On copula verb omission in L1Romanian. A case study

Larisa Avram

1. Introduction

It has long been noticed that during the early stages of language acquisition children tend to omit functional morphemes, among which tense and aspect markers, determiners, auxiliaries and copula verbs (Brown 1973, Radford 1990). Copula verb omission (CVO) has been discussed in relation to the acquisition of several languages: L1 English (Becker 2000, 2001, Wexler 2000, Skinner 2005), English in a Spanish-English bilingual context (Liceras et al. 2011), L1 Spanish (Sera 1992), L1 Italian (Caprin and Guasti 2009, Franchi 2006, Moscati 2006), L1 German and L1 Croatian (Czinglar et al. 2008). Two important findings emerge from these studies. Firstly, in spite of the fact that CVO is attested in the early acquisition stages of many languages, the extent to which children omit copula verbs is subject to cross-linguistic variation. CVO is a robust phenomenon in English, German and Italian, but not in Spanish (Sera 1992), French, Brazilian Portuguese (Kupisch and Rinke 2007) or Croatian (Czinglar et al. 2008). This variation seems to be correlated to the extent to which children produce optional infinitives (OIs) (Becker 2000, Wexler 2000). Secondly, in those languages in which it is attested, the omission is not random. It is sensitive to several factors among which the properties of the predicate. It has been argued that children tend to omit the copula in stage-level (SL) but not in individual-level (IL) predicates (see Becker 2000, 2001, Skinner 2005 for English, and Czinglar et al. 2008 for German).

The general picture which emerges is that the extent to which children omit copula verbs varies across languages. In those languages in which there is copula omission, this is not random.

2. Aim and organization

In the present study I examine the acquisition of the copula verb *fi* 'be' in Romanian. To the best of my knowledge there is no available analysis of the acquisition route of copula verbs in child Romanian. This study can therefore contribute new data to the general picture of copula use in early grammars. Since Romanian is not an OI language (Avram and Coene 2011), the data can contribute to our understanding of the correlation between the availability of OIs and copulaless structures. I address three questions: (i) is copula omission a robust phenomenon in child Romanian?; (ii) if there is copula omission, is it sensitive to the type of predicate (SL vs. IL)?; (iii) how can one account for the observed pattern of copula use?

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. In section 3 I summarize the main findings of previous studies on the acquisition of copula verbs with focus on the correlation between CVO and OIs, as well as on the sensitivity of copula omission to the semantic and syntactic properties of the predicate. The study on copula *fi* 'be' in child Romanian is presented in Section 4. The analysis of the use of copula *fi* in one longitudinal corpus of monolingual Romanian reveals a very low omission rate, with no significant difference between SL and IL predicates overall. But copula *fi* with DP, AdjP and non-locative PP predicatives is omitted only until 2;3, whereas *fi* with locative PPs, which denotes mainly temporary situations, continues to be omitted – though at a very low rate – at least until 2;11. The Romanian data are interpreted as supporting both Wexler's (1998, 2000) correlation between the availability of INFL-licensed null subjects, the absence of an OI stage and lack of robust CVO, and Becker's (2000) hypothesis that copula omission is sensitive to the semantic and syntactic properties of the predicate. The conclusions of the study are summarized in Section 5.

