

Heavy subjects and Root Infinitives in L1 French¹

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Abstract

This paper presents an investigation into apparent errors of subject case assignment in child French, where non-Nominative elements often appear in what seems to be the subject position. It demonstrates that such constructs are best analysed as left-dislocated elements coindexed with a missing subject clitic, contrary to what is predicted under the Agreement and Tense Omission Model (hence ATOM) proposed by Schütze and Wexler (1996).

This investigation suggests that the ATOM is not tenable, given that, in the instances where the verb unambiguously bears or lacks Agreement morphology, the data goes against the predictions of that model. The apparent correlation observed between non-Nominative ‘subjects’ and the lack of finiteness of the verb is shown to be an effect of the null-subject phenomenon.

1. Introduction

Young French speaking children often produce sentences like (1), where both the apparent subject and the verb are realised in a non-target-like fashion: the apparent subject is not in the nominative case, and the verb is not finite.

- (1) moi mettre ça comme Pol. (Max 2;3.20)
me put_{-F} that like Pol
‘I (want to) put it like Pol.’

The strong pronoun in (1) could be either a non-nominative subject in the subject position (i.e. a strong pronoun surfacing instead of a clitic, in an attempt at producing a structure like (2)), or a dislocated subject with a missing resumptive (i.e. an attempt at producing a structure like (3)).

- (2) je vais mettre ça comme Pol.
I will put_{-F} that like Pol
‘I’ll put it like Pol.’
(3) moi, je vais mettre ça comme Pol.
me I will put_{-F} that like Pol
‘I’ll put it like Pol.’

The non-finite form of the verb in (1) is an instance of the much studied Root Infinitive phenomenon (Rizzi 1994), where a non-finite verb occurs in a context where a finite form would be required in the target grammar.

On the basis of a longitudinal corpus of three monolingual children between the ages of 1;10 and 3;5,

these two analyses are evaluated: either Apparent Heavy Subjects (AHS) in non-finite contexts are true subjects in a genuine subject position, or they are dislocated subjects with a missing resumptive clitic. The former option has to account for the possibility of licensing non-nominative subjects (e.g. along the lines of Schütze and Wexler 1996). The latter postulates that these AHS surface in the default case (which, in French, corresponds to the accusative, and is only visible on strong pronouns), outside of the subject position.

It will be argued that any non-nominative AHS in child French is a left-dislocated subject with a missing subject clitic, both in cases like (1), where the verb is unambiguously non-finite, and in cases like (4) where the verb is apparently finite but might be argued to be a ‘default’ RI on the basis of the fact that such verb forms appear with null subjects and do not display unambiguous agreement morphology.

- (4) moi tire ça. (Max 2;1.25)
me pull_{?A} that
‘I’m going to pull that.’

The analysis proposed completes the picture outlined by Labelle and Valois (1996), who showed that target-deviant postverbal ‘subjects’ are in fact target-like right-dislocated subjects with a missing resumptive clitic (i.e. a null subject).

The corpora used for the present analysis contain data from three children: Max (Quebec) and Anne (France) from the York corpus, and Tom (Belgium), from the Cat corpus.² Each child was video-recorded fortnightly for half an hour, over a period of 18 months. The transcriptions were made where possible by the observer, and later checked and coded by a native speaker of French (myself).

The main period under investigation corresponds to the core of the null subject stage (for an analysis based on the same corpora, see Plunkett and De Cat 2001). This period was chosen so that the null subject factor could be taken into consideration, and because non-nominative AHS almost exclusively occur during that stage. Non-nominative AHS are only sporadically attested after this.

Further examples are given in (5)–(7).³

- (5) moi vu. (Max 1;11.0)
me seen
‘I (have) seen (one).’

- (6) ça est 0 drapeau. (Anne 2;2.0)
that is flag
‘That’s a/the flag.’
- (7) et moi a gagné. (Tom 2;4.8)
and me have_{+F3p.sg.} won
‘I’ve won.’

In this article, I concentrate exclusively on the analysis of AHS for which case is visible (as in (5)-(7)), i.e. cases where the AHS is a (strong) pronoun. During the null subject stage, 13% of non-finite root clauses contain a pronominal AHS. This proportion goes down to 2% in finite-looking clauses.

