

On the Acquisition of Clitic *se* and Aspect in Spanish

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0. Abstract

The literature on acquisition of aspect has focussed on the perfectivity-imperfectivity distinction. In this paper we deal with this topic regarding the acquisition of aspectual clitic *se* which is crucially related to perfectivity structures. The data analysed are available on the Childes database. We show that very young children make omission errors of clitic *se*. We support the view that the acquisition of telicity is difficult in languages where telicity is marked by the combination of the properties of the verb and its object (Van Hout, 2003, and Hogdson 2003).

1. Introduction

Much research on children's acquisition of clitics has focused on the development of all the appropriate morpho-syntactic levels as a locus of learning and variation among different child languages. In this paper we attempt to examine the acquisition of aspectual clitic *se* in Spanish, because it presents an interesting linguistic challenge for children, given that it affects the way the aspectual distinctions are encoded in the morpho-syntactic levels of the Spanish clause structure.

In section 2, we present previous studies on the acquisition of clitics. In section 3, we discuss Spanish telicity and provide an analysis for clitic *se*. We show how research on language acquisition may contribute to shed some light on the debate on the acquisition of aspect. In section 4, we include the present study based on longitudinal studies on the production of aspectual *se*. Section 5 is intended as the discussion and the main conclusions of the paper.

2. Previous studies on the acquisition of clitics:

The acquisition of clitics in Romance languages has been studied in the last twenty years (Guasti 1993-1994, Schaeffer 2000, Wexler et al. 2004, Tedeschi 2006) and is still subject of current debate since it derives many implications with respect to the acquisition of structural agreement in the Romance clause.

In all the studies cited before, omissions of accusative clitics are attested in languages with past participle agreement. These omissions are characterized by optionality. The way optionality is accounted for is however different. According to Schaeffer (2000), the optional use of an accusative clitic by young Italian children doesn't argue against the "Full Clause Hypothesis" which claims that functional categories are present from the beginning in child grammar. The underlying problem of the optional use of accusative clitics is explained by claiming that children lack a

pragmatic principle which would allow them to interpret discourse relations the way adults do.

Tedeschi (2006, this volume) argues that optional clitic omission is not caused by pragmatic factors, but by a competition between discourse and syntactic requirements, due to economy constraints which would affect children's performance. Interestingly, her findings show that, apart from optional omission of clitics, much lower than in Shaeffer's (2000) study though, clitics sometimes agree with the subject (instead of agreeing with the object), indicating that "children could not always link the clitic to its antecedent, or that they inverted Agent and Patient in their answers" (Tedeschi 2006).

Lyczkowski (1999) demonstrated, on the basis of naturalistic data, that Spanish-speaking children rarely omit object clitics. The same result has been achieved experimentally by Wexler et al. (2004).

In our study below, we want to examine acquisition of clitic *se* to test whether this element is problematic for children, provided the fact that it is not an ordinary object clitic but an element highly related to aspectual perfectivity (cf. Rigau 1994, Sanz 1995, Zagana 1996), which seems to be somehow problematic for children according to Hodgson's (2003) recent production and comprehension studies.

3. Clitic *se* and Perfectivity

Perfect *have* in Spanish is classified as perfective. However, this does not mean it is associated with the achievement of a goal or that it can be seen as telic or resultative, as the strangeness of (1) and (2) indicates:

(1) Él ha caído
"He has fallen"

(2) Él ha ido
"He has gone"

Sentences (1) and (2), if uttered at all, are interpreted as an activity that was done without reaching a particular goal. Hence, the tense is past but there is present relevance. As for the notion of perfectivity or telicity, i.e. reaching a goal, it is not connected to *have* in (1) or (2), but is present in a separate functional category, as argued by Sanz (1996). We assume that *se* is inserted in this functional category in order to provide the sentences in (1) and (2) with the notion of telicity:

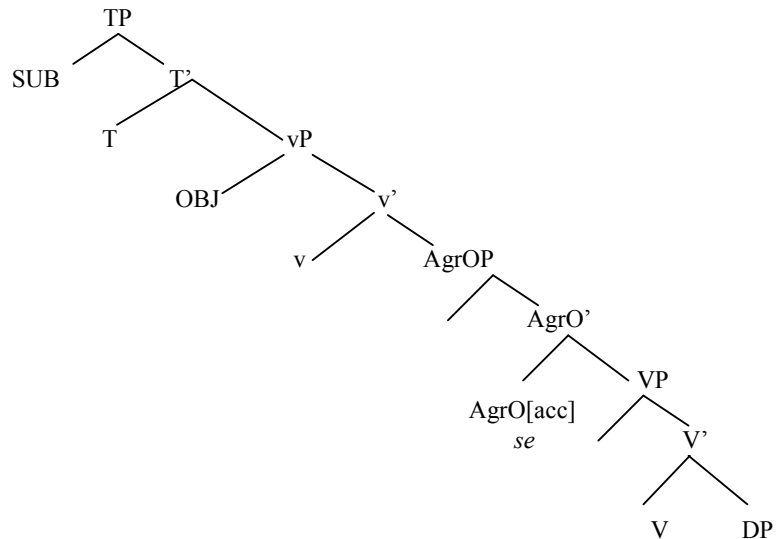
(3) Él se ha caído
He SE has fallen
"He has fallen down"

