

## **Genuine Relatives vs. Clefts in L1 French: Revisiting the Factor of Depth of Embedding**

The complexity of linguistic constructions in child language acquisition has been widely studied. Within the domain of syntactic complexity, considerable attention has been devoted to intervention effects, which arise amongst others in adjunct and direct object relative clauses (RCs) (3). In such clauses, an element must cross over another element during movement, disrupting syntactic parsing (Friedmann et al., 2009; Belletti et al., 2012; amongst others). Hamann and Tuller (2014) hypothesized that another factor contributes to syntactic complexity: depth of embedding. They distinguished between genuine RCs (1) (3), with deep embedding inside a DP, and superficial RCs (2), with more superficial embedding inside a CP. Their corpus study, examining typically developing (TD) children aged 6 to 14 and children with specific language impairment (SLI), supported their hypothesis: compared to genuine RCs, superficial RCs were more frequent in younger TD children and in children with SLI. The present study investigates whether depth of embedding similarly affects the production of complex clauses in younger L1 French-speaking children aged 2 to 5. Our analysis is based on a total of 1082 *c'est*-clefts (2), analyzed as superficial RCs, and genuine RCs (1) (3), produced by 2- to 5-year-old L1 French children from the Palasis (2009) and York (De Cat & Plunkett, 2022) corpora.

Our findings reveal that even the youngest children already produce both superficial and genuine RCs. However, various non-adultlike formal types of RCs are attested, including RCs without a relativizer and RCs involving a resumptive pronoun (Table 1).

Focusing exclusively on subject RCs to isolate potential intervention effects from object and adjunct RCs, we found that the proportion of superficial RCs is lower than that of genuine RCs. From the age of 54 months onward, the proportion of genuine RCs even surpasses that of superficial RCs. Moreover, non-adultlike patterns are more frequent in subject superficial RCs than in subject genuine RCs. Hence, our study suggests that children have more difficulty producing clefts (i.e., superficial RCs) than genuine RCs. A possible explanation is that clefts are used for specific Information Structure (IS) purposes; it may be that children struggle to integrate these IS properties with their syntactic representation of clefts.

When considering only object and adjunct RCs, in which intervention effects come into play, we found that genuine RCs are more frequent than superficial RCs. Interestingly, from the age of 54 months onward, the proportion of object and adjunct genuine RCs increases considerably, while that of object and adjunct superficial RCs decreases. This shift may be attributed to the older children's improved ability to handle intervention effects, leading to an increase in object and adjunct genuine RCs. At the same time, the decline in object and adjunct clefts might be explained by the prosodic properties of French: clefts are required to express contrastive focus on the subject, as this is not possible in a sentence with canonical word order (Hupet & Tilmant, 1989). However, contrastive focus on the object or adjunct can already be achieved within an SVO structure. Thus, our study might suggest that older children have acquired these prosodic constraints.

In contrast to the depth of embedding, our findings support the well-established view that intervention effects contribute to syntactic complexity. Specifically, children produced more subject than object and adjunct RCs, regardless of their type (genuine or superficial). If depth of embedding were a key factor influencing syntactic complexity, we would expect a stronger subject-object/adjunct asymmetry in genuine RCs than in superficial RCs, as was found by Hamann and Tuller (2014). However, this was not observed in our data.

In conclusion, our study does not provide evidence supporting depth of embedding as a factor increasing the syntactic complexity of constructions. Rather, our findings suggest that additional factors, such as the prosody and IS of clefts, contribute to their complexity and impact their L1 acquisition.

## Examples

(1) Genuine subject RC:

*On a* [DP *un coq* [CP *qui fait cocorico*]] !  
 we have a rooster that does cock-a-doodle-doo  
 ‘We have a rooster that goes cock-a-doodle-doo!’ (Palasis, LSN, 5;6)

(2) Superficial subject RC (*c’est*-cleft):

*C’est* [CP... [FocP *moi qui* [TP *lis*]]].  
 it is me who reads  
 ‘It’s me who is reading.’ (Palasis, ELE, 5;6)

(3) Genuine direct object RC with intervening subject:

*C’est* [DP *une personne* [CP *que tu ne connais pas* <*une personne*>]].  
 It is a person that you know not  
 ‘It’s a person that you don’t know.’ (York, Léa, 4;1)

**Table 1. Formal types of superficial RC’s (*c’est*-clefts)**

		Genuine RC	Superficial RC
RC- attempt without relativizer	without resumptive	(4) * <i>On a un coq</i> we have a rooster <i>fait cocorico !</i> does cock-a-doodle-doo	(5) * <i>C’est moi lis.</i> it is me reads
	with resumptive	(6) * <i>On a un coq il</i> we have a rooster he <i>fait cocorico !</i> does cock-a-doodle-doo	(7) * <i>C’est moi je lis.</i> it is me I read
full RC with relativizer	without resumptive	(8) * <i>On a un coq qui</i> we have a rooster that <i>il fait cocorico !</i> he does cock-a-doodle-doo	(9) * <i>C’est moi je</i> it is me I <i>lis.</i> reads
	with resumptive	(10) <i>On a un coq</i> we have a rooster <i>qui fait</i> that does <i>cocorico !</i> cock-a-doodle-doo	(11) <i>C’est moi qui</i> It is me that <i>lis.</i> reads

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