2. Hypothesis 1: Pronominal AHS are true subjects in the default case

Subject case errors in child language have been reported in the literature since the 60’s (e.g. Gruber 1967; Valian 1991; Vainikka 93 4). One proposal in particular makes clear cross-linguistic predictions as to which types of case errors should be expected. It is presented in Schütze and Wexler (1996); Schütze (1997); Wexler, Schütze, and Rice (1998) as the Agreement and Tense Omission Model (ATOM). The core idea is that in child grammar, the two Inflection heads may be underspecified independently of each other. When the Agreement head is underspecified (as indicated by a ‘-’ in Table 1), the subject is predicted to surface in the default case. Non-nominative subjects are claimed not to be due to a lack of knowledge of the case system or of the nominative-assigning property of Agr: both are part of the child’s grammar from early on (as argued in detail by Schütze 1997). Rather, the presence of non-nominative subjects is said to result from the very underspecification of Agreement. Nominative case can only be assigned to the subject when Agreement is fully specified. Whether the verb looks finite or non-finite depends on the other Inflection head: Tense. Whenever Tense is fully specified, the verb looks like a finite verb: it is expected to undergo raising in languages like French, and it does not bear overt non-finite morphology. By contrast, whenever Tense is underspecified, the verb surfaces as a Root Infinitive (a true RI in the case of French, as it bears infinitival morphology). Schütze (1997: 263-271) also argues that the presence of null subjects is dependent on Tense, and not on Agreement: whenever Tense is underspecified in the child’s grammar, a null subject will be possible.

2.1. Patterns of Agreement and Tense specification in child French

In French, subject clitics themselves never appear in a case other than nominative (no such error has been attested in the literature, to my knowledge — where e.g. an accusative clitic would appear in a subject

Agr	Tns	Subject
-	-	Default case or null
-	+	Default case
+	-	Nominative case or null
+	+	Nominative case

Table 1: Specification of Agreement and Tense

position). Schütze (1997: 250) argues that strong pronouns are the default form of pronouns in French, and that they are the forms expected to surface when Agreement is underspecified. The relevant paradigms are given in table 2. First person plural clitic *nous* is not considered here, as it is not used in spoken French (at least not in colloquial French, which constitutes the input to the children studied here); third person singular with the subject clitic *on* ‘we’ is used instead, sometimes in conjunction with a dislocated pronoun *nous* ‘us’. *On* is also used as a genuine third person singular (especially as an impersonal), but does not have a corresponding strong pronoun in such case.

Person	Nominative clitic	Strong pronoun
1 st sg.	je	moi
2 nd sg.	tu	toi
3 rd sg.	il, elle, on	lui, elle, ∅
1 st pl.	on	nous
2 nd pl.	vous	vous
3 rd pl.	ils, elles	eux, elles

Table 2: Nominative clitics and strong pronouns in spoken French

The ATOM predicts that in child French, whenever the subject is realised, it will surface as a nominative clitic when Agreement is fully specified, and as a strong pronouns when it is not. The next subsection investigates which forms should be analysed as [+/-Agr] in child French.

2.1.1. French verbal Agreement morphology

Before examining the paradigm of verbal Agreement morphology as it is instantiated in child French, it is important to remember that the input available to the child can only provide him/her with audibly perceivable distinctions between forms. As a consequence, only audibly distinct agreement morphemes can be taken into account, as this is the only evidence available to the child indicating that there is verbal inflection in his/her language. In the present analysis, the possibility of distinguishing between forms on the basis of liaison only (as in *tu es une chipie* [tyɛzynfipi:] ‘you are a scoundrel’) has been discarded, because liaison between the verb and the following word is rare in spoken French, and no systematic transcription of liaison was carried out in the present corpora.

A note on the status of subject clitics is also called for at this point, as it has been claimed that in spoken French, these elements are agreement morphemes on the verb (e.g. Roberge 1990; Zribi-Hertz 1994). However, as shown by Côté (1999), a morphological analysis of subject clitics is untenable for Unmarked Spoken French, i.e. the varieties of French that do not allow for a true quantifier to be used as a subject coindexed with a subject clitic, as in (8). She argues that the data in the Leveillé corpus (Suppes, Smith, and Leveillé 1973) (available via CHILDES—MacWhinney 2000) falls within this category, as does her own native variety: Montreal French (which also corresponds to the input to which Max in the present study is exposed).

