Imperatives as radically reduced structures in null-subject languages: a corpus study

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Imperatives. Imperatives (IMPs) are peculiar structures. Despite being non-finite, they are root constructions (Di Domenico 2004). They are usually assumed to raise to CP, mainly to check imperative force (Rivero 1994b, Zanuttini 1997, Platzack & Rosengren 1998, Salustri & Hyams 2003, Belletti 2009) and to account for enclisis, a core property of IMPs in Romance (Rooryck 1992, Belletti 2009). Their morphologically meagre form has been analyzed as the lack of some (Platzack & Rosengren 1998, Belletti 2009) or all (Di Domenico 2004) inflectional projections. Moreover, IMPs are among the very first verbal forms children acquire (Belletti & Guasti 2015, Salustri & Hyams 2003, 2006).

Acquisition. It has been empirically observed that linguistic development is not gradual, but proceeds in three clear-cut stages which follow the geometry of the cartographic tree, in a bottom-up manner (Growing Trees approach, Friedmann et al. 2021). In the first stage, children are able to produce structures involving vP and IP. The second stage comprises structures involving the first portion of the Left Periphery (LP), up until the Q/Foc head (Rizzi & Bocci 2017). In the third stage, the syntactic tree becomes fully mature with the availability of the highest portion of the LP, up until ForceP.
Salustri & Hyams (2003, 2006) notice that IMPs are analogues of Root Infinitives (RIs) in a universal developmental stage that holds cross-linguistically. Around the 2nd and 3rd year of age, children acquiring different languages robustly overproduce tenseless verbal forms: RIs in non-null-subject languages (f.i. French, Dutch), IMPs in null-subject languages (Italian, Hungarian, Slovenian, Spanish). Rizzi (1993/1994, 2006) argues that the preference children exhibit w.r.t. RIs is due to their economical nature: RIs are the result of a Truncation operation available in development, whereby higher layers of a clause are cut off to reduce the computational cost. Taken together, the maturation of the syntactic tree (Friedmann et al. 2021) and the Truncation mechanism (Rizzi 1993/1994) show that higher layers of the clause represent a source of complexity for children.

The issue. If one follows the traditional assumption that IMPs raise to the LP, what emerges from acquisition is unexpected. How is it possible that IMPs appear early but occupy an area of the clause which is acquired only in later stages? Additionally, how is it possible that children going through the same developmental stage, in one case overproduce a truncated, more economical form (the RI), while in the other case (IMPs) they need to project the structure up until ForceP? This work is aimed at reconciling the tension between evidence from acquisition and current assumptions on the structural analysis of the imperative.

Corpus study. A longitudinal corpus study was carried out to investigate whether children produce IMPs before the LP is acquired. Spontaneous production from four Italian children was obtained from the CHILDES database (MacWhinney 2000) and examined in a semi-automatic way, searching for occurrences of imperatives and syntactic structures ascribable to the three GTs stages (Friedmann et al., 2021). Results show that all four children produce imperatives before the highest part of the LP is acquired (ex. relatives, why-questions). One of them utters IMPs before the whole CP layer becomes available (before yes/no questions, wh-questions, relatives, why-questions). Since these results form a Guttman Scale (Guttman 1944; 1950; Friedmann et al. 2021), they are incompatible with IMPs raising to CP.

Proposal. On these grounds, I suggest that (Italian) IMPs do not raise to the LP. Rather, they are "literally reduced" structures, borrowing Cecchetto and Donati's (2022) terminology: they

do not involve CP, nor higher IP projections. Interestingly, it was already suggested by Salustri and Hyams (2006, footnote 17) and Di Domenico (2004, footnote 31) that imperatives could remain in the low IP area of the clause, where the low Focus and low Topic heads are located (Belletti 2004). Following Belletti (2009, building on Kayne 1991), imperative morphology is checked in a low IP position (ImpP). Imperative clauses are also endowed with a Jussive head (JussP), which provides imperative subjects with 2nd person restrictions (Zanuttini et al. 2012). I argue that the imperative verb raises past the low Focus and low Topic heads (as in 1), checks its morphology in ImpP and finally lands in JussP (2). These positions cannot be located in the LP, on the basis of acquisition data. Moreover, intermediate IP projections are absent in IMPs (Belletti 2009, Di Domenico 2004): the structure is radically reduced, comprising only VP and a few positions in the low IP area (2).

1) Porta=la TU! (Italian)
bring-IMP-2SG=it.CL.F.2SG you-FOCUS.2SG [Ex. from Di Domenico 2004)
'YOU bring the suitcase!'

2) [JussP [ImpP [TopP [FocP [VP…]]]]

At present, this analysis is limited to 2nd person singular imperatives in Italian, i.e. imperatives with dedicated morphology, as they are the ones which resist negation and are overproduced by children. The question arises of if this reduced analysis can be applied to other languages in which IMPs are overproduced (ex. Spanish, Hungarian). This issue is left for future research.

Discussion. This present work highlights how a cartographic approach to acquisition may fruitfully feed into theoretical syntax, making it possible to revise older analyses and generate new research questions. Moreover, core properties of IMPs in Romance are all expected if we consider IMPs as radically reduced structures:

- IMPs cannot be embedded nor questioned: this follows from the lack of CP;
- IMPs with distinctive morphology cannot be negated: the structure is not high enough to accommodate NegP (NegP needs a TP complement, Zanuttini 1997);
- IMPs cannot host a subject clitic (c.f. Di Domenico 2004 on Veronese): such clitics occupy a higher IP position, i.e. AgrS, which is too high to be present in IMPs;
- Enclisis: Belletti's (2009) account of Italian/Romance cliticization works with lower structures as well. IMPs check their imperative morphology in a low position, and subsequently left-adjoin to the clitic in AgrPstPrt, yielding the order Verb-Clitic. In this analysis, AgrPstPrt should be located between JussP and ImpP (c.f. 2).

Selected references.

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