L1 ACQUISITION OF DIRECT OBJECT CLITIC DOUBLING[*]

Mona Luiza Ungureanu
Université de Moncton Campus de Shippagan

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the first language acquisition of the Direct Object Clitic Doubling (henceforth [DOCD]) parameter in Romanian, a [+DOCD] language, and reports the results of a pilot experiment that identifies the default setting of this parameter. The hypothesis tested here assumes, following Sportiche (1996, 1997), that [-DOCD] is the default value of this parameter, while the [+DOCD] value is acquired on the basis of positive evidence. Following the Full Competence Hypothesis (FCH) as proposed by Poeppel & Wexler (1993) among others, I assume that functional categories (i.e. clitics) are present in the child's grammar from the beginning. The working hypothesis in this paper predicts that in earlier stages of language acquisition children will entertain the [-DOCD] parameter, even when they are learning a [+DOCD] language. These predictions are borne out by the results of my study. This pilot experiment was designed to investigate the process of acquisition of the [+DOCD] value; in this respect, children at different stages of acquisition and adult control participants were tested. Two tasks focusing on the DOCD values were used: an elicited production task and an imitation task. We conclude that in the process of L1 acquisition of [DOCD] the default value is [-DOCD].

Key words: Romanian L1 acquisition, direct object clitics acquisition, clitic doubling acquisition, parameteric settings, functional categories.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we discuss the first language acquisition of the direct object clitic doubling (henceforth [DOCD]) parameter in Romanian, and present the results of a pilot study that could be successfully expanded into a larger experiment. The present research is part of a comprehensive, ongoing study on the morphosyntactic behavior, and the first and second language acquisition of functional categories in Romance languages, with particular focus on Romanian, French and Spanish. The hypothesis tested here maintains that the default value of the [DOCD] parameter is the [- DOCD] value. This predicts that, in the earlier stages of first language acquisition, children – including those learning a [+DOCD] language – entertain the [-DOCD] parameter and thus produce syntactic structures that are consistent with the [-DOCD] value. Moreover, we predict that structures consistent with the [+DOCD] value of the parameter emerge subsequently, as a result of exposure to positive evidence.

In languages that permit direct object clitic doubling ([+DOCD]), such as Standard Romanian, pronominal clitics are coindexed with an overt direct object determiner phrase (DP), as in (1a) below. Conversely, in languages that do not permit direct object clitic doubling ([-DOCD]),

[*] This work received partial financial support from Université de Moncton.

BDD-A26252 © 2017 Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:00 UTC)

such as Standard French, pronominal clitics cannot be coindexed with an overt DP in direct object position IP-internally (within the same Inflectional Phrase, same extended projection) as in (1b) below.[1] Under investigation here are direct object clitic doubling constructions, like the Romanian example in (1a), where the clitic *l-* (glossed CL) and the DP *Milu* are coindexed. Crucially, the presence of the clitic is obligatory here.[2]

(1) a. *Eu* ****(l)$_i$-*** *am văzut pe* ***Milu$_i$*** Romanian
I CL.ACC. 3. SG. M. have seen to Milu
'I saw Milu'

b. **Je* ***l$_i$*** *ai vu (à)* ***Milu$_i$*** French
I CL.ACC. 3. SG. M. have seen to Milu
'I saw Milu'

Romanian is particularly suitable for the investigation of this parameter in first language acquisition for two main reasons. First, [DOCD] in Romanian occurs IP-internally and thus can be examined within short sentences that are not associated with a significant computational load, which is ideal when investigating the grammars of young children. Secondly, in the structures investigated here, IP-internal [DOCD] is obligatory. Thus, a [-DOCD] construction is ungrammatical, and is, crucially, not part of a child's input. Furthermore, the obligatory nature of [DOCD] helps us circumvent the complications that are often times present when analyzing optional or pragmatically triggered [DOCD] structures, which is frequently the case of other [DOCD] constructions. These syntactic circumstances contribute greatly to the success of this experiment and are not always present in the grammars of other languages that allow for [DOCD].

In what follows, we will first outline the theoretical considerations that pertain to the syntactic structure and the first language acquisition of [DOCD]. This will be done within the Generative Grammar and Universal Grammar (UG) theoretical frameworks. We proceed by describing the methodology, presenting the results and providing an interpretation of the results. Then we discuss strategies and suggestions that should be implemented in order to expand and improve the present study and some of the issues we encountered.

2. SYNTACTIC BACKGROUND FOR DIRECT OBJECT CLITIC DOUBLING

Let us first consider the syntactic characteristics of clitics and clitic doubling. Pronominal clitics are pronoun-like elements, also referred to as deficient/weak pronominals due to the fact that they cannot be stressed and they depend morphologically on another word. In Romance languages, they are usually dependent on the verb complex (verb and/or auxiliary) and they have

[1] I am referring here to standard varieties of French in which DOCD is not permitted. Note, however, that in certain non-standard dialects of French, particularly in the spoken varieties, DOCD may occur.

[2] There may be some varieties of Romanian in which clitic doubling with proper names is optional rather than obligatory. However, in Standard Romanian and a large number of varieties this is not the case. I have conducted grammaticality judgement tests for a number of obligatory clitic environments and they confirmed that with proper names and pronouns clitic doubling is obligatory. Clitic doubling is also obligatory with a number of other types of DPs, which are not directly relevant to the present paper.

