

Absolutive Constructions in Brazilian Portuguese and Relativized Minimality Effects in Children's Productions

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1. Introduction

It has been a consensus that object relative clauses (as (2) below) are more difficult to process than subject relative clauses (as (1)) in adult language (Wanner & Maratsos, 1978; Traxler, Morris & Seely, 2002; Gibson, Desmet, Grodner, Watson & Kara, 2005). As far as acquisition is concerned, children's difficulty with object relative clauses has also been widely attested in different languages both in comprehension (de Villiers, Tager-Flusberg, Hakuta & Cohen, 1979; Goodluck & Tavakolian, 1982; Hamburger & Crain, 1982; Corrêa, 1995) and production (Labelle, 1990; Guasti & Cardinalletti, 2003; Utzeri, 2007; Belletti & Contemori, 2010; Adani, Sehm & Zukowski, 2012).

- (1) The girl that ___ patted the dog (subject relative clause)
- (2) The dog that the girl patted ___ (object relative clause)

Recently, this difficulty with object relative clauses has been related to the issue of intervention – the presence of a referential expression - the subject - between the original site of the moved constituent and its final landing site (Friedmann, Belletti & Rizzi, 2009). In order to avoid object relative clauses, children would resort to different structures, characteristically lacking the intervention element. The present investigation contributes to this debate, focusing on a particular construction found in Brazilian Portuguese – the absolutive construction. An elicitation task conducted with Brazilian Portuguese four and five year-old speakers is reported which aimed at verifying whether this kind of structure would be employed as a strategy to avoid object relative clauses.

The aim of the paper is thus two-fold: first, we discuss the structure of absolutives in Brazilian Portuguese and second, based on the results of the experiment, we claim that children's performance on object relative clause production is dependent on the complexity of the structures available to them.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section presents a brief discussion on intervention concerning object relatives in child grammar. Section 3 introduces the innovative construction under investigation – the absolutives. In section 4, the experiment is reported and the results are discussed.

2. Object Relatives in Child Grammar

Children's well attested difficulty with object relative clauses has been related to the issue of intervention. Friedmann, Belletti & Rizzi (2009) have proposed that object relative clauses are harder for children than subject relative clauses due to the presence of the intervening subject – D NP₁ – between the head of the relative clause and the gap inside the object relative clause:

- (3) The dog₂ that the girl₁ patted <the dog₂>
D NP₂ R ... D NP₁ <D NP₂>

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Data from 22 Hebrew speaking children, aged 3;7 to 5;0 years old, in both comprehension and production tests, showed that if both the target and the subject were lexically restricted, the structure would be problematic for children. When either the intervener or the target didn't carry a lexical restriction, as in free relatives or in the presence of an impersonal *pro* subject, children showed adult behavior.

The authors pointed out that those facts resembled Rizzi's Relativized Minimality Principle, which states that in a configuration like (4) "a local relation between X and Y fails if the intervener Z bears a certain structural similarity to X, or, more precisely, Z belongs to the same structural type as X" (Friedmann et al.; 2009: 82).

(4) X... Z ... Y

Children and adults would nevertheless differ in the extent to which the principle is applied. Adults are able to handle structures whose features of the intervener and target are in an inclusion relation, but children require disjunction of the features (chart provided by the authors, schema (29), p. 84):

(5)	Adult grammar	Child grammar	
a) +A +A <+A>	*	*	(identity)
b) +A,+B..... +A <+A,+B>	ok	*	(inclusion)
c) +A +B <+A>	ok	ok	(disjunction)

As far as production is concerned, Hebrew-speaking children avoided object relative clauses, resorting to subject relative clauses, free relatives, and also the use of impersonal *pro* subject. Resumptive pronouns are also commonly used by children as well as passive subject relative clauses as strategies employed in order to avoid object relatives.

