

Effects of discourse topic on global and local markings in Croatian ditransitives

a comparison of adults and children

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The study

- This study examines how Croatian monolingual children use global and local markings to signal givenness
- Global Marking (GM) is intended as the relative order of the two objects: IO-DO and DO-IO
- Local Marking (LM) is intended as the referring expression used for an object: NP, Pronoun, clitic, and omission
- Local markings are known to emerge before global markings (Hickmann et al. 1996)
- Givenness here is expressed through discourse topic
- **Goals:** revealing whether a pragmatic notion such as givenness shapes information structure in Croatian and if yes, are Croatian preschoolers adult-like in how they express discourse topic and in accommodating the pragmatically more felicitous order.

Discourse Topic (DT)

- In the current study DT is seen as a more specific representation of the notion of givenness
- The contrast is not simply set between give/new but DT/non-DT arguments
- Topic-comment order
- Topic of an overarching discourse
- Divergent results of studies on DT in child language: Children mark DT through word order (Chien 1985, De Cat 2009), Children do not use word order to signal DT (Hornby, 1971, Narasimhan & Dimroth 2012), depending on whether the language has grammaticalised mechanisms to signal topic.

Global marking: object order

- Both object orders are grammatical and attested in Croatian

1. Marlon je dao Stigu igračku. IO-DO
Marlon.NOM is.AUX gave Stig.DAT toy.ACC
2. Marlon je dao igračku Stigu. DO-IO
Marlon.NOM is.AUX gave toy.ACC Stig. DAT

- All possible word order combinations of verb (V), direct object (DO) and indirect object (IO) in ditransitive sentences are attested, but the variants are not interchangeable, as they depend on pragmatic factors (Siewierska, 1998)

Referring expressions (RE)

- A coherent discourse typically includes reference to previously mentioned reference that can be made with different forms, and a RE is the way a speaker chooses to express a referent in a certain context (Almor and Nair 2007)
- We can see an effect of givenness also in REs as speakers use pronouns for already evoked referents; conversely, new referents are introduced with more descriptive forms (Arnold 2010)
- REs we are focusing on: **NP, Pronouns, clitic, omission**
- Children can be either **under-informative**- use pronominal forms when NPs are required, or **over-informative**- use NPs when the use of pronouns is expected
- Children are rather over-informative than under-informative in their use of REs, but nevertheless sensitive to the discourse from very early on

Research questions

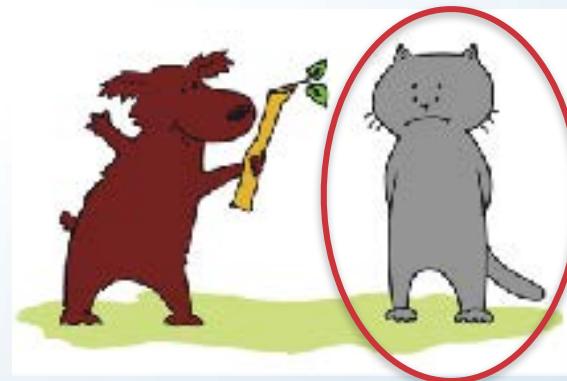
1. Do Croatian children use the DT>comment order to express the topic?
2. Are Croatian children more likely to express the DT argument with a high accessibility Referring Expression?
3. Is the use of a Referring Expression related to grammatical function (S/ DO/IO)?
4. Are there any differences between Croatian children and adults?

Predictions

1. There will be an overall **preference for the DT-comment order**, however, we expect the DT to influence the object order of **adults more than that of children** (the results for topic expression in child language are not unified)
2. The DT object will be expressed with a **pronominal (pronoun or clitic) in both types of speakers** (children were often found to use the pronouns appropriately)
3. There will be a **relation between RE and grammatical function**: Croatian is a subject-drop language (omissions of the S are expected when the it is the DT); the IO is expected to be expressed as a clitic quite frequently (corpus data)
4. Children will be more on target with LM than GM; we expect the adult controls to conform to both types of marking for the DT.