- (8) *Personne, il est venu.
nobody he is come

All the data investigated here comes from unmarked varieties of spoken French, as argued in detail in De Cat (2002b). Consequently subject clitics will be analysed as ‘true’ subjects, and only verbal suffixes will be considered to be marks of agreement with the subject.

Given the above, the paradigm of verbal agreement morphology is very impoverished in spoken French. Ferdinand (1996) shows that for the most part, this paradigm consists of what might be classified as *elsewhere* forms. Following Halle and Marantz (1993), she defines *elsewhere* forms as underspecified in the lexicon with respect to particular features (person and number in this case). This allows *elsewhere* forms to be compatible with more than one feature specification on an element such as a subject, with which the verb is expected to agree.

In Table 3, *elsewhere* forms are indicated in phonetic transcription. Specified forms only appear in their orthographic spelling. Three verb types are distinguished on the basis of the number of persons with agreement morphology distinct from the third person singular form. Although only the present tense is illustrated in table 3, *elsewhere* forms are also prevalent in other tenses. The second person plural marking is phonologically undistinguishable from the infinitival form for verbs of the *-er* class, and in the case of *allez* ‘go’. Only a clear context or the presence of a subject clitic can distinguish between the two. However as the children studied only attempted to use the former when the null subject stage was almost over, and only in very rare occasions, this homophony has not been problematic.

Ferdinand argues that children acquiring French start by using only *elsewhere* forms, i.e. over-extending their use to the whole paradigm. Evidence for the *elsewhere* status of third person singular in child French (glossed as *els.* in the examples) comes from

	-er, -oir	-ir, -re, vouloir	être, avoir, aller
1 p.sg			vais
2 p.sg.	[plœ:r]	[fɛ]	[va]
3 p.sg.			
2 p.pl	pleurez	faites	allez
3 p.pl.	[plœ:r]	font	vont

Table 3: Agreement verbal morphology in spoken French (present tense)

the fact that the only errors of agreement observed between the verb and the features of the subject are cases where an apparently third person singular form of the verb is used when the φ -features of (intended) subject are non-third-singular, as in (9)-(11) (for more detail, see Ferdinand 1996).

- (9) est là, les dames. (Anne 2;7.16)
is_{els.} there the ladies
‘The ladies are there.’
- (10) il_i⁴va regarder la yy [%pho: fEm] tous
he will_{els.} watch the (?) all
les deux_i. (Max 2;5.29)
the two
‘The two of them will look at the (?)’
- (11) et moi, j’ a gagné. (Tom 2;4.8)
and me I have_{els.} won
‘I’ve won.’

The use of default person and number features on the verb suggests that in cases like (9)-(11), Agreement is not fully specified. Postulating that AgrP is altogether absent in such cases seems too strong a claim, because a subject can get licensed (as in (10) and (11)). Following Schütze and Wexler (1996), the finite-*looking* form of the verb is due to the full specification of Tense, while Agreement remains underspecified. This is particularly clear in (11), where the verb is in the *passé composé* (hence clearly specified for Tense), but the person features of the auxiliary do not match those of the subject. When all the details of the French morphological paradigm are taken into account, it becomes clear that verb forms displaying overt agreement with the subject are quite rare in spoken French. Given that the second person plural is hardly attested at all in the corpora studied here, and that most verbs are of the *-er* class (i.e. the one with the smallest number of specified forms), only a small number of verbs can be expected to indicate whether the child is marking verbal agreement: *être* ‘to be’, *avoir* ‘to have’, *aller* ‘to go’, *vouloir* ‘to want’, and the rare instances of verbs from the *-ir* and the *-re* class (like *faire* ‘to do’, *dormir* ‘to sleep’) that are used by the child. But to complicate matters further, even with those more richly inflected verbs, second

and third person singular will have to be discarded from the analysis, as they are homophonous (see Table 3).

When the *elsewhere* form is “incorrectly” used instead of a specified form (as would be required by the target grammar), Agreement will be argued to be underspecified. When a specified form is (correctly) used, Agreement will be argued to be fully specified. But in the majority of cases, because the *elsewhere* form fills most of the paradigm, the verb form will have to be treated as ambiguous with respect to agreement marking.

