WHEN CLITIC SYSTEMS COLLIDE, ANIMACY, FOR THE MOST PART, BEATS GENDER

QUANDO SISTEMAS DE CLÍTICOS DIFEREM EM TRAÇOS, "ANIMADO" BATE "GÊNERO"

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Abstract: In this paper we present elicitation results from an experiment on the acquisition of 3rd person object clitics by children of Paraguayan parents living in Buenos Aires and their mothers. These children are immersed in a situation of contact between two varieties of Spanish: the Paraguayan system (∅ for inanimate objects and LE for animate objects) and the local Argentinian system which uses LO for Masculine and LA for Feminine clitics. Results show that the Paraguayan mothers use substantially more LO/LA when compared with adults in Paraguay, as described by Choi (2000), suggesting a great deal of attrition. Their children on the other hand use far less LO/LA, but at the same time are not adopting as a group a LE/∅ system. Examining 19 Mother/Child dyads, we find that no children are exclusively using LO/LA users but some children are exclusively using LE/∅. As for mother we find some LO/LA users and the rest uses a mixed system. Interestingly, overall children use fewer forms than mothers.

Keywords: Clitics; Contact; Acquisition; Gender; Animacy.

Resumo: Neste artigo, apresentamos resultados de um estudo para elicitar clíticos de terceira pessoa em crianças de descendência Paraguaia vivendo em Buenos Aires e suas mães. Essas crianças estão numa imersas numa situação de contato entre duas variedades do espanhol: o sistema Paraguaio, que usa LE para objetos animados e ∅ para objetos inanimados, e o sistema Argentino local usa LO para objetos masculinos e LA para objetos femininos. Os resultados mostram que as mães Paraguaias usam muito mais LO/LA do que os adultos paraguaios descritos por Choi (2000), o que é consistente com uma situação de atrito linguístico. As crianças, por outro lado, usam muito menos LO/LA do que as mães, mas não se pode dizer que estejam adotando um sistema baseado puramente na animacidade. O exame de 19 pares de mães-filhos mostra que nenhuma criança usa exclusivamente LO/LA, mas algumas usam exclusivamente LE/∅. Em relação as mães, encontramos usuárias de LO/LA mas nenhuma usa exclusivamente LE/∅. É interessante notar que como um grupo as crianças usam menos formas do que as mães.

Palavras-chave: Clíticos; Contato; Gênero; Animacidade.

INTRODUCTION

Acquisition studies in the generative tradition have made much progress in understanding the acquisition of linguistic properties that are invariant (at least for the most part) within a linguistic community. In such cases, the procedure to describe the acquisition process amounts to some form of reverse engineering. We establish a working hypothesis for what we take the adult knowledge to be, and we can also describe the input to children by examining Child Directed Speech and/or results from experimental studies. This result is then characterized as the target state. Once the target state is determined, the researcher's task is more or less straightforward. It involves a comparison between the child linguistic behavior and the adult behavior in order to determine differences between the child behavior and the adult behavior and presumably how far the

child has to move in order to attain the adult state. From assumptions about the target state, we trace a path that predicts how, and even when, the child should reach the adult knowledge state. Whatever explanation(s) we elect to address the differences between children and adults (and they need not be linguistic), we "know" the end state (and its internal workings). Our explanations are as good as they can predict the steps to reach the end state.

There are learning situations, however, in which it is basically impossible to infer from usage the grammar that generated the input to children because the input the child receives is too unstable and variable. In other words, it is not clear what the target state is. One such situation is the case of language contact due to migratory displacement. In these cases, there is a rupture of transmission in the sense that the child is no longer receiving an input that is very similar to the input their parents received, and the adult input is now the result of adaptation/attrition/accommodation to the new linguistic environment (see Schmid; Köpke, 2019 for a review). Vocabulary items may be added or subtracted variably and the input will, by definition, be a lot noisier. The child in these situations is exposed to variation that may be highly superficial (a substitution of a form for another) but also variation that may arise from the use of two different grammars. In other words, the input to the child may be too poor to lead to a unified analysis (too much noise, too much ambiguity) and at the same time may be too rich in the sense that the child will be potentially hearing data that is only consistent with more grammars than their parents received as input. As a result, the chances that the child will end up with the grammar of their parents are slim.