3. Previous studies
3.1. Copula omission and the optional infinitive stage

An impressive number of language acquisition studies reveal an early stage when child grammar allows both a non-finite and a finite form of the verb in contexts where a finite form is required. Since the infinitival form is the one which is optionally used instead of a finite predicate in many languages the stage is known as *the optional infinitive stage* (Wexler 1994). OIs, however, are either not attested or extremely rare in languages like Italian, Spanish or Catalan, i.e. in languages in which INFL-licensed null subjects are allowed. This shows that there is a correlation between the availability of OIs and of INFL-licensed null subjects (Wexler 1998, 2000). Another correlation which has been noticed is the one between the availability of OIs and robust CVO (Becker 2000, Wexler 2000), copulaless predicates being analyzed as the OI counterpart of overt copula predicates (Becker 2000). This predicts that in INFL-licensed null subject languages there should be neither an OI stage nor significant copula omission, whereas in non-INFL-licensed null subject languages both phenomena should be robustly attested. Becker (2000) and Skinner (2005) provide data which show that indeed, in child English, a non-INFL-licensed null subject language, for which an OI stage has been documented (Wexler 1998), the copula omission rate is significant. Becker (2000:89) reports, on the basis of the investigation of longitudinal corpora of monolingual English, age range 2;0 – 3;4, an average copula production rate of in between 27.7% to 65.8% (depending on predicate type). Skinner (2005) reports an average copula use of 44% to 100% (depending on predicate type and clause type) for the same age range. Czinglar et al. (2008) investigate CVO in L1 German, a non-INFL-licensed null subject language, and in L1 Croatian, an INFL-licensed null subject language. Their results show a high copula omission rate (36.1% – 46.9%) with German children (age 2;3 – 2;9) but zero CVO in Croatian. The early copula use in child Spanish also supports the correlation INFL-licensed null subjects – OI stage – robust copula omission. According to Sera (1992) and Bel (2001), Spanish-speaking children use copula verbs target-like by 3 years of age. Bel (2001), for example, found 688 overt copulas and only 4 omissions in the three Spanish corpora which she investigated. She reports similar findings for Catalan, where the CVO rate is also low (approximately 8%).

Data coming from other languages are not equally clear-cut with respect to this correlation. In child French, a non-INFL-licensed null subject language with an OI stage (Wexler 1998), the copula is omitted in between 2% – 8%, mean 4% (at age 2;1) (Kupisch and Rinke 2007), i.e. the rate is much lower than in English or in German but close to the rate attested in Catalan (Bel 2001) or in Brazilian Portuguese (2%, Kupisch and Rinke 2007). In child Italian, OIs are also practically absent. Guasti (1993/1994) reports a low rate of approximately 3%, Caprin and Guasti (2009) of approximately 1%. The prediction would be that CVO should not be a robust phenomenon in this language. The results of several studies, however, challenge this correlation. According to Franchi (2006), copula omission in child Italian is well attested (50% to 100%) during an early stage (1;7 – 2;4). Even during the next stage (2;5 – 2;1) the omission rate reaches 30%. Moscati (2006) examined copula use in negative and positive contexts by 11 Italian children (1;5 – 3;3). The omission rate was very high in positive contexts: 49% – 81%.

The attested correlations in various languages are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. The correlation between optional infinitives and copula omission in child grammar

Language	INFL-licensed null subjects	Robust OI stage	Robust copula omission
English	no	yes	yes
German	no	yes	yes
French	no	yes	very low rate
Croatian	yes	no	no
Spanish	yes	no	no
Catalan	yes	no	no
Brazilian Portuguese	yes[1]	no	no
Italian	yes	no	yes

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[1] The case of Brazilian Portuguese, however, is less clear, given the changes with respect to the value of the *pro* drop parameter in the contemporary language.

At first sight, two languages seem to challenge the alleged correlation between the availability of INFL-licensed null subjects, an (well attested) OI stage and robust CVO: French and Italian. The omission rates reported for different INFL-licensed null subject languages vary significantly.

For those languages in which OIs are either fully absent or very scarce it has been reported that children optionally use other non-finite forms in finite contexts, i.e. they use an analogue of the OI. For example, for Italian, this has been argued to be the imperative (Salustri and Hyams 2003), for Spanish and Catalan the third person singular of the indicative (Grinstead 2000). Since the copula is a functional verb which carries tense features, whose absence can indicate non-finiteness, the stage when the copula is omitted may correspond to the acquisition stage when any non-finite form, not only the infinitive, is optionally used in a context where a finite form is required by the rules of the target language. This might explain why copula omission is robust in child Italian.