BDD-A26252 © 2017 Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:00 UTC)

person, number, gender and case features. Some examples of direct object/accusative clitics from French, Spanish and Romanian are provided in (2) below.

(2) a. *Marie* ***le*** *voit* French
Mary CL.ACC. 3. SG. M. sees
'Mary sees him'

b. *Maria* ***lo*** *vea* Spanish
Mary CL. ACC. 3. SG. M. see
'Mary sees him'

c. ***Maria*** ***îl*** *vede* Romanian
Mary CL. ACC. 3. SG. M. see
'Mary sees him'

.

According to Roberge (1990), Sportiche (1996, 1997, 1999) Cuervo (2003) and Hill & Tasmowski (2008), among others, accusative clitics are functional categories base-generated in their surface position that can be associated with a DP in argument position with which they agree in person, number, gender and case. This association is contingent upon the features exhibited by the DP and is subject to parametric variation.

For constructions where the accusative clitic occurs on its own, that is, it is not followed by and coindexed with an overt direct object DP in the same IP, it is assumed that the direct object is in fact a [+pronominal] [- anaphoric] empty category, also known as 'pro'. This 'pro' is directly licensed by the presence of the accusative clitic with which it forms a chain for the purposes of case and theta role assignment. This and similar analyses of pronominal clitics are proposed by Jaeggli (1982, 1986), Borer (1984) and Sportiche (1996, 1997) and account for all languages and dialects that make use of accusative clitics, including those that do not permit clitic doubling, such as Standard French.[3]

In DOCD constructions, the overt DP associate of the clitic is also restricted in terms of its features: in Romanian the accusative clitic in a doubling construction may only be associated with a DP that has *no choice* reference, according to Pîrvulescu & Roberge (2005), while in Spanish it is associated with a DP that is [+specific], according to Suñer (1988).[4] It has been widely argued in the theoretical syntax literature that it is the accusative clitic that places restrictions on the material that it licenses in its associate DP. According to Sportiche (1996, 1997), these restrictions are subject to parametric variations triggered by the features that are present in the feature matrices of the clitic and its associate DP. Furthermore, he argues that the doubled DP moves to the specifier position of the accusative clitic phrase by LF as an instance of Spec-Head licensing. Suñer (1988) also notes that in addition to person, number, gender and case, the accusative clitic in Spanish DOCD constructions also agrees with features of animacy and specificity. Note that these restrictions and cross-linguistic differences are subject to parametric variation.

For the purposes of the present paper I assume that, in DOCD constructions, the accusative clitic licenses its associate DP and enters in an agreement relation with it, where the functional features relevant to DOCD are present in the feature matrices of the accusative clitic and of the DP, in line with Sportiche (1996) and Suñer (1988). Specifically, according to Sportiche (1996)

[3] I refer the reader to Kayne (1991, 1994) and Avram & Coene (2008) for an alternative syntactic analysis and to Torrego (1996), Uriagereka (1995), Sportiche (1997), Suñer (1988) and Belletti (1999), among others, for more analyses of pronominal clitics.

[4] Also note that there is great variation among Spanish dialects in terms of the features relevant to DOCD.

BDD-A26252 © 2017 Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:00 UTC)

the accusative clitic heads a functional projection called Accusative Clitic Voice (acc. ClV) and is coindexed with a nominal XP in direct object position. This construction obeys the Clitic Criterion (similar to the wh-criterion) in (I).

I. The Clitic Criterion – Sportiche (1996)
1. A clitic must be in a Spec/head relationship with a [+F] XP at LF.
2. A [+F] XP must be in a Spec/head relationship with a clitic at LF.

Of importance here is (1) of the Clitic Criterion, according to which, an accusative DP with the feature [+F] is licensed in the specifier position of the acc. ClVP. It is this Spec/head relationship that is responsible for the feature agreement between the clitic and the DP with which it is coindexed. In Romanian, both 'pro' and overt DPs may be licensed by the accusative clitic as shown in (3) below. Thus, both 'pro' and overt DPs are [+F], the necessary feature for licensing.

(3) a. *L*$_i$ – *am văzut pro*$_i$ Romanian
CL. ACC. 3. SG. M. have seen
'I saw him'

b. *L*$_i$ – *am văzut pe Milu*$_i$ Romanian
CL.ACC. 3. SG. M. have seen to[5] Milu
'I saw Milu'

In [-DOCD] languages, however, the obligatory property (or feature [F]) for a DP to be licensed in [Spec, Acc.ClP] is that of being a 'pro' and overt DPs cannot be coindexed with a clitic IP internally; thus, overt DPs are treated as [-F]. This renders the Standard French sentence in (4) ungrammatical.

(4) **Jean l' a vu (a) Milu* French
Jean CL.ACC. 3. SG. M. has seen (to) Milu
'Jean saw Milu'

I propose that the cross-linguistic parameterization of [+DOCD] versus [-DOCD] follows directly from the language specific content subsumed under [F] of the Clitic Criterion. Hence, overt DPs are [-F] in [-DOCD] languages but may be (contingent upon further feature specifications) and [+F] in [+DOCD] languages. Crucially, 'pro' is [+F] across languages.[6] Note that I purposely avoid to specify the exact nature of the "specific features" subsumed under the Clitic Criterion above. I do so because, to date, I have not yet encountered an analysis that I have found fully satisfactory, one that would account for all the obligatory clitic doubling constructions in Romanian, nor have I been able to work one out myself yet.[7]

[5] Note that accusative DPs that are clitic doubled also display *differential object marking* with the particle *pe*, similarly to Spanish '*a* personal'. For a detailed discussion of differential object marking in Romanian and the specialization of *pe* see Mardale 2007, 2008, 2015).