The task

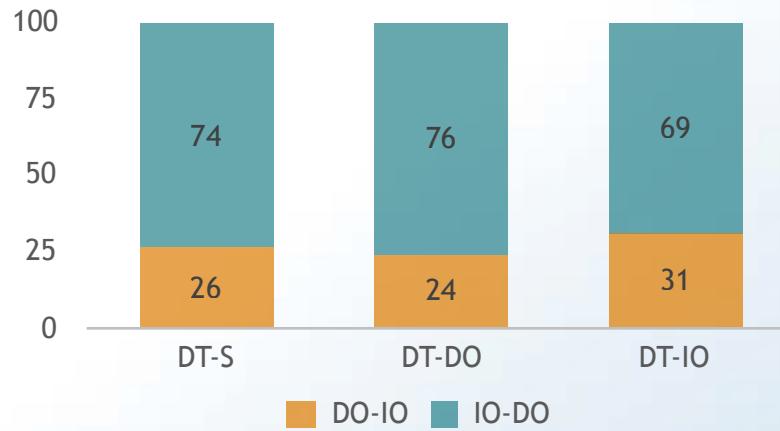
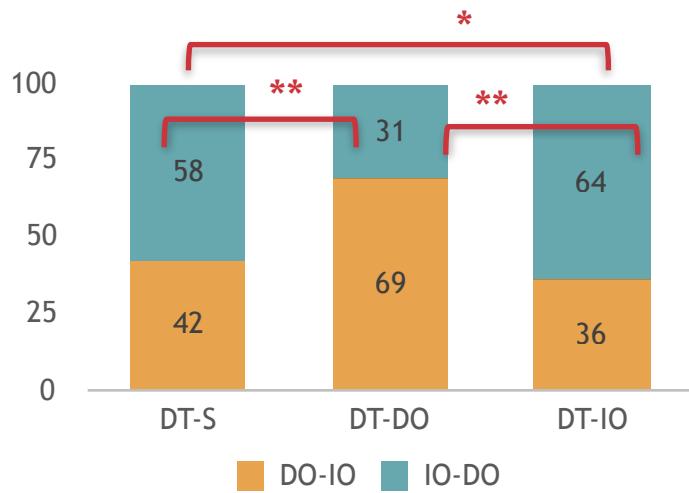
- Semi-structured elicitation task
- Three storybooks: S-DT (baseline), IO-DT, and DO-DT
- Each storybook had 13-15 images, 5 of which were target images designed to elicit a ditransitive structure



Participants and procedure

- 58 Croatian monolingual children of ages 3;6–5;1 (mean=4;4)
- 36 adult controls, between the ages of 19–28 (mean=21)
- The participants chose one of the stories
- The experimenter begun to tell the story, by describing the images up to the first target image; then the participant continued telling the story
- When one story was finished, the participant chose the following story until all three stories were told
- NOTE: the storybooks were visually available to both participant and experimenter, so all the referents can be considered visually accessible

