Children’s Comprehension in Mandarin Normal Cleft and Pseudo-Cleft Sentences*  
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Abstract  
The present study mainly examines the cleft acquisition of Mandarin children. In our study, we observed learners’ performances from four main perspectives, i.e., syntactic complexity effects, cleft types, age effects and developmental effects. The results of this study gave support that syntactic construction was an important factor affecting children’s language acquisition. Also, different cleft types affected children’s language performances. From this study, it was also evident that children’s performances improved as they grow older. In the end, we attested that children went through three stages developmental sequences to acquire Mandarin cleft sentences.

1. Introduction  
According to Soares (2006), it did a research on different types of cleft sentences production in Portuguese-speaking children. The findings demonstrated that children had difficulties in acquiring cleft constructions due to the syntactic complexity in cleft sentences. In this respect, it stipulates our interest to further investigate whether Mandarin-speaking children also encounter difficulties in acquiring Mandarin cleft sentences.

2. Literature Review  
2.1 The Construction of Cleft Sentences  
According to Li (1980), it claims that Mandarin Chinese has two main cleft constructions: normal cleft and pseudo cleft. The normal cleft sentence is a syntactic construction that marks the focus constituent between the Chinese corpula “shi” and the element “de” as presented in (1):

(1) Jangsan chyunyan shi dzai Meigwo jyehwun de.  
 Jangsan last year COP in America gоt married DE
‘ It was in America that Jangsan got married last year.’

Another Mandarin cleft construction—the pseudo-cleft construction has a different syntactic structure when comparing with the normal cleft construction. The pseudo-cleft construction mainly marks the focus constituent after the relative clause marker “de” and the corpula “shi” as shown in (2):

(2) Ta syihwan de shi Li syaujye.  
 He like REL COP Li miss
‘ The one who he likes is Miss Li.’

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In Li (1980), it also presents different transformation stages of these two kinds of cleft sentences. The study demonstrates that the pseudo-cleft constructions go through three stages during the syntactic transformation, whereas normal cleft construction merely go through two stages. Thus, the pseudo-cleft construction is claimed to be a more complex sentence. Based on this observation, the present study presumes that structural complexity may be a factor affecting children’s cleft sentence acquisition.

2.2 Age and Language Development

While working on the issue of language acquisition, age is an important consideration. Most researchers point out that age is a great factor affecting children’s language acquisition (Hsieh 2008, Hsieh & Hsu 2010), however, Sah (2015) disagrees that age is a factor. From these studies, it seems whether age is a factor or not is still debatable. Besides, previous studies have been investigating whether developmental sequences indeed exists in children’s language acquisition (Ipek 2009, Yi 2014). The results of these studies attest that developmental effects exist and these effects affect children’s language acquisition.

3. Methodology

The participants of this study were divided into three groups: 7 five-year-old preschoolers, 7 eight-year-old elementary schoolers, and 7 adults. All the participants were required to complete two different tasks in this study. The first task was the interpretation task, which includes 20 questions in all. In every question, two pictures were presented and a speaker read out the sentences. Children were then asked to choose the correct picture, based on their interpretation of the sentence which they just heard. The second task was grammaticality judgment task, which involves 20 questions in all. In this task, children heard a sentence, and then judged whether the sentence was correct or not.

The participants in these three groups were asked to complete two tasks within 30 minutes. After completing the tasks, children returned the answer sheet to the experimenter. Then, the experimenter moved on to conduct statistical analyses.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Syntactic Complexity Effects in Cleft sentences

The present study compared children’s ungrammatical rates of normal cleft and pseudo-cleft sentences. The ungrammatical rates of the two cleft constructions were presented in the following table 1:
From this table, we could see that preschoolers, schoolers, as well as adults all showed that they had more ungrammatical comprehension rates on pseudo-cleft constructions than on normal cleft sentences. One of the possible reasons might be that the pseudo-cleft constructions were more challenging due to their complex transformation as Li (1980) presented. Aside from this, following the canonical word order hypothesis (Bever 1970), the construction of pseudo-cleft sentences in Mandarin Chinese does not follow the canonical word order of Mandarin simple sentence-SVO. Hence, it was considered that the pseudo-cleft sentences might be more challenging for children to acquire. From the above results, it may support that syntactic complexity is indeed a factor which affects children’s language development (Soares 2006).

### 4.2 Children’s Comprehension on Different Cleft Types

Comparing children’s interpretation of different cleft types, our results indeed demonstrated that some cleft types were easier for children to acquire, while some cleft types were more difficult for them to acquire. From our findings, it presented that for preschoolers, NP cleft, VP cleft and ADJ cleft were more difficult for children to process. For schoolers, VP cleft would be hard to acquire. In this respect, it proved that for schoolers, the VP cleft might be more marked than other cleft types. For preschoolers, the NP cleft, VP cleft, and ADJ cleft would be more marked than other two cleft types. Overall, we could organize a ranking to show the markedness of these cleft types as presented in (3) based on our finding:

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\text{(3) VP cleft =ADJ cleft (3.5%) > NP cleft (3%) > PP cleft (2.8%) > ADV cleft (2.1%)}
\]

\text{%=ungrammatical comprehension rate}

### 4.3 The Developmental Sequences of Children’s Cleft Acquisition

From the above observation, we found that there were developmental sequences in children’s cleft acquisition. First, in the performances of preschoolers, we observed that they did not seem to acquire the clear concepts of the syntactic constructions—pseudo-clefts. When children reached around 8
years old, it showed they had lower cleft error rates, comparing with preschoolers. This represented that children’s comprehension of cleft sentences had greatly improved. Later on, when children reached the adults’ level, they could fully acquire nearly all cleft sentences. However, pseudo-cleft sentences are still more difficult for adults to process when comparing with normal cleft sentences, which can be observed from table 1. According to our observation, all participants had better performances on normal clefts than on pseudo-clefts in both tasks. In this respect, it indicates that children begin to acquire the normal cleft construction first, and the pseudo-cleft construction concept will develop later in their language acquisition. This prove that pseudo-cleft sentences are indeed more difficult to acquire than normal cleft sentences.

5. Conclusion

The present study mainly examined the cleft acquisition of Mandarin children. The results in our study gives rise to the assumption that language development involves different factors such as age and syntactic complexity. Among these findings, it gives us the implication that something in the children’s mind is pre-given (Krashen 1982, Goodluck 2010). The way how children acquire languages is not through explicit instruction in class, but with a Language Acquisition Device (Chomsky 1965) which assists children in their language development.

References