(4) Él se ha ido
He SE has gone
"He is gone"

Following Chomsky (1995), we will assume that the tense features of e.g. *ha* and *ido/caido* are Interpretable. In addition, the functional category hosting *se* must also have interpretable features. Note that *se* can be interpreted at either the semantic (i.e. LF) or phonetic interface. We will assume that *se* occupies a special functional category that, apart from containing aspect, is responsible for Case checking.

Just like a tensed verb (in most languages) makes nominative Case checking possible, a perfective verb would enable objective Case checking. Following Tenny (1987), Sanz (1996) links perfectivity and transitivity by assuming the feature [measure] to occupy a head that is checked by an object NP. Hence, 'I ate' is not perfective but 'I ate the apple' is. She assumes the presence of a Tr(ansitive)P as in e.g. Jelinek (1997), but an AgrO head might contain the same feature.

(5)



By inserting clitic *se* in AgrO, we assume that this functional head has perfective features. In addition, this functional category is responsible for the inherent Case checking of the object.

Torrego (1988) argues that inherent Case is semantic, interpretable Case. Following this view, we may assume that clitic *se* is responsible for the inherent Case of the affected object, because it is needed for interpretation. Furthermore, we may also follow Chomsky (1995) and argue that affected objects marked by *se* also check the structural accusative case by further moving from Spec AgrO to the specifier of *v*.¹

¹ As Sanz (2000) points out, the term inherent Case, when applied to direct objects, usually refers to partitive Case. However, the objects marked by *se* are those that turn an activity into an accomplishment and therefore are considered specific. In Sanz's (2000) analysis, they are

It seems to be the case that there are different types of *se*, but the one we are discussing here can only be analysed as having aspectual properties. Crucially, it co-occurs with affected objects in transitive structures, as exemplified in (6), and with subjects of unaccusative verbs, as exemplified in (7)

- (6) a. El niño se comió la manzana
 the boy SE ate the apple
 “The boy ate up the apple”
 b. La niña se leyó el libro hasta el final del todo
 The girl SE read the book up to the end
 “The girl read the book up to the very end”
- (7) a. El niño se cayó
 the boy SE fell
 “The boy fell down”
 b. El barco se hundió
 The ship SE sank
 “The ship sank”

We assume that the object marked by *se* is affected by the action expressed by the verb. According to the examples in (6) *the apple* and *the book* denote the affected object, because the apple gradually disappears in the eating-process, and the number of pages one must read in order to finish the book gradually diminishes in the reading-process.

In what follows, we will assume that telic *se* checks person agreement with the subject of unaccusative verbs like *caerse* in the example in (7a), which explains why a singular but not a plural form of the subject can co-occur with the verb also in singular, as exemplified in (8):

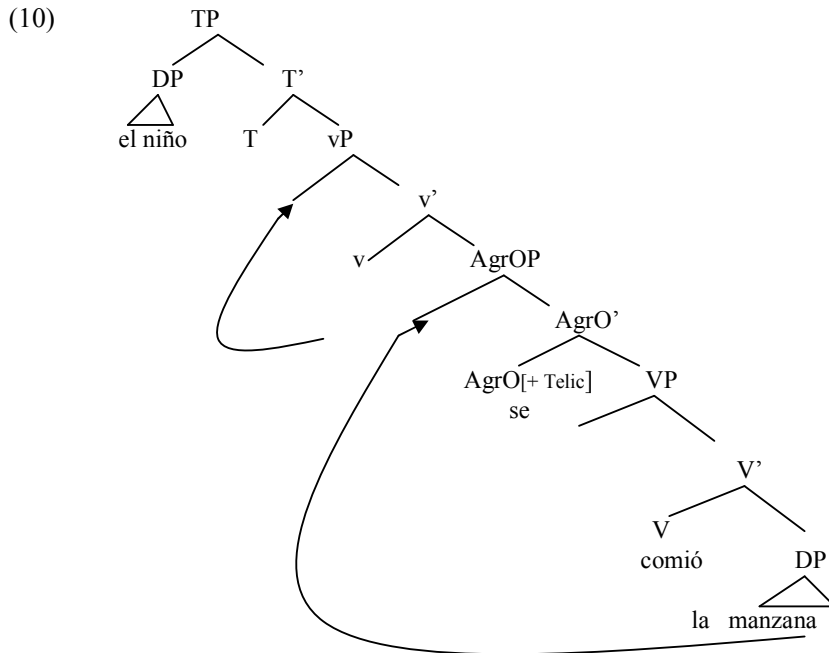
- (8) Se cayó él / *Se cayó ellos
 SE fell(sing) he/ SE fell(sing) they
 “he fell” / “they fell”

