SPLIT FOCUS PREFERENCES IN TAGALOG: EVIDENCE FROM CHILD LANGUAGE [*]

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This study makes use of an elicited production task to investigate child and adult preferences for particular focus patterns in Tagalog declarative sentences and relative clauses. Our findings point to a general preference for theme focus over agent focus in declarative sentences on the part of both children and adults, but a preference among children for relative clauses with agent focus.

1. Introduction

A signature feature of Tagalog is its so-called focus system,[1] in which the verb is marked with an affix indicating the thematic role of one of its NP arguments, which in turn is marked by the case prefix *aŋ* and often said to be 'focused.' In this study, we will investigate two core patterns of this sort: agent focus (AF)

[1] Although the terms "voice" or "trigger" are also sometimes used for this phenomenon, we choose the term "focus" in this paper.

and theme focus (TF). The examples in (1)–(3)[2] help illustrate how the system works.

(1)   T<um>akbo   aŋ   lalake.
       <AF.PFV>run   +FOC   boy
       'The boy ran.'

(2)   B<um>ili   naŋ   libro   aŋ   lalake.
       <AF.PFV>buy   -FOC   book   +FOC   boy
       'The boy bought a book.'

 (3)   B<in>ili   naŋ   lalake   aŋ   libro.
       <TF.PFV>buy   -FOC boy   +FOC   book
       'A boy bought the book.'

In the case of the intransitive sentence in (1), the verb carries the agent focus infix *-um-*, reflecting the fact that its sole argument (the agent *lalake* 'boy') is focused, as indicated by the case prefix *aŋ*. Whereas intransitive sentences allow just this one option, patterns containing a two-place predicate permit the alternation exemplified in (2) and (3). In (2), the agent argument is focused, as shown by its occurrence with *aŋ* and by the presence of agent focus infix *-um-* on the verb. In (3), in contrast, the theme argument is focused: it is marked by *aŋ* and triggers the theme focus infix *-in-* on the verb.

       Relative clauses (RC) in Tagalog are introduced by the 'linker' *-ŋ* and follow the noun that they modify.[3]

(4)   lalaki=[RC ŋ   t<um>akbo   __]
       boy=LNK   <AF.PFV>run
       'the boy that ran'

A key feature of Tagalog is that only focused arguments can be relativized. Thus, as illustrated below, only the agent argument can be relativized in agent focus patterns, and only the theme argument can be relativized in theme focus patterns.

(5) a.   Relativization of the agent in an agent focus pattern (acceptable):
          lalaki=[RC ŋ   b<um>ili   naŋ   libro   __]
          boy=LNK   <AF.PFV>buy   -FOC book
          'the book that the boy bought'

b. Relativization of the agent in a theme focus pattern (unacceptable):

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*lalaki=[RC ŋ  b<in>ili         __   aŋ    libro]
 boy=LNK    <TF.PFV>buy             +FOC  book
 'the book that the boy bought'
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(6) a. Relativization of the theme in a theme focus pattern (acceptable):

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libro=[RC ŋ  b<in>ili         naŋ   lalake __ ]
book=LNK    <TF.PFV> buy  -FOC   boy
'the book that the boy bought'
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b. Relativization of the theme in an agent focus pattern (unacceptable):

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*libro=[RC ŋ  b<um>ili         __    aŋ     lalake]
 book=LNK    <TF.PFV> buy            +FOC   boy
 'the book that the boy bought'
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Despite its unusual and intriguing features, the Tagalog focus system has received little attention in the literature on language acquisition. The few studies that have been done on declarative sentences (Tucker 1971, Segalowitz and Galang 1978) suffer from complications that make their results difficult to interpret, and there have been no studies at all on relative clause patterns. We attempt to remedy this situation by addressing the following two questions: (i) What is the preferred focus pattern in declarative sentences for children and adults? (ii) What is the preferred relative clause pattern for children and adults? We report on our findings in the next two sections.

2.   Experiment 1—declarative clauses

Experiment 1 aimed to answer the first research question by using a picture-based elicited production task to examine adults' and children's production of declarative clauses.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

We studied 14 children aged 4;2 to 5;3 (mean 4;6) as well as 31 adult controls.

2.1.2. Materials

The experiment consisted of four conditions crossing the definiteness of agents and themes (definite agent and definite theme, definite agent and indefinite theme, and so on). Definiteness was established with the help of a context that included a picture and a background sentence (see Figures 1 and 2 below).

Half the items within each condition contained an animate agent and an animate theme involved in a semantically reversible event: hugging, carrying, pinching, pulling, and pushing.[4] The other half involved an animate agent and an inanimate theme involved in a semantically nonreversible event: cutting, eating, picking, washing, and reading.

For the purposes of this paper, we will restrict our attention to test items in which both agent and theme are definite and animate. Because focused arguments tend to be definite in Tagalog (Reid and Liao 2001), this condition offers participants an opportunity to cast their response as either an agent focus or a theme focus pattern, thereby revealing any preferences that they might have. A further advantage of this sort of test item is that it permits a direct comparison with relative clauses, the second structure type with which we are concerned. As we will see in section 3, the clause type normally used in studies of relative clauses also contains two animate definite arguments.