The features of the intended subject will be recovered as follows: (i) from the features of either a subject clitic, a dislocated DP coreferential with the subject, or an AHS; (ii) from those displayed by adjectives modifying the subject or by participials with the auxiliary *être* ‘be’ (but only participials that are not of the first verb class and certain adjectives display audible marks of agreement with the subject); (iii) from the features of a reflexive clitic on the verb, when distinct from the default *se*; (iv) from the context, where possible.

For a discussion of the relation between Tense specification and Agreement specification, I refer the reader to De Cat (2002a). In the present analysis, [-Tns] forms are treated as [? Agr] (see below).

2.2. Predictions of the ATOM for child French

As we have seen in section 2.1.1, verbs displaying unambiguous audible agreement morphology are rare in spoken French, especially in the early child data. Clear cases of Agr (under)specification obligatorily involve intended subjects whose features are incompatible with an *elsewhere* form of the verb in the target grammar. For a detail of what such forms are, see Table 3 (about tenses other than the present, see De Cat (2002a)).

The ATOM predicts that the subject should surface in the nominative in cases where Agr is fully specified (as in examples (20) (21-a) (21-b)), and as default where Agr is underspecified (as in examples (7), (9) and (10)).

It is important to stress that for Agreement to be visible, the φ -features of the intended subject have to be incompatible with the *elsewhere* form of the verb. So only cases like *je vais* ‘I go’, *ils veulent* ‘they want’, where the agreement is audibly distinct from the *elsewhere* form, can be unambiguously analysed as [+Agr], while cases like *je veux* ‘I want’, *tu vas* ‘you go’, have to remain [?Agr].

Combinations including [-Tns] were excluded from the clear cases, because verbs bearing non-finite morphology cannot bear (overt) agreement morphology at the same time in spoken French. Schütze (1997: fn 83, p.250) entertains the possibility that non-finite

agreeing forms could exist in French. If non-finite verbs can be [+Agr], (12), where a nominative clitic cooccurs with a [-Tns] verb, would have to be analysed as such under the ATOM.

- (12) 0 mettre [///] i(l) mettre ça. (Anne 2;5.15)
 0 put_{-T} he put_{-T} that
 ‘He will put that one on.’

However, given that the specification of Agreement is not visible on verbs with non-finite morphology in French, examples like (12) (which are extremely rare anyway) cannot be taken as clear manifestations of the [+Agr] [-Tns] combination. The correlate of this is that [-Agr] [-Tns] forms have to be analysed as ambiguous as well.

For the purpose of this analysis, the crucial cases to be considered are those where the specification of Agreement is morphologically identifiable on the verb. This means discarding the bulk of the data, as the majority of finite-looking verbs are *elsewhere* forms with respect to Agreement. According to the ATOM, Agreement is underspecified when a finite-looking verb displays incorrect agreement morphology, which is only visible when the features of the intended subject are not compatible with the *elsewhere* form of the verb. Whenever a verb is inflected with specific Agreement morphology, Agreement will be said to be fully specified.

The predictions of the ATOM for child French are as follows: (i) if a verb lacking the required agreement morphology has a realised subject, this will surface in the default case; (ii) non-nominative AHS are in the subject position — consequently, they cannot receive a dislocation intonation. What is unexpected under the ATOM is the cooccurrence of non-nominative subjects with verbs marked for specific agreement.

In this paper, I address only the first prediction above. For discussion of the second prediction, see De Cat (2002a), where it is shown that in most cases, the prosody of pronominal AHS is clearly that of left-dislocated elements.

2.3. Child French does not behave as predicted under the ATOM

2.3.1. Non-nominative AHS *do* occur with fully specified Agr

The ATOM predicts that whenever a verb bears specific agreement morphology, the subject will surface in the nominative case. Non-nominative subjects are thus totally unexpected in such cases. They do nonetheless exist in the data under investigation: 3/224 unambiguously agreeing verbs have been found to appear with a pronominal AHS, as in (13).

- (13) moi ai cassé ça là. (Anne 2;2.0)
 me have_{1p.sg.} broken that there
 ‘I’ve broken that.’

3/224 is a very small proportion (1.3%), and might be taken to suggest that such cases are performance errors. There is however an argument against this. Late cases of pronominal AHS are attested (as in (14), (15)), when agreement ‘errors’ have almost disappeared from the child’s speech, i.e. at a point when all verbs must be target-like with respect to Agreement specification. Even under the ATOM, the verb in these cases would have to be analysed as fully inflected. The only way these late instances of pronominal AHS can be reconciled with the ATOM is to treat them as performance errors or ‘noise’. Yet, as we will see in section 3.3, late pronominal AHS only occur in one particular context, and not at random, which rules out a performance account.

