

Minimal structures in aphasia: A study on agreement and movement in a non-fluent aphasic speaker

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Abstract

To investigate the linguistic competence of a non-fluent aphasic speaker we focus on certain properties of the patient's deficit in the functional lexicon, and ascribe occurrences of non-standard use to defective syntactic computation. By manipulating the position of constituents, we tested agreement in sentences with post-verbal subjects and the patient's ability to detect errors induced by different elements in attraction configurations.

The results show clear asymmetries in grammaticality judgments of the different agreement conditions. A deficit in the computation of agreement in sentences with post-verbal subjects was reported, indicating the fragile nature of post-verbal subject agreement. In the experiment on attraction we found a clear impairment, with attraction induced by linear intervention of a prepositional modifier. However, the patient does not regard clitics as potential interveners in the SubjV agreement relation, in accordance with the view that there is no evidence for the weak status of clitic pronouns in Italian.

By investigating the finer properties of functional elements we hope to show the extent to which certain characteristics of aphasic speech may be attributed to a possible reduction in the ability to process the finer structures of linguistic computations. A deficit in non-local configurations (the establishment of a relation over an intervening argument), along the lines of recent theoretical developments, was attested.

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1. Introduction

The present research is a neurolinguistic investigation of various Subject–Verb (SubjV) agreement configurations in a non-fluent Italian aphasic speaker. Subject–Verb agreement was investigated in an experiment in which the positions of sentence constituents – pre-verbal and post-verbal subjects – were manipulated. Evidence from comparative syntax and language acquisition reveals differences in the realization of agreement morphology depending on whether the subject is pre-verbal, hence in a *local* Spec/head configuration, or post-verbal, i.e. in a *non-local* environment. We also tested the ability of our subject to judge agreement errors in attraction configurations, where various elements intervene between the subject and the verb. In light of previous research on French adult

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speakers (Frank et al., 2006) we focused on number mismatches within the VP by testing attraction induced by different attractors: prepositional modifiers and object clitics.

We chose an agrammatic Broca's aphasic because much work on agrammatic aphasia focuses on functional elements and the tendency to drop these items is characteristic of this type of speech (see Menn and Obler, 1990 for a cross-linguistic overview). In the present research we focus on various elements covered by the global term 'functional lexicon' by testing *fluctuations* in the grammatical system, an area of constrained variation where the occurrence of an element in the syntactic structure is consistent with its configurational environment. This issue is closely linked to the general anti-optional character of human language and its consequences in terms of hierarchical restriction and parametric selection. Fine distinctions related to the possibility of dropping material depending on the grammatical context are critical in syntactic derivation (see, for example, Rizzi, 2005 on the possibility of dropping pronouns in a restricted structural environment in acquisition; Hamann et al., 2003 for a study on complement pronouns in children with Specific Language Impairment; Friedmann, 2002 for the production of interrogatives in aphasia related to different structural layers).

The goal of the research is twofold. On the one hand we are interested in certain properties of the patient's deficit, and ascribe occurrences of non-standard use of agreement to defective syntactic computation. On the other hand, we want to strengthen the theoretical model on language with data from neurolinguistics which support linguistic distinctions such as the varying nature of pronominal clitics in Romance languages.

2. On subject agreement

Implementation of Subject–Verb agreement is related to subject position. An interesting property of post-verbal order (VSubj) is the way in which agreement morphology is differently realized cross-linguistically (see Guasti and Rizzi, 2002 and quoted literature).

English realizes morphological agreement, as in (1a); in French the pre-verbal subject agrees with the verb (1b), whereas the post-verbal subject does not (1c). In this paradigm standard Italian patterns with English—compare (1a) and (1d).

- (1)
- a. There come three girls
 - b. Trois filles sont arrivées
Three girls have arrived
 - c. Il est arrivé trois filles
It has arrived three girls
Three girls have arrived
 - d. Sono arrivate tre ragazze
They-are arrived three girls
Three girls have arrived

These observations are consistent with the proposal that realization of agreement is related to the positional properties of the elements concerned and support a grammatical interpretation of the phenomenon. In post-verbal configurations morphological realization of number agreement is not mandatory. Agreement between the inflected verb and the inverted subject is never richer than agreement between Agr^o and SpecAgrP.

According to the view that agreement processes are the reflex of an established Spec–head relation inside an Agr projection, as revealed by (pre-verbal) subject agreement, post-verbal subject agreement involves checking in a non-local configuration and the building of a syntactic chain. In their paper they argue that agreement in SubjV structures is checked twice: AgrS gets valued through AGREE and its features are then checked after movement of the subject, in a local Spec–head configuration. In VSubj structures agreement is established uniquely under AGREE, as agreement checking in the local Spec–head configuration is not available. The formalism expressed in (2) presents Agreement as a grammatical process related to hierarchical factors.

- (2)
- a. DP ... AGR syntactic checking
 - b. AGR ... DP specific property of the system
- (Guasti and Rizzi, 2002)

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