by properties of the clause, polarity and mood, on the other hand. Though both children generally use total object marking correctly in both affirmative and negative clauses and in both indicative and imperative clauses, case marking alternations in such contexts become
productive slightly later. Though the longitudinal data indicate early emergence and early
target-like use of DOM in child Estonian, the author waves a warning flag. The production
data reported in this study differ from those coming from previous experimental studies,
which show that Estonian children have problems producing and comprehending marked
object constructions even at age 6;0.

A similar asymmetry between the results of experimental studies and those of the
analysis of spontaneous speech is discussed in F. Nihan Ketrez’s paper on the acquisition
of DOM in L1 Turkish. This is the only paper in this issue which investigates the
comprehension of DOM on the basis of experimental data. The responses in a
grammaticality judgment task reveal that 4;0–6;0 year old monolingual Turkish children
cannot differentiate accusative-marked and non-case-marked indefinite objects in terms of
their scope-taking properties. The author argues that the acquisition of DOM in L1 Turkish
is incomplete even at age 6;0. At first sight, the results are surprising, given the fact that
previous studies which investigated case marking in L1 Turkish on the basis of longitudinal
data report early emergence and practically errorless use of accusative-marked objects
(Ketrez 1999, Ketrez and Aksu-Koç 2009). But early use (in spontaneous speech) is
restricted to definite DPs, in spite of the fact that in Turkish DOM is constrained by
specificity, i.e. children do not mark specific indefinites. The author suggests that the
reason for which children have problems understanding the scope properties of marked
indefinite objects might be their early inability of coping with the displacement of objects
outside the verb phrase. She does not exclude that this comprehension problem might also
reflect the infrequent use of marked indefinites in CDS.

The papers collected in this issue offer only a first glimpse of some issues related to
the L1 acquisition of DOM, leaving several problems unmentioned. We hope, however,
that they provide a unitary picture of early DOM systems which corroborates the findings
previously reported for L1 Spanish. DOM is acquired early across languages, irrespective
of the factors which constrain case marking and irrespective of marking type. In the
languages where animacy is the trigger, it constrains marking from the onset of acquisition
(see the papers on DOM in Croatian, Russian, Spanish, and Romanian). Children acquiring
languages in which case marking is determined by definiteness mark objects in accordance
with this semantic property very early (see the paper on DOM in Hebrew). When telicity
and definiteness interfere, children acquire the two features concurrently, at a very early
stage (see the paper on DOM in Estonian). Clause level triggers (such as mood and
polarity) might somewhat lag behind the other factors but they are also part of DOM
systems very early (see the papers on DOM in Estonian and Lithuanian). These results
suggest that case structures requiring the satisfaction of semantic conditions are acquired
early in L1 across languages, revealing early access to semantic universals. The paper by
Ketrez, however, as well as some comments in the paper by Argus challenge this overall
“perfect” picture. The message they send is that longitudinal data may not always be able to
offer strong evidence that knowledge of DOM is indeed adult-like. As the Turkish data
show, the attested target-like structures may be bound to a narrow range of contexts, which
could result in an incomplete and possibly misleading picture. From a methodological point
of view, the differences between the longitudinal and the experimental data show, once
again, why they are both needed.
For all the languages for which findings are available for both L1 acquisition and L2 learning, the papers mention an obvious difference: DOM is acquired early in the former but it is vulnerable to the latter (Estonian, Spanish, Turkish). Given the interface nature of DOM, further in-depth studies could shed interesting light on the acquisition of interface properties in different learning contexts. This could get us closer to a plausible answer to the question of what exactly facilitates the L1 acquisition of this apparently intricate phenomenon. More generally, it could advance our understanding of the way in which interfaces constrain narrow syntax during the early acquisition process.

REFERENCES