Belletti & Contemori (2010: 5) report the use of subject relatives instead of elicited object relatives by Italian-speaking children aged 3;4 to 6;5 years old:

(6) Target (Italian)

Vorrei essere il bambino che l'elefante bagna

I would rather be the child that the elephant wets

Production

Voglio essere la bambina che si bagna

I would rather be the child that is getting wet

Child German (Adani et al., 2012: 7) and child French (Guasti & Cardinaletti, 2003: 67) have shown the production of object relatives with specific pronouns, which have been termed w-relatives, in German, and où-relatives, in French:

(7) Target (German)

Das Pferd, das der Junge reitet, ist jetzt rot.

The horse that the boy rides is red

Production

Das Pferd, wo der Junge reitet, ist rot.

The horse where the boy rides is red

(8) Target (French)

Touche l'orange que la dame a pris pour faire le jus.

Touch the orange that the lady took to make juice

Production

Touche l'orange où la dame a pris pour faire le jus.

Touch the orange where the lady has taken to make the juice

As another possible strategy to avoid object relatives, older children and adults resort to passive relatives. The use of ‘si-fa’ relatives is also attested by Utzeri (2007: 298-299), in 6 to 11-year-old Italian-speakers:

(9) Target (Italian)

Vorrei essere il bambino che l’elefante solleva

I would rather be the child that the elephant lifts

Production

Voglio essere la bambina che viene sollevato dall’elefante

I would rather be the child that is lifted by the elephant

(10) Target (Italian)

Il bambino che il re pettina

The child that the king combs

Production

Il bambino che si fa pettinare dal re

The child that himself makes comb by the king

The child that makes himself comb by the king

Argument intervention is also considered in relation to A-movement. Orfitelli (2012) assumes that structures which require A-movement across a structurally intervening argument poses difficulties for children. She considers subject-to-subject raising constructions, contrasting whether the predicates allow experiencers or not. Four year-old children show selective difficulty with *seem*-type constructions (those allowing experiencers).

(11) John seems (to Mary) to be happy.

She proposes the Argument Intervention Hypothesis (Orfitelli, 2012:80):

(12) Argument Intervention Hypothesis (AIH): children are delayed in acquiring those structures which require A-movement across a structurally intervening argument.

Orfitelli also calls attention to the fact that difficulty with *seem*-type constructions correlates with difficulty with (non-actional) verbal passives, another construction which has been argued to involve movement of one argument over another (Collins, 2005), that is, the intervention of the external argument may be considered for the movement of the internal object to the subject position.

In Collins’ proposal, movement of the internal argument, in passives, to the subject position circumvents the external argument by a special kind of movement, termed ‘smuggling’. It raises a whole phrase, the PartP, which contains the DPobj to a position above the external argument, from which the DPobj ultimately reaches the subject position. According to Snyder & Hyams (2015), this second movement violates the Freezing Principle (Wexler & Cullicover, 1980), but Collins suggests that the passive would be an exception, violating the principle. Snyder & Hyams argue that adults would be aware of that but children wouldn’t, which explains children’s delay in the acquisition of verbal passives (Snyder & Hyams, 2015: 6):

(13) Universal Freezing Hypothesis (UFH). For the immature child (at least until age four), the Freezing Principle always applies: No subpart of a moved phrase can *ever* be extracted.

The UFH predicts that young children will not be able to produce or comprehend passive structures, due to their inability to perform the smuggling operation. The AIH predicts that children will have difficulty with object relatives, given that movement of the object to the relativized position crosses the intervening subject.

As pointed out above, several studies on the production of object relative clauses show that children indeed have difficulties with object relatives and that only older children resort to passive relatives in tasks designed to elicit object relatives. Younger children resort to the strategies listed in (6) to (8) above.

As far as Brazilian Portuguese is concerned, an interesting possibility arises. There is an innovative construction in the language – the absolute construction, which is superficially similar to passives, displaying SV word order, promoting the direct object of an agentive verb to a pre-verbal position and exhibiting agreement between the verb and this pre-verbal internal argument. These similarities with the passive construction could lead us to predict that the absolute will not be produced by young Brazilian children.