If the verb is in the plural, note that the example turns to be grammatical again:

- (9) Se cayeron ellos
 SE fell(plur) they
 “They fell”

closer to the types of objects that Tenny (1987, 1994) considers measurers of an action, and therefore she assumes that the semantic Case that these objects receive is related to the feature [measure].

As for the case of the affected object, we assume that it is generated as an internal argument of V, but raises further into Spec AgrO to check the telic feature against *se* and then moves into Spec v to check accusative case:



Sanz (2000) provides a thorough analysis of the clitic *se* in transitive constructions like the following:

- (11) Pedro *se* leyó un libro
 Pedro *se* read a book
 "Pedro read a book (completely)"
- (12) Pedro (**se*) leyó un libro durante tres horas
 "Pedro read a book for three hours"
- (13) a. Pedro #(se) leyó un libro en una hora
 Pedro *se* read a book in an hour
 "Pedro read a whole book in an hour"
 b. Pedro #(se) leyó el libro entero ayer
 Pedro *se* read the book whole yesterday
 "Pedro read the whole book yesterday"

It is claimed that the presence of the clitic means that the sentence is unambiguously telic, and that if there are elements that point at the sentence being telic (like the adverb *todo* “all” with consumption verbs, or the adverbial *en una hora* “in an hour”, the clitic appears as a marker. She provides the following examples:

- (14)a. El niño ??(se) lo comió todo
 the child *se* it ate all
 “The child ate it all”
- b. ??(Se) comió el pastel entero
se ate the cake whole
 “He ate the whole cake”
- c. ??(Se) comió todos los pasteles
se ate all the cakes
 “He ate all the cakes”
- d. ?(Se) bebió una cerveza en un minuto
se drank a beer in a minute
 “He drank a beer in a minute”
- e. ?(Se) comió el pastel en una hora
se ate the cake in an hour
 “He ate a cake in an hour”

Hence, the telicity of the sentence is ensured as long as *se* is present.

In sum, we have argued that telic *se* should be analysed as AgrO. According to Chomsky’s (1995) proposal, Agreement should be extended for both subjects and objects. In the analysis above, we have in fact shown that telic *se* marks the inherent case of affected objects, whereas structural case is checked against Spec, *v*. Chomsky (1995) distinguishes interpretable features, i.e. features relevant for semantic interpretation, from non-interpretable ones, which are irrelevant for interpretation. Non-interpretable features must be checked and deleted in the course of the derivation, while interpretable features need not enter into checking relations. In this system, the structural accusative case of the affected object must be checked against *v* in the course of the derivation. In contrast, the [telic] feature is interpretable and can stay along the derivation.

4. The present study

4.1 Method

In this paper, data from three Spanish children are examined. We intend to investigate the acquisition of telic *se* by two-year-olds. Since there is variation in contexts of “perfectivity”, (past simple versus present perfect) children have to find out which strategy is used in Spanish, and, therefore, in the course of development, it is expected that they will make mistakes both in the production and comprehension of telic *se*. Moreover, the compositional analysis of aspectual perfectivity in Van Hout (2003) predicts difficulty with the acquisition of this clitic.

We want to test whether children have any difficulty with *se* in telic contexts. So far, there are no other initial results which can confirm the problematic status of aspectual *se* in Spanish

Our first contribution to this study is based on the longitudinal acquisition studies of past tenses (perfectum and imperfectum) with complex structure verbs with *se* and other simple structure verbs without *se* in the current Childes corpora.

The data analysed are available on the CHILDES database and include the whole period of clitic *se* development (until target production is achieved) for three children: Irene, Magin and María. The ages range between 1;6 and 2;11 for the three children, sampled every month and with intervals every three months.