3.2. Copula omission and predicate type

Becker (2000) was the first to notice that CVO in child grammar is not random. In child English the omission rate is significantly lower with nominal (DP) predicates (27.7%) (illustrated in 1a) than in locative predicates[2] (often with a locative PP) (65.8%) (illustrated in 1b):

(1) a. She's a crocodile.   (Naomi 2;3, from Becker 2000, her example 4d, p. 92)
    b. Eric at Cathy house. (Naomi 2;4, from Becker 2000, her example 5c, p. 92)

The results reported in Becker (2001:34) are similar: children omit copula *be* with nominal predicates 72.4% and with locative predicates only 20.9%. This asymmetry is accounted for in terms of the semantic and the syntactic differences between the two types of predicative. Nominal predicates denote mainly permanent properties, introducing a standing characteristic of an argument. Locative predicates generally denote temporary properties. This semantic contrast is characterized, following Carlson's (1977) ontology, in terms of the properties of the entity to which the predicate applies. SL predicates apply to a *stage* ('time-space slice' in Carlson's terms) of an individual denoted by the subject, i.e. they report on temporary situations. IL predicates apply to an individual denoted by the subject, reporting on a permanent characteristic. According to Kratzer (1995), only the former have an event variable. Becker (2000, 2001) shows that the two types of predicate also differ in structural terms. Only SL predicates can occur in the complement position of perception verbs (2) and in existential codas (3):

(2)   a. I saw John in the park.
       b.*I saw John tall.
(3)   a. There are students in the park.
       b. *There are students tall.

Following Felser (1999), where it is argued that the complement of perception verbs is an Aspect Phrase (AspP), Becker (2000, 2001) proposes that the difference between the two types of predicates can be accounted for in terms of a different underlying structure. SL predicates are aspectual and involve an AspP. This functional projection is absent in IL predicates. Becker (2000) assumes that nominal predicates are IL whereas locative predicates are SL.

Returning to the acquisition data, the presence of an AspP with SL predicates seems to favour copula omission in child English. According to Becker, this is due to the fact that in child grammar the aspectual feature of these predicates can ensure temporal anchoring in the absence of Tense. Following Guéron and Hoekstra (1995), she assumes that main clauses are temporally anchored when

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[2] Becker treats both instances of *be* as copula verbs, making no distinction between copula *be* and the unaccusative (lexical) verb *be*. This differs from the more traditional analysis, according to which only the former is semantically void and does not assign theta-roles (see, e.g., Williams 1980, Zdrenghea and Greere 1999). On the traditional approach her claim would be even stronger since the data show that English children tend to omit the lexical verb *be* more than the functional copula, which is semantically vacuous.

a Tense operator in the C-domain binds either Inflection (Tense) or Aspect. For a clause to be finite, the Tense operator must bind Inflection, irrespective of whether an AspP is projected or not. In child grammar, temporal anchoring can be achieved, in the absence of Tense, through the binding of Aspect. Given the fact that copula *be* is the realization of Tense, it can be omitted only when the predicate contains an aspect feature, i.e. with SL predicates. If the predicate lacks an aspect feature, as is the case of IL predicates, temporal anchoring requires a tense feature on Tense and thus the copula must be overt.

Becker (2000, 2001) extends the analysis to copulative predicates with an adjectival predicative. Adjectives can denote both temporary (e.g. *hungry*, *angry*) and permanent properties (e.g. *blue*, *intelligent*). Her hypothesis predicts that the omission rate should be higher when the adjective is a SL predicate. The prediction is borne out by the data: English-speaking children use an overt copula 49.6% with adjectival predicatives overall, but the rate is higher with IL adjectives (4a-b) – 68.3% than with SL adjectives (4c-d) – 46.3% (Becker 2000: 134):

(4)   a. and this is yellow. (Naomi 2;5) (Becker 2001, her example 29f)
        b. Mommy's little. (Nina 2;1.22) (Becker 2001, her example 29d)
        c. this empty. (Peter 2;3.3) (Becker 2001, her example 29a)
        d. her thirsty. (Nina 2;2.6) (Becker 2001, her example 29c)

An SL/IL asymmetry is also reported for child English in Skinner (2005). The same omission pattern is attested in both declarative clauses and in *wh*-questions. In *wh*-questions, the average overt copula rate is of 81.7 % with SL predicates and of 100% with IL predicates. In declaratives, the copula is overt in 81.3 % of the utterances with an IL predicate but in only 44% of the utterances with a SL predicate (Skinner 2005:5).