[6] To my knowledge all languages that have accusative clitics allow coindexation of the clitic with 'pro'.

[7] For an analysis that explains obligatory clitic doubling in Romanian in terms of feature valuation across domains and D-linked null objects consider Avram & Coene (2008).

BDD-A26252 © 2017 Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:00 UTC)

3. THEORIES AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH OF FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

3.1. THEORIES OF L1 ACQUISITION: FEATURES

Two main theoretical issues arise with respect to the first language acquisition of the clitic doubling parameter: the role of UG in its acquisition and learnability from negative evidence. First of all, if it is indeed the case that all languages that have clitics license 'pro' in their specifier, this licensing property of clitics (i.e. license 'pro' in [Spec, Acc.ClVP]) should be encoded in UG as a universal property of (direct object) clitics and not as a language specific parameter. Following the Full Competence Hypothesis, according to which the properties and principles of UG are available to the child from the beginning, we expect simple clitic constructions to be part of the child's grammar independent of their acquisition of the clitic doubling [+DOCD] constructions.[8]

Secondly, consider the learnability problem from negative evidence. Within the cross-linguistic distribution of clitic use the [-DOCD] parameter is a proper subset of the [+DOCD] parameter since all languages that permit [+DOCD] constructions also permit [-DOCD] constructions, and the opposite does not hold true: many languages that permit [-DOCD] constructions do not permit [+DOCD]. In other words [-DOCD] is subsumed under [+DOCD].[9] It follows that from this perspective too learnability would be facilitated by a [-DOCD] default parameter. Conversely, if [-DOCD] were to be acquired (lexically and/or syntactically) this would be done through negative evidence, thus incurring the learnability problem. Assuming that UG is available to the child at all stages of acquisition, and that acquisition does not rely on negative evidence, both issues stated above lead towards a hypothesis whereby [-DOCD] is the default setting of the [DOCD] parameter.

The clitic doubling parameter provides a good diagnostic to test whether negative evidence is used for the purposes of first language acquisition and whether the properties of UG, specifically features and their values, are present in early/ier child grammar. Moreover, Romanian provides the ideal syntactic setup to investigate the [DOCD] parameter because it has obligatory clitic doubling IP-internally, in environments that require a reduced computational load, i.e., short IPs that do not include a complex syntactic and/or pragmatic structure in the left periphery. Thus, issues relating to optionality in the input are averted, and the effects related to computational overload are minimized.

3.2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Since the present experiment is concerned with earlier acquisition stages of a functional category's value, the DO clitic, it must be established that the functional category is indeed present in the child grammar. This is in accordance with the FCH as proposed by Poeppel & Wexler

[8] In this paper I only compare languages that do make use of clitic projections. Thus, no claim or predictions are made as to non-clitic languages. I will simply assume that the acquisition of clitics takes place at a fairly early stage and is based on positive evidence.

[9] From this perspective, we may not need a binary features representation, rather, one could posit a configuration, where the presence of [DOCD] automatically entails the presence of [-DOCD] constructions. I will leave these theoretical scenarios for future research and more in-depth consideration as the implications of such a configuration would be manifold. A similar point was also raised in Avram & Coene (2008: 7): "Parameter setting may reduce to a very small number of valued features, since valuation of one feature may lead to a cascade-like setting of parameter values."

BDD-A26252 © 2017 Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:00 UTC)

(1993), where the full compound of functional categories is present in the child grammar from the beginning. Also according to the FCH, all principles and properties of UG are present in early grammars; thus, the licensing properties of clitics (licensing 'pro' in [Spec, acc.ClVP]) should be present from the beginning. The view that functional categories are present in early grammars is in contrast to Radford (1990) who claims that functional categories are absent at this stage. Moreover, following Hamann, Rizzi & Frauenfelder (1996) on the acquisition of object clitics in French, I consider that clitics are present in the competence of the child's grammar irrespective of whether the morphological agreement features are the appropriate ones. This contrasts to claims made by Clahsen (1990) where a functional category is assumed to be part of the child's grammar only in as much as the appropriate agreement features are present in the morphology.

With respect to the L1 acquisition of DO clitics, the great majority of studies centres either on the time at which DO clitics emerge and the time and manner in which they are acquired, or on the morphological agreement features they exhibit in child grammar. In the case of the former studies the results suggest that DO clitics emerge later than other functional categories (determiners and subject clitics), they are omitted in early child grammar, and exhibit a prolonged course of development that can include earlier emergence followed by reverting to non-adult-like forms. Some of the studies on the relative late emergence and/or non-target like behavior of DO clitics include, but are not limited to the following: Hamann, Rizzi & Frauenfelder (1996), Jakubowicz et al. (1998), Schaeffer (2000), Hamann (2002), Ticio & Reglero (2002), Avram & Coene (2003), Dominguez (2003) Rasetti (2003), van Kampen (2004), Wexler et al. (2003/2004), Costa & Labo (2005), Grüter (2006, 2011) Pérez-Leroux et al. (2006), Pîrvulescu (2006), Tedeschi (2009), Castilla & Pérez-Leroux (2010). The latter studies, which observed non-target like agreement features and case marking in French, Spanish and Romanian include Hamann, Rizzi & Frauenfelder (1996), Jakubowicz et al. (1998), Avram (2001), Dominguez (2003), Avram & Coene (2008). For studies looking at the bilingual effect on the omission of clitics in first language acquisition consider Pérez-Leroux et al. (2009, 2011) and Pirvulescu et al. (2014), a.o.