2.1.3. Procedure

Each test item began with presentation of a picture such as the one in Figure 1, accompanied by the background sentence (in Tagalog) "Here is a family: father, brother, sister, and mother," to ensure that each character would be familiar to the participants (and hence definite).

Figure 1. Context picture of the father, brother, sister, and mother in Condition 2.

Participants were then presented with the actual test item, which consisted of a picture such as the one illustrated in Figure 2, along with the query "What is happening here?" In this particular case, participants are expected to respond by

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[4] An event is semantically reversible if it is equally plausible for either participant to function as agent or theme. Thus a sentence such as *The boy hugged the girl* is semantically reversible since, in principle, a boy could hug a girl or a girl could hug a boy. In contrast, *The boy read the book* is not reversible, since a book cannot read a boy.

reporting that the father is carrying the brother, giving us the opportunity to observe a possible preference for either agent focus or theme focus.

Figure 2. Target picture in Condition 2. The target answer is a Tagalog equivalent of "The father is carrying the brother."

2.2. Results

After removing irrelevant answers, we were left with 31 responses from adults and 19 from children. As shown in Figure 3, both groups manifested an overwhelming preference for theme focus (96.8% for adults, 84.2% for children).
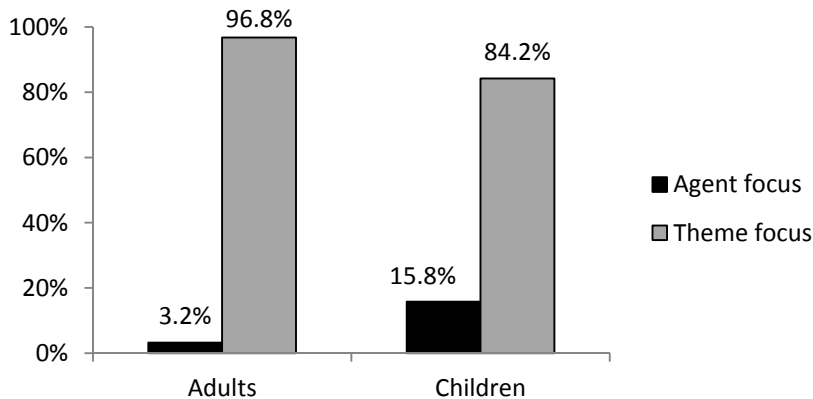

Figure 3. Adults' and children's focus preference when agent and theme are both [+animate] [+definite].

This asymmetry strongly suggests that theme focus is overall the preferred pattern in both adult and child production, consistent with reports in the literature that theme focus in the default in Tagalog (Payne 1982, De Guzman 1988, Aldridge 2012). We turn next to the question of whether a comparable preference is found in relative clauses.

3.   Experiment 2—relative clauses

Experiment 2 examines preferences in the use of relative clauses with the help a picture-based elicited production.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

Fourteen children aged 4;1 to 5;5 (mean 4;10) participated in our second experiment, along with seven adult controls.

3.1.2. Materials

We made use of 13 pairs of black-and-white pictures, which consisted of 3 practice items and 10 target items. The target items involved reversible events with an animate agent and an animate theme, both of which were made definite with the help of a context. There were two conditions—one that elicited agent focus relative clauses and one that elicited theme focus relative clauses.

3.1.3. Procedure
Each test item consisted of a two-picture panel depicting the same action using different characters; an accompanying pair of sentences provided a background context.
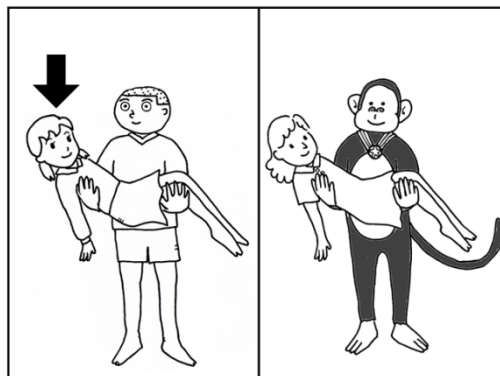

Figure 4. Sample agent focus relative clause item for the target response, "the boy who is carrying the girl."

In the case of Figure 4, for instance, participants were told (in Tagalog): "A boy is carrying the monkey. Another boy is carrying the girl." Because the characters in the picture were made familiar to the participants by the lead-in sentence, they can be considered definite, as was also the case with the characters in the test items used in our first experiment. They were then asked

"Who has the arrow mark?" The targeted response in this case is an agent relative clause, as shown in (7).