We know that the child comes with the same equipment and the same language acquisition device to acquire language, whether they are in a homogeneous linguistic community or not, and we know that the goals are the same: (i) generalize quickly but cleverly, in order to attain best grammar for the input (Yang, 2002, 2016); and (ii) become a competent user of their speech

community's language (Kiparsky, 2008). The child does not know what the target state grammar is that they are supposed to learn, and in fact it is irrelevant for the child what this end state is.

Assuming the Variational Model (Yang, 2002), if the input for a particular linguistic parameter is invariable, a representation that supports that input will be rewarded every single time to the detriment of the alternative and very quickly will become the only choice, assuming the input is frequent. On the other hand, if the input for a particular parametric choice is not frequent, the property will take longer to be acquired. In cases, however, where the input does not allow the elimination of one choice, technically both options will be possible throughout life. In this sense, for this property, matters are settled in an unsettled way, which is not what corresponds to our naïve intuition of an end state.

What exactly happens in these cases in not clear, but work by Han, Lidz, and Musolino (2007, 2016) suggests that both adults and children seem to be categorical in their choices, even though the children's grammars are independent of their parents'. In other words, children seem to choose one of the options and seem to stick to that option. Even if in the community there are two possibilities, for each individual child or adult there is at least a strong preference for one form or the other. Why this would be the case is an interesting question. It could be related to a more superficial reason, namely the last option chosen is the one chosen again and again, and this makes the alternative lose its strength over time. But it could be that the learner reaches a threshold of sorts and makes a decision to treat the most favored option as categorical, perhaps due to a pressure that does not come from the linguistic system itself but comes from more general economy considerations. In this case, there seems to be no pressure from the speech community and either choice is equally acceptable. We end up with individuals having one option as a productive option and the group as having two active grammars.

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Of course, there are other outcomes in cases where the input is not categorical, which we see played out again and again in the history of languages, especially when in the domain of morphological forms (Kroch, 1989). When there is competition between forms, we see the disappearance of one of the forms or some reanalysis via some type of specialization of one of the forms, or simply one of the forms may be treated as an exception (Sapir's leakage).

We know from much work with artificial languages (e.g. Hudson-Kam; Newport, 2005) that children are equipped with the ability to generalize (and in fact do generalize more than adults in a comparable situation) but we also know from Yang (2016) that they can sort rule-abiding elements from exceptions in a very efficient and precise way. When the input is homogeneous, generalizing will for the most part lead to convergence, as there is little wiggle room to sustain idiosyncratic analyses. Furthermore, the stability of the linguistic community allows the child to learn what is and what is not an exception in the adult system quite fast. However, when the speech community input is too noisy, the indeterminacy of the input does not impose pressure to eliminate idiosyncratic analyses, and it may also be much harder to determine the ratio between exceptions and rules. Here the pressure to become a member of the speech community may not lead to grammatical convergence, since that may be impossible. In other words, there may be more room to maintain a more idiosyncratic behavior at least with respect to some aspects of system.

In this paper we present elicitation results from a study on the acquisition of 3rd person object clitics by children (aged 3-5) and their mothers in a contact situation. Specifically, we are examining the clitic production of children born in Argentina from Paraguayan parents, living in Villa 21, Barracas, Buenos Aires.[6] The children in our study are in contact with both the Paraguayan and the

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[6] Villa 21 is also known as Villa Paraguaya and is the home of about 40,000 Paraguayans.

Argentinian Spanish spoken in Buenos Aires, and also with a certain amount of Guaraní, which is spoken by 80% of the population in Paraguay.

In this paper we ignore Guaraní and we concentrate on the properties of the clitic systems in both Spanish varieties, which diverge quite a bit. This paper is divided as follows: section 2 briefly describes both clitic systems and also what we know about the acquisition of Spanish clitics in stable linguistic communities. Section 3 describes the studies and their results. Section 4 concludes with a discussion of the results.