- (14) mais moi veux mettre ça. (Anne 3;5.4)
but me want_{+T} put_{-T} that
‘But I want to put that one.’
- (15) moi veux pas ranger. (Max 2;9.12)
me want_{+T} not tidy-up_{-T}
‘I don’t want to tidy up.’

Note that if pronominal AHS are analysed as dislocated subjects with a missing resumptive, the presence of pronominal AHS in child French would not bear on the ATOM one way or the other.

2.3.2. Nominative subjects *do* occur with underspecified Agr

When Agreement is underspecified, the subject is predicted by the ATOM to surface in the default case. However, this is not what we find in child French.

The evidence presented below is crucial, as it rests on the only uncontroversial and unambiguous cases where Agreement is underspecified: cases where a finite-looking verb lacks the expected specific agreement morphology (i.e. where the φ -features of the intended subject are incompatible with the *elsewhere* form in which the verb appears). I have found 25 such cases in the present corpora. Out of these 25 cases, only 3 appear with a pronominal AHS (as in (7)), while 15 (i.e. 60%) appear with a (nominative) subject clitic (as in (11), (16), (17)).

- (16) moi, j’ est pas méchant. (Tom 2;4.8)
me I is_{els.} not nasty
‘I’m not nasty.’
- (17) moi aussi, je va monter. (Anne 2;9.15)
me too I will_{els.} go-upstairs
‘I’ll go upstairs too.’

These results go in the opposite direction to what the ATOM predicts: in child French, an underspecified Agr licenses nominative subjects more often than non-nominative AHS. This is summarised in table 4.

Subject	Case	Proportion among [+Tns] [-Agr] verbs
Pron. AHS	default	12% (3/25)
Other AHS	unclear	8% (2/25)
Clitic	nominative	60% (15/25)
No subject		20% (5/25)

Table 4: Subject distribution with tensed verbs clearly lacking Agreement

We have seen that in child French, (i) clearly non-agreeing verbs do license nominative subjects more often than non-nominative subjects, and (ii) Agreeing verbs cooccur with non-nominative AHS. On the face of this evidence, we have to conclude that the ATOM is untenable, and that it is not the (under)specification of an inflection head that accounts for the case assigned to the subject.

Incidentally, the same conclusion would have to be drawn under a morphological analysis of subject clitics, irrespective of whether one adopts the weak or the strong version of it (the weak version considering that subject clitics retain their argument status (Lambrecht 1981), and the strong one claiming that they do not, and that, subsequently, spoken French is a pro-drop language (Auger 1994)). Note however that both versions face the same problem of determining what counts as agreeing: is the presence of the clitic sufficient, or are specific morphemes also required where they would be in the adult language? In the former case, the presence of a subject clitic would be the sole indicator of agreement, and cases like (18-a), (18-b) and (18-c) would be analysed as agreeing, as opposed to cases like (18-d), (18-e).

- (18) a. je vais manger.
I will_{1p.sg.} eat
- b. je va manger.
I will_{els.} eat
- c. je mangE.
I eat_{-F}
- d. vais manger.
will_{1p.sg.} eat
- e. va manger, moi.
will_{els.} eat me

In the latter, agreement would only be marked when both the clitic and specific morphology are realised on the verb, hence considering cases like (18-b), (18-d), (18-e) and (18-c) as non-agreeing, as opposed to cases like (18-a).⁵ Under the non-pro-drop version of the morphological analysis of subject clitics, the same arguments as those presented above would be used to evaluate (and reject) the ATOM. Under the pro-drop version, only one prediction of the ATOM could be tested, as there would be no clear nominative sub-

ject in spoken French. This prediction is that non-nominative subjects never appear with [+ Agr]. This prediction would be contradicted even more clearly than under the assumptions held in this analysis: 11% of [+ Tns] clauses occur with a pronominal AHS doubled by a subject clitic (i.e. where the verb would be automatically [+ Agr]), as opposed to 10% without clitic.

In the next section, I propose that no special mechanism or restriction impedes nominative case assignment in child French, because pronominal AHS are left-dislocated elements coindexed with a null subject.