4.2 Quantitative analysis

We examined children's productions of Present and Past tenses. We wanted to test whether children have a preference for clitic *se* in perfective contexts as is the case in adult grammar. The data showed that children omitted clitic *se*, particularly in contexts where it is especially required: in perfective contexts with verbs inflected for the past simple tense and with an affected object.

First we looked at the correct use of clitic *se* and we obtained the following.

	Correct	Errors	Omissions
1;6-1;8	1	3	3
1;9-1;11	12	5	19
2;0-2;2	44	4	1
2;3-2;5	64	5	0
2;6-2;8	61	0	0
2;9-2;11	64	0	0
Total	246	17	23
% correct	246/286 (86%) correct		57/382 (14%) incorrect

Table 1. Correctness of constructions with aspectual SE Present tense

Simple past		
	Correct	Omission
1;9-1;11	1	0
2;0-2;2	3	0
2;3-2;5	4	8
2;6-2;8	0	0
2;9-2;11	10	0
Total	18	8
% correct	18/26 (69.2%) correct	
	8/26 (30.8%) incorrect	

Table 2. Correctness of constructions with past tense with aspectual SE

Imperfectum		
	Correct	Omission
1;9-1;11	0	0
2;0-2;2	1	0
2;3-2;5	3	1
2;6-2;8	0	0
2;9-2;11	41	1
total	45	2
% correct	45/47 (95.7%) correct	2/47 (4.3%) incorrect

Table 3. Correctness of constructions with past tense with aspectual SE

Present perfect		
	Correct	Omission
1;9-1;11	8	2
2;0-2;2	20	4
2;3-2;5	12	1
2;6-2;8	8	0
2;9-2;11	18	1
Total	58	8
% correct	58/66 (87.9%) correct	8/66 (12.1%) incorrect

Table 4. Correctness of constructions with past tense with aspectual SE

Simple past		
	Correct	Omission
1;9-1;11	1	0
2;0-2;2	0	0
2;3-2;5	1	8
2;6-2;8	0	0
2;9-2;11	20	1
Total	22	9
% correct	22/31 (71%) correct	9/31 (29%) incorrect

Table 5. Correctness of constructions with past tense without aspectual SE

Imperfectum		
	Correct	Omission
1;9-1;11	0	0
2;0-2;2	1	0
2;3-2;5	2	0
2;6-2;8	0	0
2;9-2;11	3	0
Total	6	0
% correct	6/6 (100%) correct	0/6 (0%) incorrect

Table 6. Correctness of constructions with past tense without aspectual SE

Present perfect		
	Correct	Omission
1;9-1;11	4	0
2;0-2;2	12	2
2;3-2;5	19	0
2;6-2;8	7	0
2;9-2;11	5	0
Total	47	2
% correct	47/49 (95.9%) correct	2/49 (4.1%) incorrect

Table 7. Correctness of constructions with past tense without aspectual SE

The first general finding was that all verbal tenses with or without *se* give a significant relationship with age ($P < 0.001$). In addition, we found that children commit the same amount of errors in constructions with and without clitic *se*. However, the number of productions of verbs with *se* varies depending on the verbal tense they use. Examples of errors are shown at the qualitative analysis section. We found that children produce significantly more errors in sentences with a simple past than sentences with an imperfectum ($P < 0.0016$). Note that as we argued before in the introduction, unlike the simple past, the present perfect in Spanish may be ambiguous between a perfective or an imperfective reading.

In Spanish, there is a large number of pronominal verbs that require a benefactive clitic, such as *mancharse* (stain). Unlike adults, children tend to use clitic *se* in contexts of imperfectivity. In fact, there is no significant difference between children's productions of *se* with the present perfect or with the imperfectum.

Our next step was to find out whether children omit clitic *se* in the same contexts. As it is shown in tables 1-7, the data show that children omit clitic *se* in contexts where adult grammar requires it, namely with perfectivity. Compare the omission errors of *se* with the past simple with those with the imperfectum, in the tables above.

One way to test children's development of perfectivity was to look at the correct use of clitic *se* along with other temporal adverbs that imply perfectivity. We found that children significantly don't commit errors in this respect. Also, we found that children significantly didn't commit errors with clitic *se* on sentences with affected objects.