1 BACKGROUND

Roughly we can say that the local Argentinian system uses a gender/number system: *lo* for masculine and *la* for feminine direct objects.[7] The Paraguayan system is a *leísta* system: according to Choi (2000) *le* is used for animates across the board (independent of education and bilingualism status; see also Schwenter, 2006). For inanimates, 90% of the time a Ø form is used, with *lo* being used 10% of the time. As Table 1 illustrates, for each type of object (we ignore plurality in this paper), there are two forms that may fit.

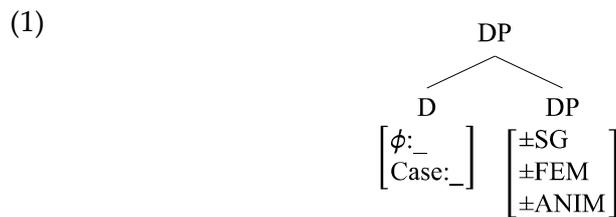Table 1. Distribution of clitics in the two varieties.

	Animate Masculine	Inanimate Masculine	Animate Feminine	Inanimate Feminine
ARG system	LO	LO	LA	LA
PAR system	LE	Ø	LE	Ø

This table should not be interpreted as if the Argentinian system has no LE or does not use Ø for referential objects. Both dialects use LE for the dative and the Argentinian system has also a LE object that seems to be dependent on the type

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[7] In this paper we ignore number, which poses its complications because of rules of syllable-final [s] lenition.

verb, and animacy of the subject/object and yields particular interpretations. We will assume that in this case LE is the form used because fundamentally we have a dative, following much work on this topic (Di Tullio 1995, Ganeshan, 2019, but see Pineda, 2020). In the same way the Ø referential direct object is also possible in a restricted set of cases, suggesting that it has some deictic feature, as it is better in imperatives and in cases of ostension (Masullo, 2013).

Although there is much debate as to whether we should treat clitics as agreement markers or regular objects, for concreteness we assume that these clitics are determiners which combine with pronominal DP complement from which they acquire ϕ features (gender, number and animacy) as in (1) (Papangeli 2000, Alcaraz, 2021, Kurz 2023). We also assume that they are all generated in argument position and raise to some position higher in the structure.

(1)

$$
\begin{array}{c}
\text{DP} \\
\diagup \quad \diagdown \\
\text{D} \qquad\qquad \text{DP} \\
\begin{bmatrix} \phi:\_ \\ \text{Case:}\_ \end{bmatrix} \quad \begin{bmatrix} \pm\text{SG} \\ \pm\text{FEM} \\ \pm\text{ANIM} \end{bmatrix}
\end{array}
$$

After D agrees with DP in animacy and gender, it enters an agree relation with v and the possible feature combinations in D are given in (2).

(2)   a.   [+D, +ANIMATE, –FEM, +ACC]
       b.   [+D, –ANIMATE, +FEM, +ACC]
       c.   [+D, +ANIMATE, –FEM, +ACC]
       d.   [+D, +ANIMATE, +FEM, +ACC]

Alternatively in the Argentinian system D probes for gender (but not animacy) as in (3a,b) and, in the Paraguayan system, D probes for animacy, but not gender, as in (3c,d), yielding.

(3)   a.   [+D, –FEM, +ACC]   b.   [+D, +FEM, +ACC]
        c.   [+D, +ANIMATE, +ACC]   d.   [+D, –ANIMATE, +ACC]

For concreteness we will ignore the dative and concentrate on the singular accusative cases. Assuming a Distributed Morphology approach (Halle; Marantz, 1993), a very simple feature specification for the vocabulary items for each language is given in (4):

(4)   ARG system   /lo/ ↔ [–FEM, +D]   /la/ ↔ [+FEM, +D]
          PAR system   /le/ ↔ [+ANIMATE, +D]   ∅ ↔ [+D, –ANIMATE][8]

The task for the child exposed to both systems is not trivial. Assuming Distributed Morphology (and much other models), the child has to determine the following: (i) the information associated to different vocabulary items; (ii) the syntactic features operating in the language (at the points of insertion); and (iii) how and when the information is assembled (syntactically or post-syntactically). And in the case of pronouns, all this depends on knowing what the antecedent for the pronoun is. Forsythe et al. (2021) and Forsythe and Schmitt (2021) found that children decide on the antecedent before they match the features of the pronoun with the antecedent. In other words, if the discourse biases the interpretation towards a particular referent, the young child might ignore the phi features on the pronominal element, in which case they may not learn from the form.