The fact that copula omission is constrained by semantic properties and syntactic principles predicts that the pattern should be attested in other languages as well. The prediction is indeed borne out by data from child German (age 2;3 – 2;9). Czinglar et al. (2008) investigate two longitudinal corpora. In one corpus, the data are clear-cut. Locative predicates occur mainly with a null copula (73.4%) and nominal predicates mainly with an overt copula (75.5%) (p. 84). In the second corpus investigated, the results are less robust; the copula omission rate is of 43.5% with locative predicates and of 14.8% with IL predicates (p. 85). But the difference is statistically significant in this corpus as well.

The data reported in Liceras et al. (2011) for English-Spanish bilinguals, however, reveal a different pattern. The authors investigate copula use in English by two English-Spanish bilinguals. The total number of overt copulas is high both with nominal and with locative predicates. With adjectival predicates the rate is even higher, with no difference between SL and IL adjectives (93.6% for IL vs. 91.2% for SL). The authors argue that this might reflect the influence of Spanish, which has distinct copula verbs for the two types of predicatives (*ser* and *estar*). The transparency of the Spanish system may facilitate the acquisition of temporal anchoring in the English grammar of the bilingual children. Notice that if this is indeed the case, then the low rate of copula omission in child Spanish could be accounted for independently of the correlation available OI stage – robust CVO. The same would apply to Catalan and Portuguese, which also have two and three copulas, respectively, and very low CVO rates. At first blush, this suggests that the CVO rate might be correlated with language-specific properties, not necessarily (only) with the OI stage.

3.3. Summing up

Three main conclusions can be drawn from previous studies: (i) CVO has been attested in various languages; (ii) the omission rate can be correlated with the availability of an OI stage but it might also be affected by language-specific properties; (iii) omission is not random; the pattern suggests that children preferentially omit the copula with SL predicates.

4.   The acquisition of copula *fi* 'be' in chid Romanian

4.1 Copula *fi* 'be' in Romanian

In Romanian, the copula *fi* 'be', which carries tense and agreement features, is obligatory (5a), except in exclamatives of the *mad magazine sentence* type (Avram 2015) (5b):

(5) a. Vasile *(este) cuminte.
        Vasile is   well-behaved
       'Vasile is well-behaved.'
     b. Vasile (să fie)   cuminte?!   Cred   că glumeşti!
        Vasile subj be.he well-behaved think.I that joke.you
        'Vasile well-behaved?! You must be joking!'

The copula may occur with a variety of predicatives: NP, DP, AdjP, QP, PP, AdvP (Pană Dindelegan 2008), which can denote both temporary and permanent properties. Some examples are given in (6):

(6) a. Vasile este medic/ prietenul nostru/obosit.
        Vasile is   doctor/ friend.the our / tired
       'Vasile is a doctor/our friend/tired.'
     b. Acestea   sînt multe/ de cărămidă.
          these   are many/ of brick
          'These are many/ of brick.'

The traditional analysis distinguishes between the copula *fi* 'be' (illustrated in 6) and the existential verb *fi* 'be' which occurs with a locative adjunct (7):

(7) Cartea   este pe masă.
     book.the is   on table
     'The book is on the table.'

Though adopting this analysis, Pană Dindelegan (2008:294-295) explicitly states that a unifying analysis of copula *fi* 'be' and existential *fi* 'be' as copula verbs should not be rejected as a possible alternative[3]. In the present study, I adopt this alternative analysis which also allows a straightforward comparison of the data reported here to those reported for other languages in previous studies, where a unifying analysis was assumed.

