

Failure to produce direct object clitic pronouns as a clinical marker of SLI in school-aged Italian speaking children

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Abstract

We administered a clitic elicitation task to 16 school-aged Italian speaking children with specific language impairment (SLI) in order to investigate whether the failure to produce third person direct object clitics (DO clitics) is a persistent clinical marker of SLI in Italian; we examined whether this failure also extends to reflexive clitics. Results show that Italian children with SLI aged 6 to 9;11 years fail to produce DO clitics and tend to produce a lexical noun introduced by a determiner (full DP) in the argument postverbal position instead of the pronoun; the production of reflexive clitics is preserved in the same population. Receiver operating characteristic curve analyses and computation of likelihood ratios show that the failure to produce DO clitics is a persistent good clinical marker of SLI in Italian. We argue that DO clitic production requires complex morphosyntactic operations that are hardly achieved by children with SLI; our findings are compatible with theories considering SLI as a deficit of processing complex linguistic relations.

Keywords: Clitic pronouns, Italian, specific language impairment

Introduction

Intensive work has been recently carried out to recognize and describe linguistic phenomena that are potential clinical markers of specific language impairment (SLI), namely phenomena that correctly identify children with SLI as language impaired (sensitivity) and non-language impaired children as such (specificity). Although studies from different languages have shown that non-word repetition is particularly challenging for children with SLI crosslinguistically, research with children with more general learning problems, such as children with Down syndrome (Jarrold, Baddeley, & Hewes, 2000) or with Autism (Kjelgaard & Tager-Flusberg, 2001), suggests that these difficulties might be related to any language impairment and not exclusively to SLI. For this reason, research that is more recent considers different types of markers in parallel and evaluates their diagnostic accuracy in isolation and in combination with each other's. As observed in early