Before we complicate the input with two systems competing, it is necessary to establish some baseline for what children do when they are exposed

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[8] A reviewer points out the correlation between null forms and inanimates present also at least as a preference for null objects in Brazilian Portuguese (see Cyrino, 2020; also Creus; Menuzzi, 2004). This phenomenon is quite complex as there are many ways to obtain a zero in the syntax (ellipsis, VP deletion, operator-movement. More research is necessary to determine to what extent this is a categorical effect or a preference. However, it is notable that inanimates in other languages are also the objects and subjects less morphologically marked (Hammerly, 2003; Toosarvandani, 2023)

to a single system. In an elicitation task where children are asked 'what is X doing with Y?", Castilla et al. (2008) found that in Colombian Spanish (which is much like what we are calling the Argentinian system with respect to the clitic system), 5-year-olds produce the target clitic 73% of the time and the substitutions of LO/LA by LE are minimal. Even 3-year-olds do not surpass 3% LE use. As for omissions, they only reach 25% in 3-year-olds, as Table 2 shows.

Table 2: Percentage of forms by antecedent type: Children & Adults in Colombia*

	3 year-olds	4-year-olds	5-year-olds	adults
LO/LA	33	62	73	96
LE	3	2	2	0
∅	25	15	13	4

*Adapted from Castilla et al. (2008); OTHER responses not shown.

In other work, using a similar task, Schmitt et al. (2021) tested Paraguayan children living in Paraguay. The results from 22 children (mean age 67 months ranging from 47 to 76 months), show a much different pattern, as Table 3 shows. Here we find exactly the pattern expected given Choi's description: overwhelming use of ∅ for inanimates and overwhelming use of LE for animates. The use of the gender-based system hovers around 10%, and there is also a certain amount of "other" responses, which combines responses with full DPs and also other types of responses. Given that the methodology is basically identical in the two studies, the bulk of the differences are to be associated to the differences in input. While the Colombian children overwhelmingly use LO/LA, the Paraguayan children use LE/∅.

Table 3: Percentage of forms by antecedent type: Paraguayan children living in Paraguay*

CliticType	Animate M	Animate F	Inanimate M	Inanimate F
LE	77	73	5	14

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Ø	2	7	89	64
LO	2	0	2	0
LA	0	11	0	9
Other	18	9	5	14

*Columns may not add up to 100 exactly due to rounding.

The situation we are interested in this paper is an acquisition situation in which these two systems are in contact. Two questions arise: (i) do Paraguayan mothers living in Argentina reproduce the behavior of Paraguayan children in Paraguay? (ii) do children of Paraguayan mothers living in Argentina display the same behavior as their mothers?

We can hypothesize that, if Paraguayan mothers behave like the Paraguayan children in Paraguay, they will overwhelmingly use LE/Ø and their children will also be overwhelmingly LE/Ø users, with perhaps a bit more variability, due to contact with the dominant gender-based system. On the other hand, if Paraguayan mothers are accommodating to the local variety, they may have more gender-based clitics and more variation than the Paraguayan children in Paraguay. In this case, their children will be exposed to more variation and will have to generalize based on more forms and therefore more potential distinctions. This may lead to children to choose one system over another or to combine the two systems in one, with a potential loss of forms, as there will be always two options for each case in (2). We may also expect more individual idiosyncratic behavior.

2   THE STUDY

2.1   Methods, materials, and subjects

The task is a replication of the task used in Pérez-Leroux et al. (2008). In this task, children are shown a picture and after a contextualizing sentence, children are asked a question about the picture. All pictures have two characters and one

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is doing something to the other. Participants are then asked a question of the form "¿Qué hizo X con Y?" (What did X did to Y?) as illustrated in (5):

(5) "¿Qué hizo la madre con el perrito?"
What did the mother do with the little dog?