4.2. Romanian and the optional infinitive stage

Romanian is an INFL-licensed null subject language. As shown in section 3.1, there is a correlation between the availability of INFL-licensed null subjects in the target language and the availability of OIs in children's grammar. This predicts absence of OIs in child Romanian. Indeed, Avram and Coene (2011) show that in monolingual Romanian (age 1;6 – 2;11) OIs are absent, in accordance with Wexler's (1998) generalization. In this respect, child Romanian differs from other INFL-licensed null subject languages such as Italian, Spanish or Catalan, for which low percentages of OIs have been reported (see, e.g., Guasti 1993/1994). This difference can be accounted for in terms of language-specific properties. Contemporary Romanian has a (bare) infinitive but it has been replaced by the subjunctive in a variety of contexts in which the infinitive is generally used in Romance (Frâncu 2010). The only contexts where a bare infinitive is still used include the complement position of the modal verb *a putea* 'can' and of the lexical verb *a şti* 'to know', as well as the periphrastic future with the auxiliary *vrea* and the periphrastic conditional:

(8) a. Poate /ştie   scrie   poezii frumoase.

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[3] See Pană Dindelegan (2008) for the possible advantages of a unifying account.

can.he/know.he write   poems beautiful
'He can/knows how to write beautiful poems.'
b. Va   /ar   pleca devreme.
will.he aux.he leave eraly
'He will/would leave early.'

The very low frequency of the bare infinitive in the input may explain the lack of OIs in child grammar. Avram and Coene (2011) argue that the OI analogue in child Romanian is the bare subjunctive. The stage during which these bare subjunctive forms are attested is very short: 1;11 – 2;4 in one corpus[4] and 2;1 – 2;6 in the second one. Its frequency is very low, 3%, a percentage which is comparable to the one reported for OIs in other INFL-licensed null subject languages (Spanish, Catalan) (Bel 2001).

According to Becker (2000), Wexler (2000), CVO should be robust in those languages in which OIs are attested. This correlation is supported by data from English, German and Croatian, but it is challenged by data from French and Italian. In the present study I am extending the investigation of this correlation to child Romanian.

4.3. Data and method

The analysis is based on data coming from one longitudinal corpus of monolingual Romanian, consisting of transcribed audio recordings of natural unstructured conversations (the Avram corpus, described in Avram 2001), available in the CHILDES database (MacWhinney 2000). The present analysis uses data from 14 files (corresponding to 14 60 minute audio-recordings). The data are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Longitudinal corpus

Child	Age range	MLU range	Total number of utterances	Total number of BE contexts
Bianca	1;10 – 2;11	1.39 – 3.03	7821	601

All the utterances which contained or which should have contained a copula were analyzed. Repetitions, imitations, and formulaic uses were not included in the analysis. The identified predicates were coded as copulative *fi* 'be' (9a-b) and locative *fi* 'be', i.e. *fi* with a locative PP/AdvP (9c-d):

(9)   a.   Albă ca Zăpada e f(r)umoasă.
            Snow White   is beautiful
            'Snow White is beautiful.' (B. 2;4)
       b.   Asta e capra.
            this is goat.the
            'This is the goat.' (B. 2;6)
       c.   Sunt la Doina.
            am   at Doina
            'I am at Doina's.' (B. 2;2)
       d.   Brățara este aicea.
            bracelet.the is here
            'The bracelet is here.'(B. 2;2)

  Predicates with copula *fi* were coded with respect to predicative type: (i) NP/DP (9b); (ii) AdjP (9a); (iii) PP (10).

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[4] These data come from the corpus also used for the present study.