One of the most relevant studies to the present paper is Avram & Coene (2008), who investigate certain syntactic constructions that exhibit obligatory accusative direct object clitics. The structures considered are taken by the authors to involve an overt D-linked constituent in the left periphery (possibly Spec TopP) that is coindexed with the direct object, where the post-verbal complement position is empty. Specifically, the structures discussed in Avram & Coene (2008) are: (i) left dislocation structures with dislocated D-linked direct objects; (ii) relative clauses (introduced by care 'which, who'); (iii) D-linked wh-questions (with care 'which, who'); (iv) right-dislocation structures. In all these structures the direct object DPs do not occur in the usual complement position. Rather, they involve either a complex left periphery structure, if the DPs are base generated in the left periphery; or movement operations and chains, if the DPs moved from their complement positions.

Crucially, irrespective of the syntactic structures or operations proposed to account for the aforementioned obligatory clitic constructions, they have to assume a significantly higher pragmatic content and a higher degree of computational complexity than the structures considered in the present study. It is important to note though that Avram & Coene (2008) are not specifically concerned with clitic doubling as such. Rather, their main research hypothesis is that in order to acquire clitic distribution in Romanian, children would have to work out that Romanian bans D-linked null objects and that valuation of the Person features across domains is required. This predicts that, in obligatory clitic constructions, earlier child grammars will contain non-target forms: clitics are omitted and non-adult-like Person index (number, gender and person features) forms

BDD-A26252 © 2017 Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:00 UTC)

are used. Their results are indeed in line with these predictions. Furthermore, one of the most important findings of the study is that the acquisition of 3rd person clitics is delayed and prolonged, while that of 1st and 2nd person clitics is less problematic. These findings confirm results obtained by van Kampen (2004) for Dutch and French pronouns.

3.3. HYPOTHESIS AND PREDICTIONS

The hypothesis put forward in the present paper is that [-DOCD] is the default setting of the [DOCD] parameter and the [+DOCD] parameter is acquired as a result of exposure to positive evidence. For [+DOCD] languages, such as Romanian, this predicts that, in earlier stages of first language acquisition, [-DOCD] constructions, i.e., simple clitic constructions and constructions with an overt DP but no clitic associate, are present before [+DOCD] structures. [+DOCD] constructions emerge later and emergence of [+DOCD] possibly entails a clustering effect with respect to [-DOCD] constructions.[10] Crucially, [+DOCD] constructions would not precede [-DOCD] constructions. In line with findings of previous research on the first language acquisition of clitics, and particularly on direct object clitics in Romance languages, we expect the emergence of clitics, and especially that of 3rd person clitics, to be delayed and the forms produced initially to lack target-like phi-features.

4. METHODOLOGY

This pilot experiment was designed to evaluate the feasibility, suitability and ultimately relevance of the methods to be used in a larger, possibly longitudinal, study investigating the progression of the acquisition of the [+DOCD] parameter in Romanian.[11] Some of the main methodological issues we aim to determine are the approximate age of the participants at the start of the study, and the duration of the study; the suitability of the tasks and stimuli; and the appropriateness of the procedures.

The participants chosen were three children at different stages of acquisition: three boys learning Romanian as the first language one 2;8 years old and two 3;1 years old.[12] All children were exposed to Romanian at home and to both Romanian and English at the day-care facility. Since English does not have clitics, no transfer of properties relating to the [DOCD] parameter from L2 is to be expected.[13] Two adult control subjects whose first and dominant language is Romanian were tested as well.

Two tasks were used: an elicited production task, in which the experimenter was performing various actions with toys, and an imitation task. Both tasks centered on obligatory direct object clitic constructions, including tests for simple clitic constructions (without an associate DP).

[10] For [-DOCD] languages this hypothesis predicts that clitic-doubling constructions will not be present at any stage in the acquisition.

[11] Given that longitudinal studies with young children involve significant long term commitment from the participants and researchers as well as a considerable difficulty level to complete, it is important to precede it with a pilot study that would circumvent otherwise preventable adverse conditions and situations.

[12] Although two of the boys have the same age, they were at different L1 acquisition stages when the data were collected.

[13] Still, according to Pérez-Leroux et al. (2009, 2011) and Pirvulescu et al. (2014), there is a bilingual effect on the acquisition of clitics in L1 which is manifested as omission of clitics in the earlier stages of L1 acquisition.

BDD-A26252 © 2017 Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:00 UTC)

The latter tests ensured that the child grammar has clitic projections and that the [-DOCD] parameter is present. The children were tested individually and prior to the experiment, there was a preparation period during which the children were introduced to the toys used and told what they were expected to do. A total of 25 stimuli were presented (actions and sentences). For the elicited imitation task the participants were required to imitate 16 stimuli sentences: for each grammatical sentence there was an ungrammatical counterpart. Unfortunately, the imitation task was not successful; the shortcomings of the task are discussed in Section 6.1. The experiment lasted an average of 35 minutes.