The experiment was composed of 10 items, but 2 of the pictures made the gender of the object unclear and therefore we report here the results for 8 pictures, 4 targeting animate objects (2 Masc/2 Fem) and 4 targeting inanimate objects (2 Masc/2 Fem). Responses were recorded, transcribed, and coded for clitic type (LE/LO/LA/∅/Other), animacy and gender of the intended antecedent of the object. 19 children and their mothers were tested in the Cultural Center of Barracas, Buenos Aires, Argentina by a native speaker of the Argentinian variety. Importantly for this study, both parents were Paraguayan and all the children were born in Buenos Aires. Children's ages ranged from 38 to 65 months with a mean age of 52.5 months.

2.2 Results

We will start by examining the results for Paraguayan mothers in Argentina (Table 4).

Table 4: Percentage of forms by antecedent type: Paraguayan Mothers in Argentina*

CliticType	Animate M	Inanimate M	Animate F	Inanimate F
LE	42	8	29	5
∅	3	13	5	39
LO	42	55	0	13
LA	3	3	53	24
Other	11	21	13	18

*Columns may not add up to 100 exactly due to rounding. Shaded cells mark expectations for each form.

Overall, Paraguayan mothers are using forms from both systems. For Animate Masculine antecedents we have half and half of each competing form, overwhelmingly LE and LO. For Inanimate Masculine antecedents, LO is the preferred form followed by ∅. For Animate Feminine antecedents, LA is the preferred form followed by LE and for Inanimate Feminine antecedents, the preference is for ∅, followed by LA. We can also see that there are gender errors (specially the use of LO for feminine inanimate) and a certain amount of LE for inanimates and ∅ for animates. In other words, to the extent that these results reflect the input to children, taken as a group, adults use every form in every one of our four categories, except for feminine animates, which are never realized as LO. These results are compatible with the featural description of the vocabulary items in (4) and also with D features in (2) or (3).

Given the input, we can make some predictions about children's behavior. A priori, the child does not know the features associated to the vocabulary items nor does she know the feature composition of the D node into which the form is inserted. One possibility is that the child assumes the features associated to the vocabulary items in (4) and the feature composition of the locus for insertion in (2). After all, the child has reasons to contrast animacy and also gender. This makes both LE and LO compatible with (a), LO and ∅ for (b); LE and LA for (c) and LA and ∅ for (d). With this much overlap, we would expect to find a reduction of forms, or a specialization of some forms (Kroch 1989). This set of assumptions is not the only option however. The child may assume that the competition is not just between forms. Rather two systems are competing. A system in which D probes for gender and a system in which D probes for animacy. In this case, there are no ties among vocabulary items. There is always a winning form. The competition is between two different Ds. And here we may expect one D to win over another, but not in principle a reduction of forms, as there is no pressure for it (at least within the competing items for each D).

Table 5: Percentage of forms by antecedent type: Paraguayan Children born in Argentina*

CliticType	Animate M	Inanimate M	Animate F	Inanimate F
LE	53	13	47	8
Ø	5	21	13	42
LO	11	21	0	8
LA	0	11	16	16
OTHER	32	34	24	26

* Columns in tables may not add up to 100 exactly due to rounding.

Table 5 shows the results for children. Children overwhelmingly use more LE for animates than any other form and to the extent that they use LO and LA, for animates they clearly know their gender. For inanimates, the picture is more diverse. As with adults, the inanimate feminine is preferably realized by Ø, but Ø is as likely as LO for inanimate masculine antecedents. Comparing children with adults we find that by Tukey's tests the use of LE and Ø is not significantly different between mothers and children. But the use of LO (p=.0003) and LA (p=.027) is. Children use much less LO/LA than adults. As for gender errors, they only happen in inanimates. Here again we find no use of LO for feminine animates and no LA for masculine animates either.

At the individual level, not considering the OTHER responses, it is important to note even in a short task, the mothers are quite inconsistent. In fact, only three mothers are consistent LO/LA users (16%) and only one mother is a consistent LE/Ø user (5%). With respect to the number of forms used (including the Ø) we find more adults using 3 or 4 forms than children (64% of the adults vs. 42% of the children). With respect to children, six are LE/Ø users (32%) and there are no LO/LA users. As for exclusive users of one form only, we find one mother and one child using LE exclusively, but they also use other forms. Also interestingly only children use two forms (excluding the known systems).