3. Hypothesis 2: Pronominal AHS are dislocated subjects with a missing resumptive

The presence of pronominal AHS in child French has been noted before in the literature (e.g. Pierce 1992; Ferdinand 1996; Legendre et al. 1999), but it was generally assumed that such elements could not be in the subject position because they were clearly not in the nominative case.⁶ In particular, Ferdinand (1996: 201-202) has argued that, given the absence of (other) non-adult-like case assignment in child French, strong pronouns could not be in the subject position, and that, consequently, they had to be in a peripheral position.⁷

3.1. Dislocated subjects can occur in the absence of subject clitic in child French

Unambiguously left-dislocated subjects, where the left-dislocated subject cooccurs with a resumptive clitic (19), are attested in child French from very early on.

- (19) a. et ça, c' est là. (Anne 2;2.30)
and that it is there
'And that one is there.'
b. da(lmati)en, c' est lui. (Max 2;3.6)
dalmatien it is him
'That one's the Dalmatian.'

It has also been established (on the basis of Ferdinand 1993, 1996; Labelle and Valois 1996) that child French allows for the subject to be right-dislocated, even in the absence of a resumptive clitic (20).

- (20) ai gagné, moi. (Tom 2;1.11)
have_{1p.sg.} won me
'I've won.'

Given the independently attested existence in the children's grammar of subject left-dislocations and of subject right-dislocations coindexed with a null subject, it is plausible that (pronominal) AHS be subject left-dislocations with a missing resumptive clitic. The frequent occurrence of left-dislocated pronouns coindexed with a subject clitic (as in (21)) supports this hypothesis (exact figures will be given in table 5).

- (21) a. moi, je vais là. (Max 2;4.18)
me I go_{1p.sg.} there
'I'm going there.'
b. moi, j' ai dormi. (Tom 2;4.9)
me I have_{1p.sg.} slept
'I've slept.'

3.2. Predictions of the dislocation analysis of AHS

I have argued elsewhere (De Cat 2001b, 2002b) that dislocated subjects are base-generated by adjunction to IP or CP in adult French, and that they are interpreted as the topic of the clause / sentence in which they appear. Overall, the rate of left- or right-dislocation of subjects is the same in adult French, across dialects: 7% of clauses contain a subject left-dislocation, and 7% of clauses contain a subject right-dislocation (out of a total of 3588 coded clauses from the adults of the York and Cat corpora — see De Cat (2002b) for details). A certain level of similarity between subject left-dislocations and subject right-dislocations in child French can thus reasonably be expected. More specifically, with respect to the present analysis, it is likely that if pronominal AHS are in fact subject left-dislocations, they will behave to an extent like subject right-dislocations: we can expect that the rate of omission of subject clitics at the null subject stage will not be significantly different whether the dislocated subject appears in the left- or the right-periphery of the clause. This is indeed what we find, as detailed in table 5.

Strong pronouns interpreted as subject	With coindexed clitic		Without coindexed clitic	
TIME 1				
Left-dislocated	25%	(3/12)	75%	(9/12)
Right-dislocated	35%	(6/17)	65%	(11/17)
Total		(9/29)		(20/29)
TIME 2				
Left-dislocated	72%	(310/431)	28%	(121/431)
Right-dislocated	70%	(99/141)	32%	(42/141)
Total		(409/572)		(163/572)

Table 5: Subject clitic realisation in sentences with a pronominal subject dislocation

What table 5 shows is that, when the data is subdivided into two periods, determined on the basis of the emergence of obviously agreeing verbs,⁸ it clearly appears that pronominal AHS are comparable with right-dislocated pronominal subjects: in both cases, across the periods, the same proportion of strong pronouns expressing the subject cooccur with a subject clitic. No significant difference in rate of appearance of nominative clitics is observed, whether

the strong pronoun is left- or right-dislocated. Statistical significance was computed for Time 1 by a Fisher exact test, due to the low number of tokens in some cells. The p value found was 0.431, which means that there is a 43% chance of wrongly rejecting the null hypothesis (according to which these distributions would be the same). For Time 2, the Chi-square test was used, yielding comparable results: $\chi^2 = 0.153$; $p < 0.7$). Pronominal AHS are thus best treated as left-peripheral elements coindexed with the (sometimes null) subject.