(10)   Castelu(l) e cu goanga.
        castle.the is with *goanga*[5]
        'The castle is with the *goanga*.'(B. 2;10)

The semantics of all the predicates (with or without an overt *fi* 'be') was analyzed individually in order to determine whether they denoted a SL (11a) or an IL property (11b). All the predicates were coded in terms of the presence/absence of the verb *fi* 'be' (12):

(11)   a. E în pătuţu' meu.
          is in bed.the my
          'It's in my bed.' (B. 2;11)
        b. Ăsta e un c(r)ocodil.
          this is a crocodile
          'This is a crocodile.' (B. 1;10)
(12)   a. E în dormitory. (bicicleta)
          is in bedroom
         'It is in the bedroom.' (the bicycle) (B. 2;7)
        b. Doina frumoasă.
          Doina beautiful
          'Doina (is) beautiful.' (B. 1;10)

Predicates which contained only the verb *fi* 'be', with no predicative, were coded only if the context allowed unambiguous identification of the predicative.

4.5. Results

The results summarized in Table 3 show a very high percentage of overt *fi* 'be', with no significant difference between copula *fi* 'be' and locative *fi* 'be'. The percentage for copula *fi* 'be' includes all the copulative predicates with NP/DP, AdjP and PP predicatives.

Table 3. Overt copula *fi* and locative *fi*

Child	Copula *fi*	Locative *fi*
Bianca	93.05% (333)	90.53% (220)

A closer look at the data, however, reveals a slight difference between the two types of predicate. Copula *fi* 'be' is omitted only until 2;3. The average omission rate during this early stage (1;10 – 2;3) is of 10.42% (12/113), lower than with the locative *fi* 'be' during the same stage: 25.4% (16/63). Locative *fi* 'be' continues to be omitted during 2;4 – 2;11, but at a very low rate, in between 0% to 13% (average 4.62%, 8/173). Figure 1 illustrates the omission of copula *fi* 'be' and of locative *fi* 'be' across files:

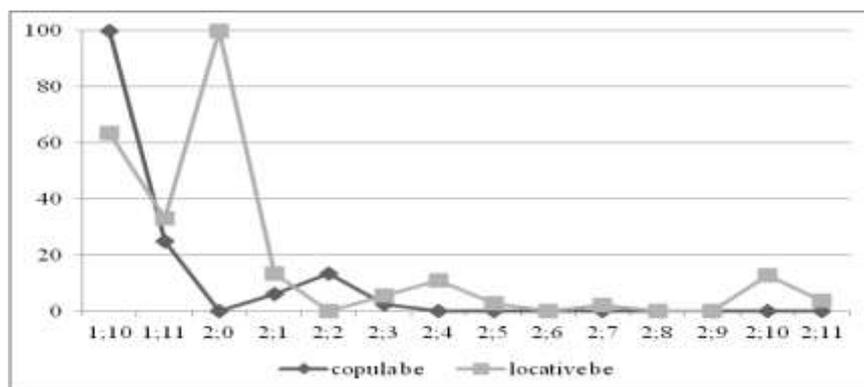---

[5] Child invented form.

Figure 1. Copula omission across files

Bianca showed a strong tendency to use an overt copula *fi* 'be' with nominal predicatives across stages, whereas with locative *fi* 'be' the rate of overt verbs is lower, especially during the early stage (1;10 – 2;3). Adjectival predicatives are much less numerous. With these, the copula is omitted only until 2;3, as with nominal predicatives; but the omission rate is higher (see Table 4).

Table 4. Predicates with overt *fi* 'be' by predicative

Stage	*fi* 'be'+ AdjP	*fi* 'be'+ NP/ DP	*fi* + locative PP/AdvP
Stage 1: 1;10 – 2;3	62.5% (5/8)	94.62% (88/93)	74.6% (47/63)
Stage 2: 2;4 – 2;11	100% (36/36)	100% (162/162)	95.6% (173/181)
Average	93.2% (41/44)	98.04% (250/255)	90.16% (220/244)

The predicates with locative *fi* 'be' denoted almost exclusively temporary situations. The overall production rate is the lowest in this case. After 2;4 the few *fi* omissions are attested exclusively within this type of predicate. Actually, one notices a slight difference between copula use with SL and with IL predicates. The data in Table 5 show that copula production was slightly higher with IL predicates. After 2;4, omission is attested exclusively in the context of SL predicates.