However, we will argue that this is not so. In what follows we will show that no intervening argument is present in such construction, which leads us to predict that it will appear early in Brazilian Portuguese children's productions. The existence of such a construction raises the following question: Would it also be a strategy employed by children in order to avoid object relatives? In the next section, this construction is presented. Given its novelty in the language, only one analysis is currently available in the literature, which we will assume. In section 4, we will address the question above directly, presenting the results of the experiment conducted with children acquiring Brazilian Portuguese as their native language.

3. Absolute Constructions in Brazilian Portuguese

In the absolute construction, exemplified below, transitive/agentive verbs are used as intransitives. The external argument is absent and the internal argument appears in pre-verbal position, agreeing in person and number with the verb. The construction is innovative and particular to the Portuguese spoken in Brazil. European Portuguese speakers have difficulty in comprehending the meaning of these sentences, judging them ungrammatical:

(14) A casa está pintando/construindo.

The house is painting/building

'The house is being painted/built'.

(15) Esse trem já perdeu.

This train already lost

'This train was missed'.

(16) A cada um minuto, quatro coisas vendem.

At each one minute, four things sold-pl

'Each minute, four things are sold'.

(17) Meu jardim destruiu todo com a reforma.

My garden destroyed all with the renovation

'My garden was completely destroyed with the renovations'.

(18) A Maria operou.

The Maria operated

'Maria had surgery/was submitted to surgery'.

In what follows, we will describe this construction by comparing it to several known constructions present in the language, trying to establish what it is (or isn't). It will be a process of elimination. After showing that it cannot be analyzed as any of the constructions considered, we will be ready to assign it a new analysis.

At first sight, absolutes might be thought of as a type of passive construction lacking the morphological marking (verb in the past participle and the presence of the verb ‘*be*’). However, this analysis is not on the right track. In passives, the external argument may be realized as a by-phrase, as shown below in (19), but in absolutes, by-phrases are ungrammatical, as (20) illustrates:

(19) O jardim foi destruído pela reforma.
The garden was destroyed by the renovations.

(20) *O jardim destruiu pela reforma.
The garden destroyed by the renovations.

Another difference between the two is that in passives, the omitted external argument is ‘implicit’ (21), but in absolutes, it is not projected at all (22):

(21) O jardim foi destruído pra aborrecer a Maria.
The garden was destroyed to upset Maria.

(22) *O jardim destruiu pra aborrecer a Maria.
The garden destroyed to upset Maria.

These differences lead us to conclude that absolutes are not passives with impoverished morphology. They should be regarded as a different type of construction. Another possibility is that absolutes are a type of anticausative construction composed of the verb following the clitic ‘*se*’. Examples of this type of construction are shown below:

(23) A porta (se) abriu.
The door (se) opened.

(24) O anel de vidro (se) quebrou.
The glass ring (se) broke.

As the parentheses indicate, adding the clitic ‘*se*’ is optional in contemporary Brazilian Portuguese. Given that anticausatives can be lacking the clitic, it could be argued that absolutes are in fact anticausatives without the clitic. That this analysis is not on the right track can be seen when we add the clitic to an absolute construction: the result is an unacceptable sentence:

(25) *Esse trem já se perdeu.
This trains already (se) missed.

(26) *O jardim se destruiu.
The garden (se) destroyed.

A third possibility is to analyze this construction as a type of topicalization, where the internal argument moves to a left-periphery position, being topicalized. In order to assess the position of the moved internal argument, we will use wh-questions, as Brazilian Portuguese displays wh-questions with wh-phrases moved to the left periphery. In wh-questions with topicalizations, the internal argument appears before the wh-word, as shown below:

(27) Esse livro, quando você comprou?
This book, when you bought
‘This book, when did you buy?’

In absolutive constructions, the internal argument cannot appear before the *wh*-word, as shown in (28); it must follow it, as shown in (29):

(28) *Meu jardim quando destruiu?¹
My garden when destroyed

(29) Quando meu jardim destruiu?
When my garden destroyed
'When was my garden destroyed?'