4.3 Qualitative analysis

Examples of errors that children made are examined next. In the first place, a number of omission errors in the Present are exemplified in the next examples:

- (15) a. No *(te) *escapes* (Irene, 2)
 don't hide
 b. ... y el *pequeñin* *(se) *queda* (Irene, 2;14)
 ... and the kid stayed

Both verbs *escaparse* “hide” and *quedarse* “stay” are pronominal verbs and therefore require the use of a benefactive clitic. The number of omissions of this type of clitic were very low (14%). In contrast, we observed a large number of errors with respect to telic verbs like *caerse* “fall”, *ponerse* “turn”, *mancharse* “stain”, *romperse* “break”, and *encontrarse* “find”. Some examples follow:

- (16) Simple past
- a. *cayó* # *ota ve cayó* # (Irene, 1;8)
 fell(3rdsing) again fell(3rdsing)
 “he fell again”
- b. *lo cojo lo tito y Tina cayó* (Irene 1;10)
 AccCL (I) take AccCL (I) through and Tina fell
 “I take it and Tina fell”
- c. *puso malito* (Irene, 2;14)
 turned(3rdsing) sick
 “He got sick”
- d. *cayó la abuela* (Magín 1;10)
 fell the granny
 “The granny fell”
- e. *cayó y rompió la quisma* (Irene, 1;11)
 fell(3rd sing) and broke(3rd sing) the head
 “The fell and broke his head”
- f. *taba Juanito y Aba y encontraron una mariposa* (Irene, 2)
 was Juanito and Aba and found a butterfly
 “Juanito and Aba were there and found a butterfly”
- (17) Present Perfect
- a. *ha caído mami* (Magín 1;11)
 has fallen mom
 “Mom has fallen”
- b. *ha manchado la rodilla* (Magín 1;11)
 has stained the knee
 “He has stained the knee”

The data show that two-year-olds commit a large number of omission errors with Past tenses, more than with Present tenses. We want to relate this contrast to the fact that children have difficulty with perfectivity.

5. Discussion

Much acquisition research on children's development of aspect has focused on the imperfective-perfective distinction. To the extent that developing understanding of aspect begins with the initial comprehension of the semantics, we expect that the mapping of the semantics onto the appropriate morpho-syntactic levels will be a locus of learning for children and of variation among different child languages.

According to Hodgson's (2003) findings based on a comprehension/production study, Spanish children have difficulty in assessing perfective meaning from perfective morphology. The data presented in this study suggests that the arguments of the verb, particularly the direct object, play a significant role in learning the entailment of completion carried by perfective morphology. The presence of the agent may play a small role in acquiring aspectual meaning, however the data shows that it was not as strong of an indicator as was the presence of the full change of state of the direct object.

Clitic *se* has been analysed as heading AgrO, and as such it can be analysed as a direct object, which also plays a significant role on the acquisition of "perfectivity".

Van Hout (2003) has proposed a crosslinguistic difference with respect to acquisition of telicity. In this sense, she makes a distinction between languages that mark the entailment of completion on the verb itself, as is the case of Slavic languages (Russian, Polish), in which perfective aspect is marked as a prefix on the verb, and languages which mark telicity by combining the properties of the verb and its object, as in the case of Germanic languages and Finnish. Spanish is also a language where the entailment of completion is obtained from the properties of the verb and its arguments, in particular its direct object, as argued by Hodgson (2003). This author also points out that Van Hout's distinction between what she calls predicate telicity and compositional telicity is relevant for acquisition. The acquisition of languages like Russian and Polish, which have predicate telicity in which the entailment of completion is calculated by the verb + affix, is predicted to be easier than the acquisition of compositionality telicity in languages like English and Dutch, in which the completion of the event is computed based on the joint properties of the verb + object.

Rigau (1994) analyses *se* as a benefactive clitic which will always appear in aspectual contexts of perfectivity, since it requires the presence of an internal argument. According to Sanz (1996), clitic *se* requires "telicity" or the presence of an *affected* internal argument in the sense of Tenny (1994). According to our longitudinal studies of the acquisition of aspectual *se*, the main error that children make is to omit aspectual *se* in cases where it is required, namely with telic verbs. We argue that they omit this because they usually opt for less complicated structures represented by verb+affix combinations, which typically represent atelic configurations. The data presented in this study show that children do not make any meaningful errors when aspect is part of the verb morphology. i.e., with the imperfectum.

De Miguel and Fernandez Lagunilla (2003) claim that Perfectivity is not a sufficient condition to allow for the presence of aspectual *se*. Rather, its presence relies on the complexity of certain events. In any case, we can argue that the compositional analysis of clitic *se* + verb makes the right prediction of difficulty in languages like Spanish, where aspectuality is not only morphologically marked. Furthermore we have claimed that the presence of *se* is highly related to the presence of an Interpretable feature that is responsible for inherent case assignment. It seems to be the case that normal developing children do not have any difficulty with agreement checking relations where non-interpretable features are involved. In contrast, it may be the case that the acquisition of interpretable features takes longer. However, more research is required. In particular, we hope to obtain experimental data soon in order to confirm or reject our hypothesis.

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