(7)   lalaki=[$_{RC}$ ŋ   b<um>u~buhat   naŋ babae   __]
        boy=LNK   <AF>IPFV~carry   -FOC girl
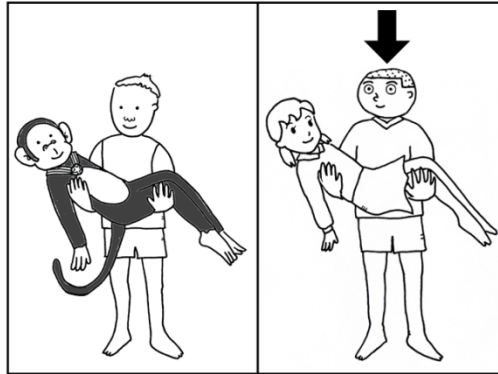   'the boy who is carrying the girl'

Figure 5. Sample theme focus relative clause item for the target response, "the girl who the boy is carrying."

Figure 5 exemplifies a test item designed to elicit a theme relative clause, as illustrated in (8).

(8)   babai=[$_{RC}$ ŋ   b<in>u~buhat   naŋ   lalake __]
        girl=LNK   <TF>IPFV~carry   -FOC   boy
        'the girl who the boy is carrying.'

3.2. Results

We analyzed 65 responses from adults (32 from the agent focus relative clause condition; 33 from the theme focus relative clause condition) and 48 responses from children (25 from the agent focus relative clause condition; 23 from the theme focus relative clause condition). Figure 6 summarizes our findings.

        As can be seen in Figure 6, adult participants performed at ceiling in both conditions; however, results from children showed a significantly higher success rate on agent focus relative clauses over theme focus relative clauses (β = 1.54 ± 0.62, $p < .05$).[5] This suggests that children find agent focus relative clauses easier to produce than their theme focus counterparts—a result that runs counter to the strong preference for theme focus observed in declarative clauses.

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[5] I report fixed effect coefficients, β, from mixed effects logistic regression, which includes participants and items as random effects. The estimates of the two random effects were close to zero, indicating that the probability of targeted responses does not depend on individual participants or items.
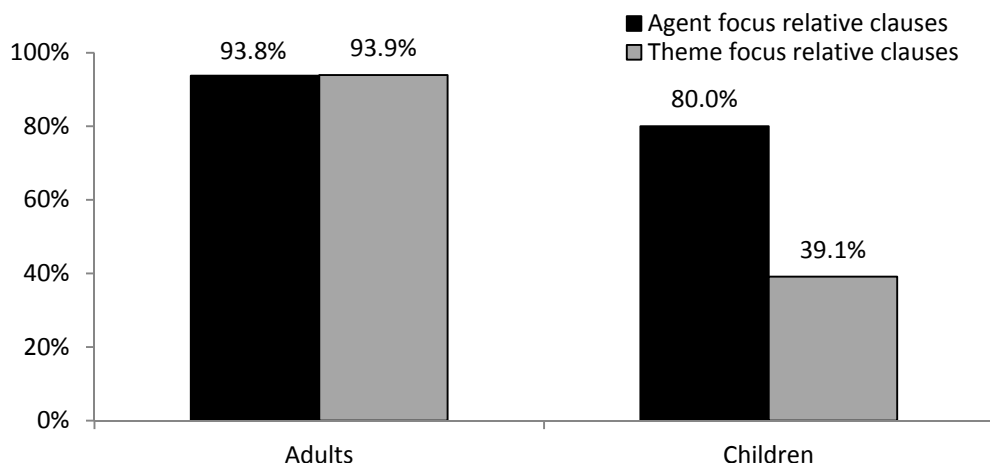
Figure 6. Rate of target responses in both relative clause types.

4.   General discussion

In sum, our results reveal a mystery of sorts. On the one hand, we have been able to experimentally confirm a standard generalization about Tagalog: theme focus is preferred to agent focus. Moreover, this seems to be true for children, almost to the same overwhelming degree as it is for adults.

On the other hand, matters are very different in the case of relative clauses, where children favor agent focus patterns over their theme focus counterparts by a large and statistically significant margin. In this regard, the children's performance reflects a much broader cross-linguistic tendency for learners and speakers to favor relativization of a verb's external argument over internal arguments and obliques, as reported for Ch'ol (Clemens et al. to appear), Dutch (Frazier 1987), English (Diessel and Tomasello 2005), French (Holmes and O'Regan 1981), German (Schriefers, Friederici, and Kühn 1995), Greek (Stavrakaki 2001), Hebrew (Friedmann, Belletti, and Rizzi 2009), Hungarian (MacWhinney and Pléh 1988), Japanese (Kawashima 1980), Kaqchikel (Heaton 2015), Korean (Cho 1999), Mandarin Chinese (Hsu, Hermon, and Zukowski 2009), Persian (Rahmany, Marefat and Kidd 2011), Q'anjob'al (Clemens et al. to appear), and Swedish (Håkansson and Hansson 2000).

Our findings thus raise a series of new questions about Tagalog pertaining to the nature of focus, the preferences that are manifested in different constructions, and the manner in which those preferences emerge in the course of language acquisition. These questions are at the forefront of additional research that we are currently conducting on Tagalog.

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