These data show that absolutives are not a type of topicalization, as the internal argument occupies a position different from topics. There is one final possibility to be considered in our quest for a suitable analysis. It should be considered that absolutives are impersonal constructions, as the one exemplified below:

(30) Pro destruíram meu jardim.
pro destroyed-pl my garden
'Someone destroyed my garden?.'

Impersonal constructions display subjects which are semantically indefinite and syntactically plural. Its internal argument comes after the verb, as shown above. This is different from absolutives, where the verb agrees with the internal argument, which must be in pre-verbal position:

(31) *Meu jardim pro destruíram.
My garden destroyed-pl

(32) Meu jardim destruiu.
My garden destroyed-sg.

Having excluded analyses which considered the absolutive to be a kind of passive construction, impersonal construction, topicalized construction or anticausative (lacking the clitic '*se*'), we will analyze it as a new type of construction. We will follow Negrão & Viotti's (2010) analysis, which considers the internal argument as the complement of V. Since absolutives do not involve agentivity, *v* is not projected. The internal argument agrees with a T head and gets nominative Case, moving to a position outside VP²:

¹ Note that this sentence would be acceptable if it had an overt subject:

(i) Meu jardim, quando ela destruiu?
My garden when she destroyed
'When did she destroy my garden?'

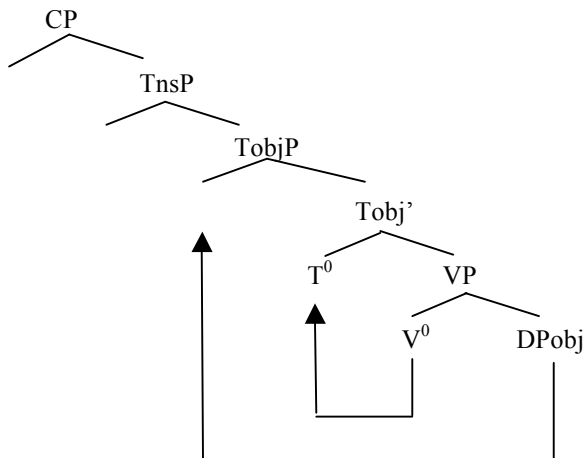
In this case, we are not dealing with an absolutive construction, but with a topicalized one (similar to (27)), where the subject ('*ela*'/*she*) occupies an argument position (spec,IP) and '*meu jardim*'/*my garden* occupies a position in the left periphery:

(ii) [_{TopP} Meu jardim [_{FocusP} quando [_{IP} ela destruiu]]]

In the case of (28) in the text, such an analysis would not be possible as null subjects are not acceptable in *wh*-questions in Brazilian Portuguese (see for example Figueiredo-Silva, 1996).

² We are not fully committed to the exact position the DPobj moves to (TobjP, in N&V's proposal), as far as it is a position above VP and no external argument is assumed.

(33) Structure for absolutive construction (Negrão & Viotti (2010: 57))



According to this analysis, absolutes are similar to passives in that the internal argument is overtly moved to a pre-verbal position outside VP and agrees with the verb. Also similar to passives, absolutive constructions can be relativized:

(34) O trem que perdeu
 The train that lost
 ‘The train that was missed’

(35) O jardim que destruiu
 The garden that destroyed
 ‘The garden that was destroyed’

(36) A mulher que operou.
 The woman that operated
 ‘The woman that had surgery’

In absolutive relative clauses, movement from direct object position to the relativized position crosses no intervening DPs, as shown below:

(37) O jardim que destruiu
 The garden_k [that [___k destroyed ___k]]

