Feature Reassembly in Cognate Neuter Subject Pronouns: L1 French—L2 Picard

I explore the acquisition of an endangered minority language, Picard, in Northern France by speakers of French seeking to revitalize their heritage langue d’oil. In these closely related languages, I examine cognate grammatical systems through the lens of default processing and lexical feature reassembly (Lardiere, 2009). Neuter subject pronouns, therefore, provide testable morphosyntactic nuances.

Auger (2009) identifies two neuter pronouns in Vimeu Picard, ch(é) and a, in complementary distribution for predicate type. a occurs with [+Verb] (Chomsky, 1975) predicates: adjectival (1a), verbal, and adverbial. ch(é) occurs with all other [−Verb] predicates: nominal, prepositional (1b), etc. a also undergoes allomorphic variation, phonetically deleting before non-high vowels (Ø in 1c). This phonetic deletion superficially interferes with obligatory subject doubling, creating a case of morpho-phonological opacity where a phonetically-null pronoun (Ø) blocks the syntactic chain of agreement of a predicate adjective to the full NP subject. Contrastively, French ce and ça are considered allomorphs of the same morpheme (Zribi-Hertz, 1994). ce is found before the copula être regardless of predicate type, but, before non-present tenses, ça can be inserted more colloquially. ça is found before other verbs.

Twelve heritage learners of Vimeu-Picard (aged 17–73, proficiencies evaluated with a C-test) completed an aural judgment task, rating sentences on a Likert scale from 1–9 (Good.Picard – Not.possible.in.Picard). This task included four stimulus sets in 2x2 designs, Sets 1 and 2 manipulate predicate type to test the status of the [+Verb] feature with the different pronouns. Predicate conditions are adjectival(1) vs. nominal(2) and the neuter pronouns appear before either a consonant in Set 1 or a vowel[−High] in Set 2. Therefore, pronoun conditions for Set 1 are (a) a vs. (b) ché and for Set 2 are (a) Ø vs. (b) ch’. Sets 3 and 4 test the acquisition of the null pronoun as a valid part of this system. Set 3 manipulates the allomorphic distribution of a(1) vs. Ø(2) before (a) a consonant or (b) a vowel[−High]. Set 4 tests for the presence of the neuter pronoun Ø in its blocking of predicate adjectival agreement to the full NP subject. All Set 4 NPs are feminine and all pronouns appear before a vowel[−High]. Variables are pronoun type, Ø(1) vs. ungrammatical ch(2), and the adjectival agreement to (a) the neuter pronoun or (b) the full NP.

Rating patterns were similar across both age and proficiency levels, p=.008. In Set 1, before a consonant, the default ché paired with an ungrammatical [+Verb] predicate (*1a²) was rated 1.365x higher than (1a¹), p=.037, and 1.772x higher than (1b²), p=.008. Surprisingly, the [+Verb] pronoun a with a [−Verb] predicate (*1b¹) did not show significant rejection compared to other conditions. In Set 2 before a vowel, rejection patterns were not significant. This questions the status of the null pronoun. In Set 3, grammatical a before a consonant (3a¹) is judged 4.631 times more acceptable than grammatical Ø before a vowel[−High] (3b²), p=.001. In Set 4, ch with NP agreement (*4a²), which is the only Set 4 condition that would be ungrammatical in French, is judged most ungrammatical, p(s)<.05. Whereas the grammatical (4b¹), Ø with agreement to Ø, was judged no differently than ungrammatical (*4a¹) and (*4b²).

These data suggest that the default ch pronoun can be rejected in the presence of the [+Verb] feature in the emergent grammar. However, today’s heritage learners may not have enough exposure to Picard to fully associate the [+Verb] feature to the a pronoun or to fully integrate its null allophone. Instead speakers allow the default ch to take over the [+Verb] grammatical function of the Ø pronoun before vowels[−High]. Examples
1) a. *Mais tout o a n’est mie grave.* (Vasseur, 2003: 114)  
‘But all that it is not serious.’

b. *Tout o ch’est à nous.* (Vasseur, 2003: 4)  
‘All that it is ours.’

c. *Tout o Ø est bieu.* (Vasseur, 2003: 538)  
‘All that it is beautiful.’

Stimuli

2) Stimulus set 1: Pronoun before Consonant

(1a) | Eune rose, a sra tojours aussi bieu à rbeyeu. | [+Verb] [+Verb] |
(1b) | *Eune rose, ché sra tojours aussi bieu à rbeyeu. | [+Verb] [+Verb] |
(1c) | a rose it will-be always as beautiful to look at |

3) Stimulus set 2: Pronoun before Vowel

(2a) | Un tchurè Ø est tojours rétu. | [+Verb] [+Verb] |
(2b) | *Un tchurè Ø est tojours un homme. | [+Verb] [+Verb] |
(2c) | a preacher it is always nice |

4) Stimulus set 3: Allophonic Variation [+Verb]

(3a) | Un tchurè a doit prêcheu tous les jours. | Consonant |
(3b) | *Un tchurè ch’est tojours un homme. | Vowel[-High] |
(3c) | a preacher it must preach all the days |

5) Stimulus set 2: Morphological agreement

(4a) | *Eune avinture Ø est tojours amusan. | Full Feminine NP |
(4b) | Eune avinture Ø est tojours amusan. | Neuter Pronoun |
(4c) | an adventure it is always fun(masc./fem.) |

References


