Acquiring (illocutionary) complementisers: preliminary insights from child Catalan and Spanish, and beyond

1. Overview. This paper provides novel data from child Catalan and Spanish showing that illocutionary complementisers emerge remarkably early, in many cases well before subordinating complementisers start to appear. This poses a problem for bottom-up maturational approaches to the acquisition of functional categories, which propose the CP left periphery develops last. Such facts are argued to support, instead, approaches that take (at least some) discourse and speaker-hearer content to be acquisitionally privileged and accessible early and that take functional spines to initially develop 'inwardly'. Preliminary data from Italian is also presented to further corroborate these claims.

2. Background. The acquisition of complementisers and subordination is typically taken to be a relatively late phenomenon, in comparison to other very early phenomena, such as the acquisition of basic word-order and head-directionality (e.g., see Armon-Lotem, 2005; Clahsen & Penke, 1992, on Hebrew and German). However, another kind of (main-clause) complementiser attested across Ibero-Romance and used prevalently in spoken contexts has gone unstudied in the context of the emergence of complementisers. These are so-called ILLOCUTIONARY complementisers (in the sense of Corr, 2016); that is, complementisers that do not function as a subordinator that heads a complement or relative clause (as in Cat. *Li he dit **que** aniré a Barcelona* 'I told him/her that I'm going to Barcelona') and instead have been repurposed to introduce non-embedded matrix clauses, with several illocutionary and speaker-hearer-oriented functions. Largely adopting Corr's (2016) terminology, these can be subdivided into EXCLAMATIVE, QUOTATIVE, CONJUNCTIVE and INTERROGATIVE complementisers (the latter only available in Catalan); e.g., Cat. *Que$_{EXCL}$ ho has llençat tot al terra!*, 'You've thrown everything on the floor!' or Sp. *No le digas eso a mamá, que$_{CONJ}$ es un secreto,* 'Don't tell that to mum, because it's a secret'.

I adopt neo-performative proposals (building on Ross, 1970) that take such utterance- and conversation-related information to be formally represented in the syntax. These works embed illocutionary complementisers as part of the C-domain and/or of a higher Speech-Act-oriented domain (following, i.a., Speas & Tenny, 2003; Haegeman & Hill, 2013; Wiltschko 2014, 2021; see, in particular, Corr, 2016, 2022).

In this context, therefore, illocutionary complementisers represent a new and potentially productive testbed for the claim that CP- and left-peripheral material and, specifically, complementisers emerge late in the learning path, as has been argued in bottom-up maturational approaches to the acquisition of syntactic spines (Radford, 1990; Rizzi, 1993; Friedmann & Reznick, 2021; Friedmann et al., 2021). Moreover, they have the potential to shed light on the acquisition timing of illocutionary and speaker-hearer-oriented material compared to propositional material, a domain which thus far has received limited attention (though cf., i.a., Potts & Roeper, 2006; Heim & Wiltschko, 2021).

3. Methodology and data. The production of illocutionary complementisers by five Catalan- and five Spanish- speaking children in the CHILDES database is quantified and compared to the production of finite embedding complementisers. The results show that illocutionary complementisers emerge on average significantly earlier than subordinating complementisers ($t(16) = -4.0871, p < .001$), instantiating novel evidence for early access to a CP domain (see Table 1)[1]. Some examples of early illocutionary complementisers are given below:

Language	Children	Illocutionary	Embedding
Catalan	Laura	1;10.22	3;00.02
		1.15 MLU	2.42 MLU
	Gisela	1;08.24	2;08.00
		1.13 MLU	2.61 MLU
	Àlvar	2;02.06	2;06.25
		1.84 MLU	1.91 MLU
	Guillem	2;02.28	2;11.25
		1.54 MLU	2.44 MLU
	Júlia	2;06.25	2;06.25
		2.74 MLU	2.74 MLU
Spanish	Irene	1;08.09	1;08.26
		1.88 MLU	2.28 MLU
	Yasmin	1;10.08	2;05.18
		1.93 MLU	2.47 MLU
	Juan	1;11.11	2;01.21
		1.58 MLU	1.77 MLU
	Magín	1;09.01	1;10.00
		1.78 MLU	2.73 MLU
	Emilio	2;04.17	2;04.17
		2.18 MLU	2.18 MLU
Average		1.66 MLU	2.31 MLU

Table 1. Emergence of illocutionary and embedding complementisers

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[1] Calculation of the average MLU values in Table 1, as well as the independent-samples t-test, exclude any outlier values (in this case, Júlia's).