This fact points to another similarity with passives, as they also do not display intervening elements in this case. Given the discussion in the previous section regarding children’s difficulties with intervening elements in relative clauses, it is interesting to observe the behavior of children acquiring Brazilian Portuguese. It was observed in the previous section that children acquiring several languages avoid producing object relative clauses. Passive relatives are sometimes produced by older children in these cases, but not by younger ones. Given that absolutes are ‘simpler’ than passives, since they do not project vP, do not have the morphological marking of participle in the verb and do not involve the smuggling operation, we are interested in observing how children acquiring Brazilian Portuguese will behave in a task designed to elicit object relatives. On the one hand, we could hypothesize that they haven’t acquired this construction yet and will refrain from producing it. It could also be thought that they might have difficulties with A-chains, which would render this construction impossible for them to produce (and to parse). On the other hand, if the construction is known to them, and if it is true that it involves no intervening elements in subject position, as proposed by Negrão & Viotti, then we expect production of this construction at high rates, as they display a simpler derivation, if we compare them to

passives (which have no intervention effects but have more morphological elements and derivational steps). In the next section, we present the experiment we devised in order to check children's behavior regarding object relatives.

4. Experiment

An elicited production task, similar to Labelle (1990), was administered to Brazilian Portuguese speakers. Our main goal was to observe which strategies children acquiring Brazilian Portuguese would resort to in a task designed to elicit object relatives; and more specifically, to what extent they would resort to absolute relatives and passive relatives.

Participants: This task was administered to 20 four year-olds (mean age: 4;6), 20 five year-olds (mean age: 5;5) and a group of 20 adults.

Material: Pairs of pictures and stickers to be placed on them were used to elicit production. 4 subject relatives and 4 direct object relatives were elicited from each child.

Procedure: The child was invited to participate in a game-like activity in which he/she would place stickers on pictures. A blindfolded puppet, named Caco, was introduced and the child was informed that he/she should tell Caco which picture he/she had chosen. Then, the first pairs of pictures were shown, displaying the same character in both of them, but performing slightly different actions. The child's attention was drawn to some object or character in the scene and asked to place his/her sticker on one of them. Lastly, he/she was asked to tell Caco which one had been chosen. As Caco was blindfolded, the child could not just point or turn the picture to him, he/she had to verbally utter it. In order to clearly identify the object or character chosen, a relative clause was expected. The whole procedure took about 15 minutes (different types of relatives were elicited, the results for subject and object relative clauses are presented here). The following dialogue illustrates the procedure for the elicitation of an object relative clause:

Experimenter: Look, there are two watermelons. Here Magali is eating the watermelon and here Magali is cutting the watermelon. Let's paste the sticker on one of them. (Child does it).

Now tell Caco (a blindfolded puppet): Which watermelon did you choose?

Child: I chose the watermelon that Magali is eating/cutting (target response)



Results and discussion: A total of 160 responses by children and 80 responses by adults for each type of relative clause were obtained. These responses were classified in the following way. For subject relatives, subject relatives with a gap in the relativized position were considered the target response, other responses obtained were resumptive subject relative clause and non-valid responses (N/A), which had no relative clause. For object relatives, the target response was a direct object relative clause with a gap in the relativized position. Other structures produced were: resumptive object relative clause; subject relative clause; absolute construction; passive construction; non-valid response (N/A). Examples for each type are provided below:

(38) Subject (gap) relative clause: target response

O menino que está rindo

The boy that is laughing

(39) Subject (resumptive) relative clause

*O menino que **ele** não está chorando*

The boy that he is not crying

(40) N/A – Non-valid response

O menino chorando

The boy crying

(41) Direct Object (gap) relative clause: target response

A melancia que a Magali tá comendo/cortando

The watermelon that Magali is eating/cutting

(42) Direct Object (resumptive) relative clause

*A melancia que a menina tá comendo **ela***

The watermelon that the girl is eating it

(43) Subject relative clause

A melancia que está cortada

The watermelon that is cut

(44) Absolute construction

A melancia que tá comendo/cortando

The watermelon that is eating/cutting

(45) Passive construction

A melancia que está sendo comida/cortada

The watermelon that is being eaten/cut

(46) N/A - Non-valid responses

A melancia cortada/comida

The watermelon cut/eaten

The distribution of responses by group (4 and 5 year-olds and adults) is provided by the charts below:

