Mandarin children's acquisition of relative clauses with resumptive pronouns

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Abstract: Theoretical and empirical studies show that acquisition of relative clauses with resumptive pronouns is difficult for children, which is a kind of first-level recursive structure, indicating that there is a difference between child Chinese and adult Chinese. Resumptive pronouns (RPs) in Chinese prepositional object and clausal complement are obligatory. However, whether RPs in Chinese genitive noun phrases are obligatory or not is no consensus. In addition, the debates about children's acquisition of these structures are far from being settled. Therefore, this study analyses these three constructions and proposes the following two research questions:

(1) Are there developmental changes in Mandarin-speaking children's acquisition of relative clauses with resumptive pronouns?

(2) What's the acquisition difficulty ranking of different sentence constructions?

The theoretical analysis indicates that acquisition difficulty of different constructions is shown as below: Genitive NP[1]> preposition object>clausal complement. The following empirical evidence also supports the analysis. This study designs an elicited imitation experiment including three types Chinese relative clauses items: prepositional object, genitive NP and clausal complement. Mandarin-speaking young children (n=288) and adults (n=52) participated in the experiment. This study finds that children cannot achieve adult-like ability until they are 8-year-old. And there are distinct acquisition differences between sentence constructions. Finally, implications are provided based on this study.

Key words: resumptive pronouns; relative clauses; first language acquisition; maturation theory; Mandarin

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[1] Genitive NP refers to relative clauses with resumptive pronouns serving as genitive NP. Similarly, preposition object and clausal complement refer to relative clauses with resumptive pronouns serving as preposition object and clausal complement; ">" means that the structure left to the symbol is "more difficult to acquire than" the structure right to the symbol.