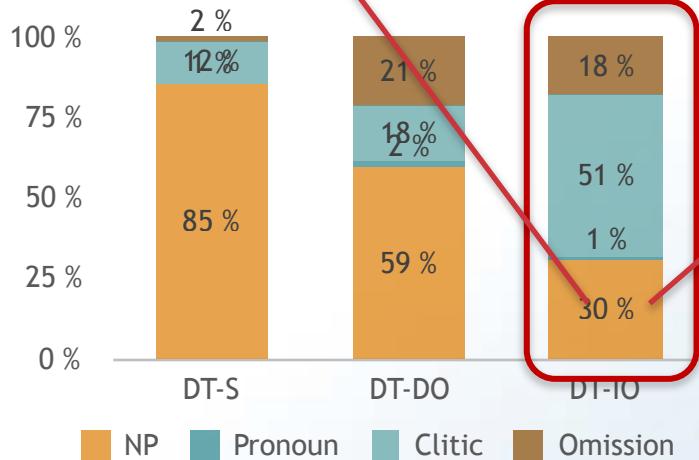
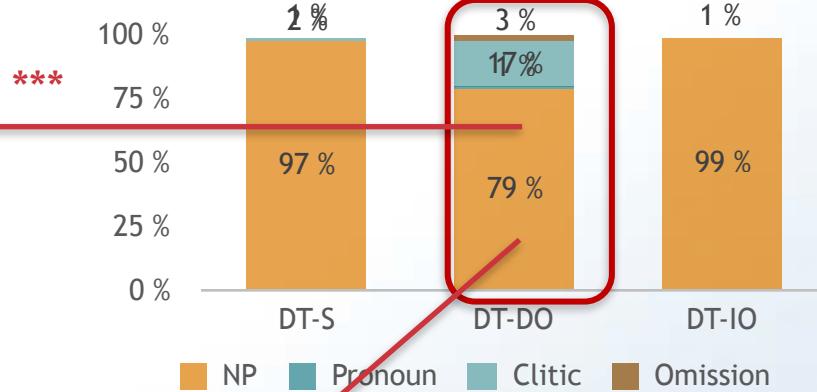
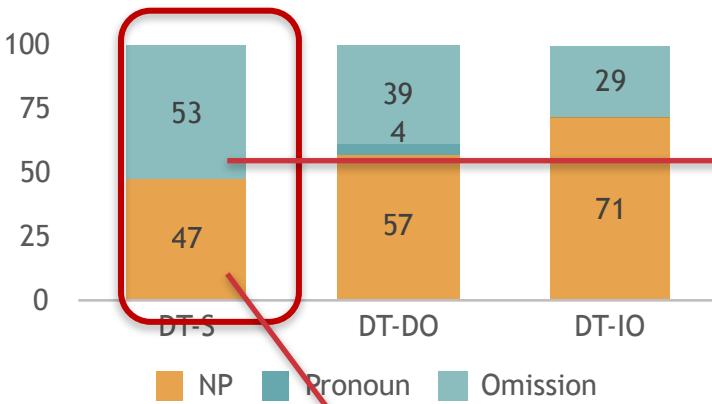
Global markings with regard to DT (only NPs)



Adults	Odds. ratio	p.value
DT-S vs. DT- IO	0.288	<0.05
DT-S vs. DT- DO	7.169	<0.0001
DT-IO vs. DT- DO	0.04	<0.0001