Table 5. Overt *fi* with SL vs. IL predicates

Child	*Fi* with SL predicates	*Fi* with IL predicates
Bianca	90.6% (241/266)	96.9% (316/326)

4.4. Discussion

Romanian is an INFL-licensed null subject language. According to Wexler (2000), this property should cluster with the absence of OIs (or a very short non-finite form stage) and lack of robust copula omission. The results of the analysis of a longitudinal corpus of monolingual Romanian support this correlation. Copula omission is low, below 10%. Locative *fi* 'be' continues to be omitted after 2;3, but omission is so low in some files that it could be interpreted as mere 'noise' in the data. This is why one could safely say that the copula omission stage ends very early, at about 2;3. The short CVO stage corresponds to the stage when bare subjunctives, the analogue of OIs, are also attested. For the Bianca corpus, Avram and Coene (2011) show that bare subjunctives are used for a short period of time, 1;11 – 2;4, which overlaps with the stage for which CVO was attested. The Romanian data, therefore, provide clear evidence in favour of the correlation INFL-licensed null subject – no OI stage/short non-finite form stage – no robust copula omission.

The analysis of omission contexts revealed no significant difference between locative *fi* 'be' and copula *fi* 'be' overall, or between locative *fi* 'be' and *fi* 'be' with a nominal predicative. In the Romanian corpus there is no significant difference between the average omission rate with SL and IL predicates. In this respect, the results differ from what was found in child English (Becker 2000,

Skinner 2005) and child German (Czinglar et al. 2008) but are similar to the data reported for English-Spanish bilinguals (Liceras et al. 2011). In both English and German, the average omission rates are relatively high. In Romanian and in English in an English-Spanish bilingual context, the average omission rates are low. Low omission rates may 'hide' the difference between copula omission with SL and with IL predicates. In Romanian, for example, in spite of the low number of omissions, one can detect a slight asymmetry in the data. Locative *fi*, which denotes almost exclusively temporary situations, is omitted at a slightly higher rate than copula *fi* 'be' with nominal predicates and for a slightly longer period of time. This shows that the early system is not fully indifferent to the SL – IL distinction. After 2;3, the few *fi* 'be' omissions are only in the context of SL predicates, i.e. of those predicates which have an AspP (Becker 2000). The presence of an AspP with SL predicates seems to favour copula omission in child Romanian, though in a much weaker way than in child English. As proposed by Becker (2000, 2001), in child grammar the aspectual feature of these predicates can ensure temporal anchoring in the absence of tense. In Romanian, finiteness is acquired early, the analogue of the OI stage ends early, which probably explains why the system only very rarely resorts to the binding of aspect (the AspP of a SL predicate) for temporal anchoring.

Summing up, in languages where copula omission is not robust, the SL-IL asymmetry is either 'hidden' by the low number of omissions (as I am suggesting for Romanian) or absent, as shown for the English-Spanish bilinguals in Liceras et al.'s (2011) study. In their case, language-specific properties (the availability of two different copular verbs) were argued to boost the acquisition of copula use. That language-specific properties might facilitate or hinder the acquisition of copula use seems to be supported by the apparently unexpected results reported for French and for Italian. This shows that more cross-linguistic data should be investigated before one can weigh the role of more general syntactic principles and of language-specific factors in the acquisition of copula use.

5. Conclusion

The main finding reported in this paper is that copula omission is not a robust phenomenon in child Romanian, in accordance with Becker's (2000) and Wexler's (2000) correlation between lack of an OI stage and absence of robust CVO. This adds to the available evidence that copula omission is a syntactic phenomenon which can be accounted for in terms of general syntactic principles. The analysis of the few copula omissions attested in the longitudinal corpus revealed a weak asymmetry between SL and IL predicates, in accordance with Becker's (2000) aspect-based analysis of SL and IL predicates and temporal anchoring. In child Romanian, copula *fi* 'be' is omitted more often and for a longer period of time with SL predicates, i.e. with those predicates which contain an AspP. The data show that even in languages where copula omission is not robust it is constrained by grammatical factors.

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