3.3. Additional evidence

Additional evidence in favour of a dislocation analysis of pronominal AHS comes from the fact that these elements are almost exclusively attested during the core null subject stage. Crucially, after that period, the only cases of pronominal AHS that are attested occur in a very limited number of contexts, which correspond exactly to the contexts still licensing null subjects. Compare (14) and (15) with (22) and (23).

- (22) (je) vais aller chercher euh+//(Max 2;9.12)
 will go get er
 ‘I’m going to get ...’
- (23) (je) peux tourner la page? (Tom 3;0.6)
 can turn the page
 ‘Can I turn the page?’

This is exactly what is expected under a dislocation analysis of pronominal AHS: such elements should only be attested where null subjects are attested.

4. Conclusion

Aparent non-nominative subjects in child French have been shown to be best analysed as left-peripheral subjects with a missing resumptive. What seemed to be a correlation between non-nominative subjects and lack of finiteness of the verb can thus be viewed as a by-product of the correlation between null subjects and lack of finiteness.

Schütze and Wexler’s (1996) ATOM, which links the licensing of non-nominative subjects in child grammar to the underspecification of Agreement, has been shown not to be tenable, given that the cross-linguistic predictions it makes are not borne out in child French: (i) nominative clitics occur in the majority of cases where Agr is clearly unspecified, and (ii) non-nominative AHS occur when Agr is fully specified.

Ultimately, this analysis emphasises how similar child and adult languages are. The apparent presence of target-deviant non-nominative subjects in child French has been shown to be in fact target-compliant use of left-peripheral subjects. Like adults, French speaking children only assign nominative to the subject of their finite sentences. Like adults, they use subject dislocations — and these are attested from

the earliest stage (De Cat 2002b). The difference between child and adult language in this context has been shown to be restricted to the well-known but not yet fully understood null subject phenomenon in language acquisition.

Notes

¹I wish to thank Bernadette Plunkett for comments and discussion and for kindly allowing me to use the York corpus. Thanks also to the audience at GALA 2001, and to Johanne Paradis. A more in-depth version of this paper, covering more aspects of the phenomenon under investigation, can be found in De Cat (2002a).

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²The York corpus was collected under the direction of Bernadette Plunkett (ESRC grant #R000 22 1972). It contains data from Belgium, France and Quebec. The Cat corpus was collected by myself, and contains data from Belgium only.

³In the glosses, $+/-F$, $+/-T$, $+/-A$ stand for $[+/-Finite]$, $[+/-Tense]$ and $[+/-Agreement]$ respectively. Transcription conventions are as follows: (i) commas indicate syntactic junctures (e.g. what was perceived by the coder as a dislocation — see De Cat (2002a)); (ii) parentheses contain unpronounced strings; (iii) the letter *e* stands for a potential proto-syntactic form (i.e. an unarticulated sound roughly corresponding to a schwa in the child’s pronunciation, in a slot normally occupied by a function word. See Bohnacker 1998; Peters 2001); (iv) *yy* stands for an unintelligible word (followed by a rough phonetic transcription); (v) 0 indicates a missing element.

⁴It is impossible to distinguish between *il* and its plural counterpart *ils* in this context, as the following word starts with a consonant, which impedes liaison, if any — Canadian French allows for the absence of liaison between *ils/elles* ‘they’ and the following verb, even when the latter begins with a vowel.

⁵Legendre, Hagstrom, Vainikka, and Todorova (1999) adopt an intermediary position, whereby the presence of either a subject clitic or an agreement suffix on the verb is taken to be sufficient indication that Agreement is specified. Hence in (18), only (18-e) would be argued to be non-agreeing. See De Cat (2002a) for discussion.

⁶Pierce (1992) did not exclude the possibility that pronominal AHS appear in the subject position, but she did not claim that is was the case either.

⁷Ferdinand argued that in finite sentences in child French (i.e. when the verb did not bear non-

finite morphology), preverbal *moi* ‘me’ was always in [spec,FocusP]. This is disputed in De Cat (2001a).

⁸The first instance of a spontaneously produced agreeing verb was taken to indicate the onset of time 2 (i.e. around 2;1 in the children studied here). This is not meant to imply that time 2 coincides with the acquisition of subject-verb Agreement. Further analysis of the data is required to determine when subject-Agreement is fully acquired, which is beyond the scope of this chapter. See Plunkett (2000) for an account based on the acquisition of personal features distinctions.

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