4.1. THE ELICITED PRODUCTION TASK

This task consisted of two conditions: one eliciting for 'simple clitic constructions' (3 stimuli) and one eliciting for clitic doubling constructions (6 stimuli). Stimuli actions eliciting for direct object clitic constructions both simple and doubling overlapped, the difference consisted only in the stimuli questions asked. For the clitic doubling stimuli the overt DP that is coindexed with the clitic is the name of a personified toy. This type of DPs requires obligatory clitic doubling in Standard Romanian. Thus, failure of the child to produce clitic doubling results in a non-target structure, suggesting that the [DODC] parameter is not yet set to the values of Romanian.

The children were presented with three toys: Big-boy, Koala and Milu. The experimenter was acting out various scenarios involving two of the toys at a time. Crucially, a third toy was in the immediate setting at all times. After the actions were performed by playacting with the toys, the experimenter or caregiver would ask the child a question about what happened. For [-DOCD] constructions the experimenter was asking the questions; for the condition eliciting for [+DOCD] constructions the caregiver, who did not witness the action (she was turned around), would ask the questions. For example: the experimenter acts out Koala kissing Big Boy.

(5) a. The [-DOCD] condition
The child was asked by the experimenter: *Ce a făcut Koala cu Big Boy*? 'What did Koala do to Big Boy? This question elicits a 'simple clitic construction'. Target answer in adult grammar: *L-a pupat*. 'He kissed him.'

b. The [+DOCD] condition
The child was asked by the caregiver: *Ce s-a întâmplat*? 'What happened?' This question elicits a clitic doubling construction.[14] Target answer in adult grammar: '*Koala* ***l****-a pupat pe* ***Big Boy***.' 'Koala kissed Big Boy'

4.2. PREDICTIONS

According to the hypothesis tested here, which claims that the [-DOCD] parameter is the default setting for clitic doubling, we predict that children will produce [-DOCD] constructions prior to [+DOCD] constructions. Thus, we expect to find a period during the earlier stages of acquisition during which children will not have [+DOCD] constructions although they are obligatory in adult grammar, and thus part of their primary evidence. That is, we expect children to have non-target structures, which are not present in their input. The hypothesis proposed in the present paper makes the predictions given in Table 1 below.

[14] Since the toys used to playact were randomly alternated and the caregiver did not see what was happening the participants had to name the direct object DP.

BDD-A26252 © 2017 Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:00 UTC)

TABLE 1

Task 1: predicted syntactic structures and morphological forms

Task/condition	S 2;8	P and S 3;1	Control group
[-DOCD] construction	Simple clitic Non-target forms	Simple clitics Target forms and/or non-target form	Simple clitic Target forms
Task 1 **[+DOCD]** construction	**[-DOCD]** Non-doubled DP or Simple clitic Non-target forms	[+DOCD] Target forms and/or non-target form	[+DOCD] Target forms

Note that the predicted [-DOCD] constructions for the youngest participant include both simple clitic constructions and non-clitic doubled overt DP constructions. These are the constructions found in [-DOCD] languages, but are crucially ungrammatical in adult [+DOCD] Standard Romanian grammars for the stimuli provided here. As for the two 3:1 years old the predictions are not clear, especially because these two participants may be at different stages of acquisition. Since they are presumed to be at an intermediate stage in acquisition, they may have acquired the [+DOCD] parameter; thus, they would perform as the control group. Alternatively, they may still be in the [-DOCD] stage; thus, paralleling the 'earlier stage' predictions represented by the youngest participant. Yet another possibility is that they have acquired the [+DOCD] parameter but consider clitic doubling to be optional for the stimuli given (as is the case with parallel constructions in certain dialects of Spanish). As a result of these various possibilities, the predictions made above regarding this age group are tentative.

5. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The main results are presented in table 2 below. Note that, since the results of the 3;1 children are very different from each other, they cannot be presented as group results; rather, they are treated as individual results. The control subjects responded as a group and the results were 100% the predicted ones, suggesting that the task was designed suitably. For the first condition, the obligatory simple clitic structure, all participants seem to have acquired it.

TABLE 2

Results of task 1

Elicited Production	2;8 Silviu	3;1 Steven	3;1 Paul	Control Group
[-DOCD] Simple Clitic	2/3	3/3	3/3	3/3
[+DOCD] Clitic Doubling	**0/6**	**0/5** (refused to answer once)	5/6	6/6

BDD-A26252 © 2017 Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:00 UTC)

Although not crucial to the present study, some differences in the agreement features of the participants are noteworthy. While Paul and Silviu consistently produce target-like clitics, Steven produces non-target forms that do not have adult-like features. He uses the reflexive/impersonal-looking clitic form: *s-a pupat* 'he kissed himself (reflexive *se*)' or 'people kissed (impersonal *se*)' instead of *l-a pupat* 'he kissed him'. Still, clitics were present in all the sentences he produced and one out of the eight tokens had the correct features. Also interesting is the fact that in three of the nine structures produced by Silviu, the youngest of the participants, both the object and the clitic are omitted. These findings are discussed in Section 6.2. below.

