Construction, allostruction or general pattern?

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The present study investigates the acquisition of Spanish relative sentences by 7–8-year-olds as a window into the mental representations of grammar and, most precisely, as a test to whether two apparently related structures can be subsumed as the same construction within a CxG framework. These two structures were object relatives (ORs) with two nominal NPs and either with or without the preposition *a* + a definite article marking the complementizer (e.g., *el niño que el abuelo abraza vs. el niño **al** que el abuelo abraza* 'the boy that the grandpa is hugging'), which we will henceforth refer to as plain-variant and a-variant, respectively. The two variants convey essentially the same meaning and the form is the same except for the presence/absence of an optional element (Demonte, 1999). However, this very same optionality and the fact that there are subtle usage differences between the plain- and a-variant in terms of register and modality (i.e., the a-variant is less common in informal registers and spoken language; Reali, 2014), make the constructional status of these structures unclear.

We assessed the comprehension of the two OR variants by means of a picture selection task and a pre-test - post-test design with an intervening training phase. Crucially, the training phase only involved one of the two OR variants, which allowed us to assess to what extent training with one variant generalized to the other variant. Results showed that children were consistently more accurate with the plain-variant than the a-variant both at pre-test and post-test and that they improved more for the trained variant than for the untrained one. We take both the accuracy difference across the board and the difference between the trained and untrained variant after training to suggest that the two OR variants are represented in the early stages of acquisition as two separate yet closely related constructions rather than the same construction. Furthermore, the higher accuracy for the plain-variant, which is far more frequent in spoken Spanish (Butler, 1992) but semantically less transparent than the a-variant (del Río, López-Higes & Martín-Aragoneses, 2012), provides further evidence of the key role that frequency plays in first language acquisition (e.g., Abott-Smith & Tomasello, 2006).

References

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