

The production of direct object clitics in pre-school- and primary school-aged children with specific language impairments

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ABSTRACT

Third-person direct object (DO) clitic pronoun production is examined through an elicited production method in pre-school- and primary school-aged groups of Italian children with specific language impairment (SLI) to establish whether there is an improvement from age 5 years to age 7 years and whether there are qualitative differences in the two groups' responses. It was found that 5- and 7-year-old Italian children with SLI produce fewer third-person DO clitics than same-age peers. The kind of responses they provide changes: at 5 years, children with SLI tend to omit clitics, while at 7 years, they use a full noun. Production of third-person DO clitics is a persistent challenge for children with SLI and is confirmed to be a good clinical marker both at 5 and 7 years of age.

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Introduction

Across languages, children with specific language impairment (SLI) display similarities and differences. While the use of free and bound grammatical morphemes is a vulnerable area for these children, the specific morphemes, which are challenging, may vary across languages. This has promoted the concept of clinical marker. A clinical marker is a non-age-appropriate use of some grammatical morphemes or of some grammatical constructions. For English, the failure to use morphemes expressing tense at the age of 5 years (the third-person agreement morpheme *-s* and past tense *-ed* auxiliaries) has been claimed to be an indication that children may be affected by SLI (Rice & Wexler, 1996). English children with SLI struggle with producing the morphemes and optionally omit them in 67% of the obligatory context at the age of 5 years, but they are still behind age expectations at the age of 8 years and still optionally omit them, although the rate of omission has decreased (Rice, Wexler, & Hershberger, 1998). Clinical markers vary across languages. In the Romance family, a good clinical marker is the failure to produce third-person direct object (DO) or accusative clitics. Based on an elicited production study, Jakubowicz, Nash, Rigaut, and Gerard (1998) demonstrate that French children with SLI from 5;7 to 13;0 years (mean age 8;11 years) only produce

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