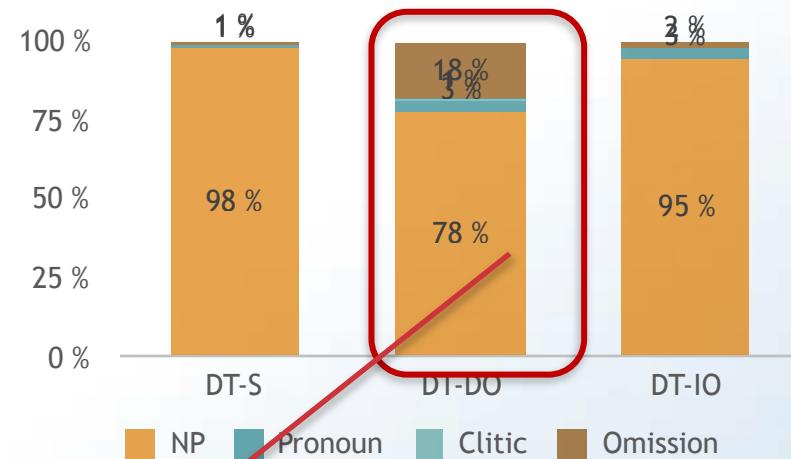
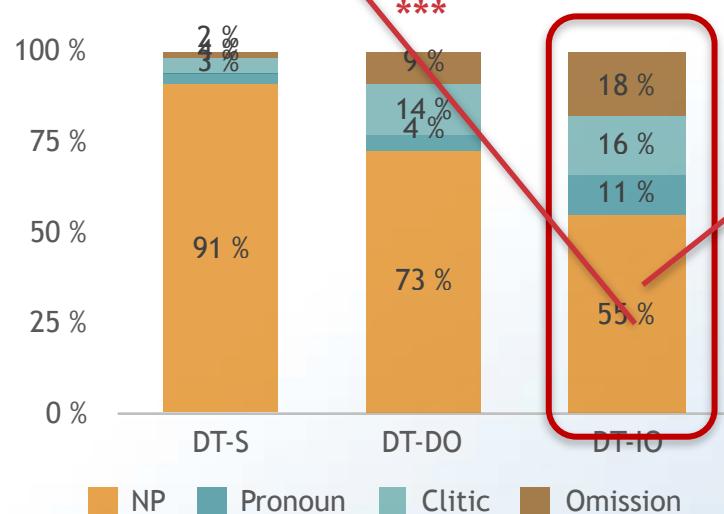
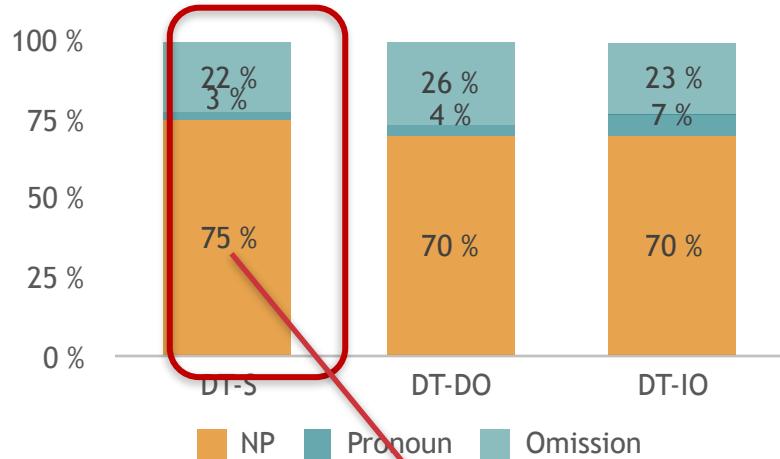
Children	Odds. ratio	p.value
DT-S vs. DT-IO	1.29	0.73338
DT-S vs. DT- DO	0.888	0.9492
DT-IO vs. DT- DO	1.461	0.6729

Local markings with regard to DT (adults)



	Odds. ratio	p.value
DT-S vs. DT- IO	1.081	0.0057
DT-S vs. DT- DO	-1.949	0.0007
DT-IO vs. DT- DO	-3.030	<0.0001

Local markings with regard to DT (children)



	Odds. ratio	p.value
DT-S vs. DT- IO	1.349	0.0001
DT-S vs. DT- DO	-0.040	0.9964
DT-IO vs. DT- DO	-1.389	0.002

Findings

- There was an effect of object order in adults but not in children as the latter used the same proportion of IO-DO in both target conditions.
- DT had an effect on REs in both groups.
- Children produced more NPs than adults overall, but simultaneously they omit more objects.
- Children were not sensitive to the DT status of the S
- There was a correlation between grammatical function and RE: subjects had a tendency to be omitted, the IOs to be expressed with a clitic, and the DOs were still quite often expressed with an NP
- Children have a three-way distinction for expressing the IO (NP, clitic, null) and a two-way distinction for the DO and the S (NP and null) while the adults also used the clitic for expressing the DO
- As predicted, adults were more consistent with object order marking than children, and children were more attentive to LM than to GM

Conclusions

- The findings are in line with previous studies: children mark givenness more readily with local markings
- The results related to other Referring Expressions reveal that children use reduced expressions to refer to DT-objects, but not DT-subjects.
- Children are sensitive to the dynamics of the discourse but are also over-specific with their RE.

Thank you

Questions?

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