5.1. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

The results of the elicited production task support the hypothesis advanced in this paper: the default setting of the clitic doubling parameter is [-DOCD]. They are also in line with the predictions made: the [+DOCD] stage is preceded by a [-DOCD] stage.[15] The participants who represent the intermediate stage of direct object clitic acquisition, 2;8 year old Silviu and 3;1 Steve, do not produce clitic doubling constructions (0/6; 0/5) but use instead constructions typical for [-DOCD] languages (i.e. either simple clitic constructions or non-doubled DP constructions). On the other hand, the results obtained from the participant who represents a more advanced stage in the progress of direct object clitic acquisition, 3;1 year old Paul, suggest that he has acquired the [+DOCD] parameter (5/6 utterances) and his performance relative to the DOCD parameter is adult-like. The discrepancy between the forms produced by the two 3;1 years old boys suggests, as is usually the case, that the stages of language acquisition cannot be determined by age alone.

Crucially, all participants seem to have acquired the obligatory simple clitic constructions presented in the first condition [-DOCD], including the two participants who do not use obligatory clitic doubling constructions. These findings reinforce the proposal that obligatory simple clitic constructions and obligatory double clitic constructions should be treated as two distinct stages in the progression of the direct object clitic acquisition.

These results are also consistent with the FCH with regard to functional categories since Silviu uses pronominal clitics, which are functional categories. I cannot claim however, that my results dispute those obtained by Lebeaux (1988) or Radford (1990), where no functional categories are present in early grammars as these claims relate to younger children (approx. 2:6).

6. DISCUSSION

6.1. SUGGESTIONS FOR A LARGER SCALE EXPERIMENT

There are a number of recommendations and improvements that can be made in order to expand the present study and ensure its success. Let us start with those aspects that are relevant to a larger scale study and continue with specific problems that were encountered in the present study.

The most significant factor to consider is the sample size and age span of the participants. A larger sample size of each of the developmental groups would contribute to the statistical reliability and would increase the likelihood of determining statistical significance between the vari-

[15] The sample size is too small to warrant a statistical analysis.

BDD-A26252 © 2017 Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:00 UTC)

ous participant groups that represent L1 acquisition developmental stages, if significance is present. This could also control for extreme variation among individuals of the same developmental group (variation that was encountered in the 3;1 years old group of the present study).

In terms of the age span, starting to observe children as young as 2;1 - 2;6 would allow us to track the progress of the [DOCD] parameter from its emergence (actually from the emergence of the first clitics). Moreover, this would also allow us to monitor the manner in which the acquisition process of the [DOCD] parameter progresses. That is, we could observe the forms and structures that are produced while the [DOCD] is acquired. Here, the non-target forms obtained could inform us about the structures that children entertain as part of their grammar prior to fully acquiring the adult parameter.[16]

In order to prove even more conclusively that the [+DOCD] is never the default value cross-linguistically, we suggest to include a control group of L1 French learners (of a [-DOCD] dialect). If the hypothesis proposed here is borne out, we expect that the children learning L1 French would not produce [+DOCD] structures.

The elicited production task could also include stimuli sentences that elicit for [+DOCD] with personal pronouns as the associate DPs, as overt direct object personal pronouns also trigger obligatory clitic doubling. It is important to note though that these structures involve a more complex pragmatic structure since they can receive a contrastive interpretation. Direct object clitic doubling in Romanian is restricted to particular features in the overt associate DPs they license. Thus, it may be beneficial to also test for these features alongside the [DOCD] parameter. One of these features is [+human] IP- internally, and for the purposes of the present pilot a short pretest regarding the human features was conducted.

This experiment also included an elicited imitation task, the results of which were inconclusive. Participants were presented with grammatical and ungrammatical sentences and asked to repeat them. The expectation was that they would correct the ungrammatical sentences when imitating. These expectations were not borne out as the participants, controls and children, did not make the expected corrections. Rather they repeated the ungrammatical stimuli exactly as they were presented. It was suggested by Patricia Balcom p.c. that the problem with the task stemmed from the fact that the sentences were too short, which was, however, necessary given the young age of the participants.[17]

6.2. ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

While not critical to the present hypothesis, two interesting sets of findings involving non-target structures and forms warrant mention: direct object and clitic omission (Silviu 2;8) and non-target morphological forms of clitics (Steven, 3:1). As previously mentioned in Section 3.2, these observations are in fact in line with findings in previous research, as both these phenomena have been attested in numerous studies across a number of languages. However, what seems to set the findings of the present experiment apart is the relatively advanced age at which omission and

[16] Ideally, the study would be set up as a longitudinal experiment monitoring the same group of children weekly for 14-15 months.

[17] While conducting the test I noticed that both children and adults took a longer time before repeating the ungrammatical sentences as opposed to the grammatical ones. This phenomenon seems to be similar to that observed for the online response system methodology. It would be interesting to observe if a correlation obtains between grammaticality of stimuli and the time elapsed prior to imitation for the type of sentences tested here and other structures.

BDD-A26252 © 2017 Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:00 UTC)

agreement errors occur. This may be due to the bilingual effect on the omission of clitics in L1 acquisition that was also observed by Pérez-Leroux et al. (2009) and Pirvulescu et al. (2014).