Table 6: Number of speakers using different forms

	Use one form	Use two forms	Use three forms	Use all forms	Use LO/LA	Use LE/∅
Paraguayan Adults	1	1	10	4	3	0
Paraguayan Children	1	4	8	2	0	4

3 DISCUSSION

The first important finding is that mothers are much more variable than their counterparts in Paraguay and their use of LO/LA is far from negligible. One could argue that this is an artifact of the experimental setting, which transforms this into a school task. Although we don't deny this may have played a role, there are two other factors that may suggest this is not the crucial fact. First, as is well-known, the use of LE is sociolinguistically marked in Argentina (Ordoñez 2012, Kany 1969) and is considered a major feature of Paraguayan Spanish. Other work by Avellana et al. (2019) has shown that Paraguayan mothers who have lived for a long time in Argentina and have more control of the variation use less LE in child directed speech than in adult directed speech. Second, and perhaps more importantly, if this were the case, the Paraguayan children would not show so much variability, assuming the input from the mothers to be relevant. Still with respect to adults, the second important point is that although we find some systematic LO/LA users and some systematic LE/∅ users, overwhelmingly we find users of 3 or 4 forms (14 out of 19). So even in a very small task we find clear use of more forms than each system would allow.

With respect to children, the first important point is that children use much less LO/LA than their mothers and as a group they tend to be LE/∅. Importantly also, at the individual level, although 4 are consistent LE/∅ users, none of them are consistent LO/LA users. In other words, it seems that the animacy distinction is winning. The second important point is that overall they

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use fewer forms than their mothers as a group: 9 children use one or two forms against 4 mothers. This suggest that most of them are trying to use a single system and animacy plays an important role.

The obvious questions is why would animacy seems to be "winning", when the dominant variety is gender based? Here we would like to offer a line of explanation which we will call "animacy by default". Animacy distinctions appear very early in development. It is known that 4 months old babies treat objects and humans differently when they disappear under an occluding object (Legerstee, 2001). It is also known that 11 month old babies behave as adults when it comes to detecting animate vs. inanimate objects in a natural scene (Hofrichter et al., 2021). Infants, like adults, preferentially attend to animate objects. This early ability is linked to evolutionary patterns of survival (New et al., 2007, among others) . In language we use animacy in processing to aid in the detection of subjects vs. objects (Minkoff, 2000) and also it can be argued to distinguish raising vs control verbs (Becker, 2006). Furthermore inanimates can be shifted into animates and vice versa (de Swart; de Hoop, 2018) depending on selection restrictions. All these uses of animacy can be interpreted as non-linguistic but correlating with linguistic properties. In more linguistic terms, animacy plays an important role in feature hierarchies. Person distinctions are dependent on animacy, since 1st and 2nd persons are always animate (or coerced into animates). This suggests that the first cut in a feature hierarchy of phi features is made by an animacy contrast with social gender established only in animates. Interestingly, animacy is also relevant for imposing directionality constraints on diachronic change (Haspelmath 2004) and is sometimes used as a feature to reanalyze morphological pieces whose declension is no longer clear (Janda, 1996, Igartua; Santazilla 2019) suggesting that it is an easy and ready grounded feature that can be used to contrast different forms. All this suggests that when the evidence is not clear, animacy can always come to the rescue.

In the case of Paraguayan children in Argentina, it is important to note that they also have ample evidence for at least a human non-human distinction in interrogative pronouns *quién* and *que* and overt personal pronouns in subject position. Animacy is also in Differential Object Marking. This makes animacy also relevant in the composition of features in the morpho-syntax, which would make these features present in both dialects.

A more linguistic route to explain children's preference for animacy as the relevant pronominal distinction could come from the source of animacy vs. gender features within the DP. In recent work Toosarvandani (2023) and Hammerly (2023) have argued that animacy is tightly connected to person and since person tends to be placed in a position higher in the DP than gender, a property of *n*, animacy and person should be treated as non-n features but rather features in D, associated to the index of the DP, at the interface with the semantics. If this is correct, gender being a grammatical feature that needs to be associated to each particular noun in Spanish, can only be spelled out if there is agreement between *n* and D. Any failure of agreement will only allow forms with no gender.

Future work using natural speech data will improve our understanding of the conditions that affect children's choices.

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