Subject Relative Clauses	4 year-olds (N=20)		5 year-olds (N=20)		Adults (N=20)	
	Subject (gap)	73,75%		91,25%		57,5%
Subject (resumptive)	1,25%	26,25%	-	8,75%	-	42,5%
N/A	25%		8,75%		42,5%	
Total	100%		100%		100%	

Chart 1: Distribution of responses for the elicitation of subject relative clauses

Object Relative Clauses	4 year-olds (N=20)		5 year-olds (N=20)		Adults (N=20)	
Object (gap)	36,25%		28,75%		42,5%	
Subject	16,25%	63,75%	13,75%	71,25%	10%	57,5%
Absolutive	26,25%		28,75%		1,25%	
Object (resumptive)	6,25%		7,5%		1,25%	
Passive	-		11,25%		40%	
N/A	15%		10%		5%	
Total	100%		100%		100%	

Chart 2: Distribution of responses for the elicitation of object relative clauses

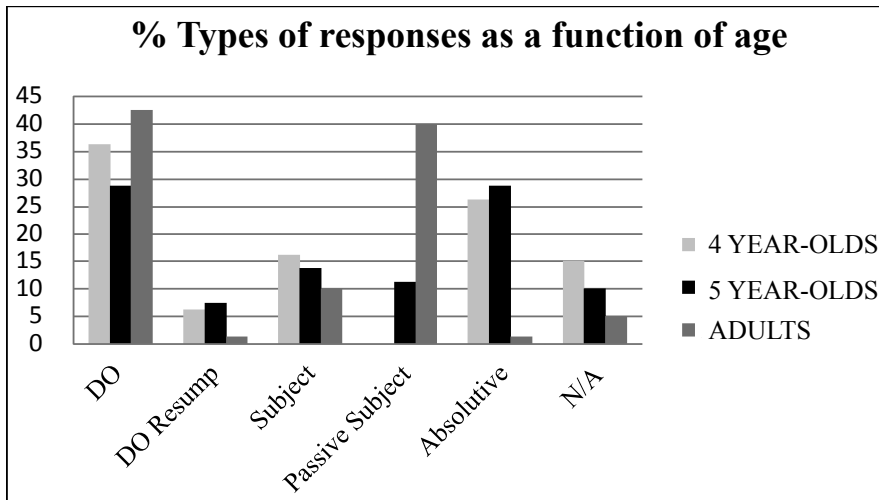
The contrast between the elicitation of subject and object relative clauses responses confirms the literature claim that subject relative clauses are easier to process and produce. An ANOVA (2X3) (*type of RC* (subject X object) and *age* (4, 5 and adults)) returned a main effect of *type of RC* ($F(1,57) = 60.5$ $p < 0.000001$), with more subject relatives being produced than object relatives. An interaction between *age* and *type of RC* was also obtained ($F(2,57) = 7.75$ $p < 0.001050$). Pair-wise comparisons show that significantly more subject relatives than object relatives are produced by 4 year-olds ($t(19) = 4.36$ $p < 0.0003$) and by 5 year-olds ($t(19) = 10.16$ $p < 0.0001$), but this difference is not statistically significant for adults.³

Most of the responses elicited for object relatives constitute alternative strategies used by the three groups, as Chart 2 displays. There is, however, a different picture for each age group. Although both adults and children avoid object relatives if compared to their production of subject relatives, each age group preferentially resort to different strategies. As it has been predicted, the use of absolutive relatives is children's main strategy. Passive relatives are preferred by adults. But these are not produced by 4-year-olds at all, whereas 5-year-olds show some use of them. Simple subject relatives are present in all groups.