The second set of results is Steven's, who produces non-target forms that do not have adult-like features. He generalizes the clitic *se*, which he seems to use as the default form: *s-a pupat* 'he kissed himself/people kissed' instead of *l-a pupat* 'he kissed him'. Avram & Coene (2008) and Dominguez (2003) have also encountered a stage of what seems to be a default, non-target use of direct object clitics in Romanian and Spanish respectively. However, again, the non-target stage they mention seems to take place significantly earlier: the latest forms at 2;3 for both languages as opposed to 3;1 in the present study. Secondly, the presumably default form proposed by Avram & Coene (2008) is the feminine *o* not the reflexive-like *se*. While I do not dispute the analysis of default clitic *o* proposed by Avram & Coene (2008), I believe this issue warrants further research.[18]

7. CONCLUSION

In this paper we test a hypothesis according to which [-DOCD] is the default setting of the clitic doubling parameter. This predicts that in the early stages of acquisition there is a period during which children entertain the [-DOCD] parameter irrespective of the parameters of L1 and, thus, do not produce clitic doubling constructions. By testing three children acquiring L1 Romanian, a [+DOCD] language, we provided results consistent with the predictions made. Thus, the results support the hypothesis proposed. Since this is a pilot experiment, further improvements are suggested regarding the sample size, age of participants and methods that should be used for the purposes of a full-sized experiment.

REFERENCES

Avram, Larisa. 2001. Remarks on the optional clitic stage in child Romanian. *Bucharest Working Papers in Linguistics*, III (1): 16-28.

Avram, Larisa & Martine Coene. 2003. From feature selection to feature valuation: the view from early clitics and determiners. (Paper presented at GLOW 2003, Workshop II: Learnability from a generative perspective, Lund, April 12, 2003.)

Avram, Larisa & Martine Coene. 2008 Object Clitics as Last Resort. Implications for Language Acquisition. In S. Baauw, J. van Kampen & M. Pinto (eds.), *The Acquisition of Romance Languages*, 7-26. Utrecht: LOT.

Belletti, Adriana. 1999. Italian/Romance clitics: Structure and derivation. In H. van Riemsdijk (ed.), *Clitics in the Languages of Europe*, 543-579. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Borer, Hagit. 1984. *Parametric Syntax: Case Studies in Semitic and Romance Languages*. Dordrecht: Foris Publications.

Castilla, Anny & Ana Teresa Pérez–Leroux. 2010. Omissions and substitutions in Spanish object clitics: Developmental optionality as a property of the representational system. *Language Acquisition* 17: 2–25.

[18] Interestingly, reflexive-like *se* is the default clitic in adult Spanish. Of course, the features compared here are gender versus case, which does complicate the issue and most probably involves two different sets of grammatical analyses.

BDD-A26252 © 2017 Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:00 UTC)

Clahsen, Harald. 1990. Constraints on Parameter Setting: A grammatical analysis of some acquisition stages in German child language. *Language Acquisition* 1: 361-91.
Costa, João & Maria Lobo. 2005. Clitic omission, null objects or both in the acquisition of European Portuguese?. (Paper presented at Gala 2005, Siena, September 8.)
Cuervo, María Cristina. 2003. *Datives at Large*. Ph.D. Dissertation, MIT.
Dominguez, Laura. 2003. Interpreting reference in the early acquisition of Spanish clitics. In S. Montrul & F. Ordóñez (eds.), *Linguistic Theory and Language Development in Hispanic Languages*, 212-228. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press.
Grüter, Theres. 2006. *Object clitics and null objects in the acquisition of French*. PhD Dissertation, McGill University.
Grüter, Theres & Martha Crago. 2011. Object clitics and their omission in child L2 French: The contributions of processing limitations and L1 transfer. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition.* doi:10.1017/S1366728911000113
Hamann, Cornelia. 2002. *From Syntax to Discourse. Pronominal Clitics, Null Subjects and Infinitives in Child Language*. Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
Hamann, Cornelia; Luigi Rizzi & Ulrich Hans Frauenfelder. 1996. The Acquisition of subject and object clitics in French. In H. Clahsen (ed.), *Generative Perspectives on Language Acquisition*, 309-334. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
Hurtado, Alfredo 1982. *Clitic chains*, ms. MIT.
Hill, Virginia & Liliane Tasmowski. 2008. Romanian clitic doubling: A view from pragmatics-semantics and diachrony. In D. Kallulli and L.Tasmowski (eds.), *Clitic Doubling in the Languages of the Balkan*, 133-163. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
Jakubowicz, Cecilia; Lea Nash; Catherine Rigaut & Christophe-Loic Gerard. 1998. Determiners and clitic pronouns in French-speaking children with SLI. *Language Acquisition* 8: 113-160.
Jaeggli, Osvaldo A. 1982. *Topics in Romance Syntax*. Dordrecht: Foris.
Jaeggli, Osvaldo A. 1986. Three issues in the theory of clitics: Case, doubled NPs, and extraction. In H. Borer (ed.), *Syntax and Semantics 19: The Syntax of Pronominal Clitics*, 15-42. New York: Academic Press.
Kampen van, Jacqueline. 2004. Learnability order in the French pronominal system. In R. Bok-Bennema, B. Hollebrandse, B. Kampers-Manhe and P. Sleeman (eds.), *Selected Papers from Going Romance 2002*. 163-183. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
Kayne, Richard S. 1991. Romance clitics, verb movement, and PRO. *Linguistic Inquiry* 22: 647-686.
Kayne, Richard. 1994.*The Antisymmetry of Syntax*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
Lebeux, David. 1988. *Language acquisition and the form of grammar*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Amherst: University of Massachusetts dissertation.
Mardale, Alexandru. 2007. *Les prépositions fonctionnelles du roumain: étude comparative*. Thèse de doctorat. Université Paris 7 & Université de Bucarest.
Mardale, Alexandru. 2008. Micro-variation within differential object marking: data from Romance. *Revue roumaine de linguistique* LIII (4): 449-467.
Mardale, Alexandru. 2015. Differential Object Marking in the first original Old Romanian texts. In V. Hill (ed.), *Formal approaches to DPs in Old Romanian*, 200-245. Leiden: Brill.
Pérez-Leroux, Ana Teresa; Mihaela Pîrvulescu & Yves Roberge. 2006. Early object omission in child French and English. In C. Nishida & J.-P. Montreuil (eds.), *New Perspectives in Romance Linguistics*, 213-220. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