(1) *Catalan*   *Spanish*

a. Ai, **que**   crema!   (Laura, MLU 1.35)   c. **Que**   no   quiero   (Juan, MLU 1.58)
    ouch that.EXCL burn.3SG   that.QUOT not want.1SG
    'Ouch, it's burning!'   '(I've said) I don't want to'

b. **Que** ja   no fa   mal?   (Guillem, MLU 1.99) d. ¡**Que**   viene!   (Magín, MLU 1.78)
    that.INT already not make.3SG pain   that.EXCL come.3SG
    'Does it not hurt anymore?'   'He/she is coming!'

Finally, early emergence of illocutionary complementisers also appears to extend beyond Ibero-Romance languages. I will briefly provide initial evidence that they are also attested in the early productions of Italian children (see 2). Crucially, I also establish that they are often found in creative configurations that are ungrammatical in the children's Tuscan and Northern Italian varieties (but sanctioned in Ibero-Romance varieties and Southern Italian Dialects). These include main-clause complementisers seemingly being used for exclamative, interrogative, conjunctive and quotative purposes (see 2-3), most of which are generally disallowed in Italian.

(2)   (3)
a. **Che**   ride!   (Martina, MLU 1.99)   a. E **che**   vuoi   un posto tu?   (Marco, MLU 2.16)
    that.EXCL laugh.3SG   and that.INT want.2SG a place you
    'He/she is laughing!'   'And do you want a place?'

b. **Che**   piove   (Martina, MLU 1.86)   b. **Che**   lo   metto   qui   (Elisa, MLU 4.47)
    that.CONJ rain.3SG   that.QUOT CL.DO= put.1SG here
    'It's raining' (in response to *l'ombrello?*, 'the   '(I've said) I'm putting this here' (uttered right after *lo*
    umbrella?', asking what someone was doing with   *metto qui*, 'I'm putting this here')
    an umbrella)

This suggests that there is a possible developmental stage in which Italian children 'maximise' the use of illocutionary *che*, considerably outstripping the uses of main-clause *che* apparent in their respective Italian varieties and providing a new lens with which to understand the role of speaker-hearer content in early grammars. As shown in (3), this apparent generalisation of the interactionally-oriented functions of Italian *che* also extends to later developmental stages.

4. Theoretical implications. These findings are theoretically consequential in at least two respects: on the one hand, they illustrate important developmental differences between kinds of complementisers in child Catalan and Spanish — a result hard to account for in approaches that take functional categories to mature bottom-up, with left-peripheral knowledge developing last. I argue, instead, that the early emergence of illocutionary complementisers favours a view which takes (parts of) the C-domain to be present early on in child grammars (see, i.a., Roeper & Rohrbacher, 1994; Tsimpli, 2005; van Kampen, 2010; Biberauer & Roberts, 2015; Biberauer, 2018, 2019; Heim & Wiltschko, 2021). Secondly, albeit more speculatively, the preliminary data from child Italian could potentially elucidate children's keenness to innovatively generalise already-acquired forms by endowing them with novel speaker-hearer meaning, as expected in theoretical approaches such as Biberauer's (2018) Peripheral Speaker-Hearer Hypothesis and Biberauer's (2019) Maximise Minimal Means model.

5. Conclusions and future directions. This paper establishes that illocutionary complementisers consistently emerge earlier than embedding complementisers in child Catalan and Spanish, an area thus far unexplored. I have also offered preliminary evidence suggesting illocutionary complementisers are attested relatively early in Italian child speech too, often in configurations that illustrate generalisation of *che* to a broader range of speaker-hearer functions than those in the children's input. The early emergence of illocutionary complementisers lends additional support to the salience of at least some speech-act and discourse material in acquisition. Further study of the acquisition of illocutionary complementisers (and speaker-hearer-oriented elements more broadly) will enhance our understanding of the make-up of early child grammars and the heuristics used to leverage and generalise formal knowledge from systematicities in the input.

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