Pair-wise comparisons show distinct behavior between children and adults as far as absolutive constructions are used ($p < .0004$ – 4 year olds and adults; $p < .0008$ – 5 year olds and adults), but no statistical difference between children's age groups ($p < .5$). Passives are also differently resorted to by each age group. There is a sharp difference between 4 and 5 year-olds ($p < .04$), as well as between 4 year-olds and adults, since 4 year-olds do not use passives at all. Moreover, there is also a significant difference between 5 year-olds and adults ($p < .002$). The graph below shows the comparison between the groups for each type of structure produced.

From a developmental point of view, it is noticeable that from 4 to 5 year-olds, passive relative clauses emerge and there are fewer non-valid responses (from 15% to 10%). There is also fewer subject relatives (from 16,25% to 13,75%), but the number of absolutives is about the same (26,25% and 28,75%). As far as object relatives are considered, actually 4 year-olds produced a higher percentage of them than 5 year-olds (36,25% to 28,75%), though this difference is not statistically significant. From 5 year-olds to adults, there are also some differences. There are very few absolutives in adults' performance (28,75% to 1,25%), and an expressive production of passive relatives (11,25% to 40%).

³ Adults' percentage of use of subject relative clauses was 57,5% , not as high as expected. It is worth noting, though, that a great number of responses (included in N/A) constitute examples of reduced participle or gerund relative clauses (the boy singing/the boy (that was) singing).



Graph 1: Distribution of responses for the elicitation of object relative clauses

In sum, subject relatives are produced at higher rates than object relatives by children. As the main strategy to avoid an object relative, there is a tendency to resort to structures in which an intervening subject is absent. Subject relatives, passives, and absolutes are good candidates in Brazilian Portuguese. Absolutes are the main strategy used by children. Adults' preference is for passive subject relatives, which are absent for 4 year-olds, but start to appear for 5 year-olds. It should also be noted that resumptive relatives are rare in both children's and adults' productions, although this strategy is used in informal registers in the language.

5. Final Remarks

This paper aimed at contributing to the debate on the distinction between children's production of subject and object relative clauses. It has been pointed out that children resort to different strategies in order to avoid object relatives in production. Although this seems to be a general trend among languages, the specific alternative strategies resorted to vary from language to language, depending on language specific aspects. In this paper, we focused on an innovative structure in Brazilian Portuguese: the absolutive construction. It has been experimentally evaluated whether such construction would, on a par with passives and subject relatives, constitute an alternative strategy children would employ in order to avoid object relatives in Brazilian Portuguese.

The results of an elicitation task administered to four and five year-olds as well as a group of adults (as a control group) showed that absolutes are actually the main strategy used by children, especially by 4 year-olds. The rate of object relatives produced, especially by 4 year-olds, is also noteworthy. It is not the case that children aren't able to produce this kind of structure: one third of their productions are comprised of object relatives with a gap. Belletti & Contemori (2010) also report rates of production of object relatives above 50% for 4 year-olds in Italian. It is also worth noticing that Italian children resort to different strategies in order to avoid object relatives, similarly to Brazilian children. As far as passive relatives are concerned, the authors call attention to the fact that adults massively use them, and around the age of five, children also start to produce them, similarly to what was obtained in Brazilian Portuguese.

What is new in Brazilian Portuguese, though, is the possibility of using the absolutive, an innovative construction, to which children (even 4 year-olds) clearly resort in order to avoid object relatives. This suggests that this construction is simpler than the passive construction and that Negrão & Viotti's analysis for the absolutes is probably on the right track. It also suggests that children do not have problems with simple A-movement and that the cost associated with the passive construction lies somewhere else (possibly in the smuggling movement, as some may argue).

In a nutshell, it may be argued that children resort to the simplest structure available whenever confronted with the task of producing complex sentences. In direct object relative clauses, A'-movement from the object position over the subject position seems to impose some cost. A passive structure would circumvent that cost, since movement would proceed from the subject position, but there is also some cost associated with the previous A-movement in passives, probably related to the intervening presence of the external argument (the *by*-phrase). The absolutive construction avoids both costs, since there is no intervening element for the A-movement (no external argument is projected) and consequently a less costly A'-movement may be employed.

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