BDD-A26252 © 2017 Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:00 UTC)

Pérez-Leroux, Ana Teresa; Mihaela Pirvulescu & Yves Roberge. 2009. Bilingualism as a window into the language faculty: The acquisition of objects in French-speaking children in bilingual and monolingual contexts. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 12 (1): 97–112.

Pérez-Leroux, Ana Teresa; Alejandro Cuza & Danielle Thomas. 2011. Input and parental attitudes: A look at Spanish–English bilingual development in Toronto. In K. Potowski (ed.), *Bilingual youth: Spanish in English-speaking societies*, 149–176. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Pîrvulescu, Mihaela & Yves Roberge. 2005. Licit and Illicit Null Objects in L1 French. In R. S. Gess & E. J. Rubin (eds.), *Theoretical and Experimental Approaches to Romance Linguistics*, 197-212. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Pîrvulescu, Mihaela. 2006. The acquisition of object clitics in French L1: spontaneous vs. elicited production. In A. Belletti; E. Bennati; C. Chesi; E. DiDomenico & I. Ferrari (eds.), *Lan guage Acquisition and Development. Proceedings of GALA 2005.* 450-462. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press,

Pirvulescu, Mihaela, Ana Teresa Pérez-Leroux, Yves Roberge, Nelleke Strik & Danielle Thomas. 2014. Bilingual effects: Exploring object omission in pronominal languages. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 17 (3): 495–510

Poeppel, David & Keneth Wexler. 1993. The full competence Hypothesis of Clause structure in early German. *Language* 69:1-33.

Radford, Andrew. 1990. *Syntactic theory and the acquisition of English: The nature of early child grammars of English.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Rasetti, Lucienne. 2003. *Optional Categories in Early French Syntax: a developmental study of root infinitives and null arguments*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Geneva, Switzerland.

Roberge, Yves. 1990. *The Syntactic Recoverability of Null Arguments.* McGill-Queen's University Press.

Schaeffer, Jeannette. 2000. *The acquisition of direct object scrambling and clitic placement: syntax and pragmatics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Sportiche, Dominique. 1992. Clitic Constructions. In L. Zaring and J. Rooryck (eds), *Phrase Structure and the Lexicon*, 213-276. Bloomington, IN: IULC.

Sportiche, Dominique. 1996. Sketch of a Reductionist Approach to Syntactic Variation and Dependencies. In H. Campos & P. Kempchinsky (eds.), *Evolution and Revolution in Linguistic Theory*, 356-365. Washington: Washington University Press.

Sportiche, Dominique. 1997. Subject Clitics in French and Romance, Complex Inversion and Clitic Doubling. In K. Johnson & I. Roberts (eds.), *Studies in Comparative Syntax*, 189-221. Dordrecht: Kluwer.

Sportiche, Dominique. 1999. *Pronominal Clitic Dependencies, in Language Typology: Clitics in the European Languages*. In H. van Riemsdijk (ed.), 679-710. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Suñer, Margarita. 1988. The role of agreement in clitic-doubled constructions. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 6:391–434.

Tedeschi, Roberta. 2009. *Acquisition at the interfaces: A Case Study of Object Clitics in Early Italian*. Utrecht: LOT.

Ticio, Emma & Lara Reglero. 2002. Evidence for AgrO in child grammar: English vs. Spanish. In J. J. Costa & M. J. Freitas (eds.), *Proceedings of Generative Approaches to Language*

BDD-A26252 © 2017 Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:00 UTC)

Acquisition. Lisboa: Associacão Portuguesa de Linguística.
Torrego, Esther. 1996. On the nature of clitic doubling. In H. Campos & P. Kemchinsky (eds.), *Evolution and Revolution in Linguistic Theory*. 399-418. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.
Uriagereka, Juan. 1995. Aspects of the syntax of clitic placement in Western Romance. *Linguistic Inquiry* 26:79-123.
Valian, Virginia 1991. Syntactic subjects in the early Speech of American and Italian Children. *Cognition* 40: 21-81.
Wexler, Keneth; Anna Gavarró & Vicenç Torrens. 2003/2004. Feature checking and object clitic omission in child Catalan. In R. Bok-Bennema; B. Hollebrandse; B. Kampers-Manhe & P. Sleeman (eds.), *Romance Languages and Linguistic Theory 2002*, 253–268. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

BDD-A26252 © 2017 Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:56:00 UTC)