Language Optionality and Variation
Festschrift in Honor of Anna Cardinaletti
edited by Chiara Branchini, Gianluca Lebani,
Lara Mantovan, Francesca Volpato

The Acquisition of Accusative and Dative Clitics in Italian Children

Lara Culev
Universitat Pompeu Fabra, España

Sílvia Perpiñán
Universitat Pompeu Fabra, España

Abstract This study investigates the acquisition of Italian third-person accusative and dative clitics in 111 monolingual children aged 3-11. Using an oral elicitation task, we found that accusative clitics, particularly masculine ones, are produced earlier and with higher accuracy than datives. Dative clitics remain challenging throughout development, with greater variability and persistent use of non-target strategies. Results suggest that clitic acquisition follows a complexity-driven trajectory, shaped by syntactic and processing demands rather than gender morphology alone.

Keywords Heritage Italian. Clitic Acquisition. Accusative and Dative Clitics. Trilingualism. Child Language Acquisition.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Italian Object Clitics. – 3 The Present Study. – 4 Results. – 5 Discussion. – 6 Conclusions.

1 Introduction

Romance clitic pronouns are complex, unstressed elements that, due to their phonological weakness and morphosyntactic properties, have been widely studied in both typical and atypical language acquisition. Research consistently reports difficulties with accusative clitics – particularly third-person forms – compared to

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

LiVVaL 9
e-ISSN 2974-6574 | ISSN 2974-6981
ISBN [ebook] 979-12-5742-086-4 | ISBN [print] 979-12-5742-121-2

Peer review | Open access
Submitted 2025-11-12 | Accepted 2026-07-29 | Published 2026-11-17
© 2026 Culev, Perpiñán | CC BY 4.0
DOI 10.30687/979-12-5742-086-4/022

other types such as French subject clitics (Hamann 2002), reflexives (Schmitz, Müller 2008), or datives (Cardinaletti, Cerutti, Volpato 2021). Indeed, object clitics, especially third-person accusatives, have been identified as clinical markers of immature or impaired language (Jakubowicz, Nash, Rigaut 1998; Tuller et al. 2011; Gavarró 2012).

While the asymmetry between subject and object clitics is well-established (Rizzi, Shlonsky 2007), systematic comparisons among other types (accusative, dative, oblique, and partitive) remain scarce. Previous studies report that dative clitics are relatively unproblematic, often acquired at similar or higher rates than accusatives in Italian (Cerutti, Cardinaletti, Volpato 2024), Spanish (Blasco 2000), Romanian (Babyonyshev, Marin 2006), and Catalan (Gavarró, Mosella 2009). Caprin and Guasti (2009) found that accusative and reflexive Italian clitics were used earlier and more consistently than dative clitics in children between 27 and 30 months of age. This study further deepens this comparison among clitics by investigating the acquisition of Italian accusative and dative object clitics in typically developing children aged 3-11, examining developmental trajectories and comparing resolution strategies across clitic types. Overall, our results reveal that dative clitics are delayed relative to accusatives. We propose that greater syntactic distance, lower frequency, and increased processing complexity may underlie this difference.

2 Italian Object Clitics

Clitics are unstressed elements that cannot appear in isolation and, in Romance, are syntactically and phonologically dependent on a host verb. They typically refer to a previously mentioned discourse element, making their use pragmatically guided but syntactically constrained. In Italian, clitic pronouns occur before finite verbs (proclisis) rather than in complement position and are analyzed as the result of movement (Kayne 1975); in enclitic contexts, they attach postverbally and are base-generated. Clitic placement is not considered problematic acquisition (Jakubowicz, Nash, Rigaut 1998), whereas form and morphology may pose challenges. Previous studies in Italian, Catalan, and French report an omission stage for direct object (hereafter ACC) clitics in early acquisition but not clearly for indirect object (hereafter DAT) clitics, despite their similarities. This study investigates the development of ACC and DAT clitics in Italian-speaking children using an experimental task. Italian clitics encode case and may also mark person, number, and gender. ACC and DAT forms overlap in the 1st and 2nd (singular: *mi*, *ti*; plural: *ci*, *vi*), but they differ in the 3rd person **[tab. 1]**, which is the focus of the present study.

Table 1 ACC and DAT 3rd Person Clitics in Italian

Case /Gender & Number	Singular		Plural	
	Masculine	**Feminine**	**Masculine**	**Feminine**
Accusative	*Lo*	*La*	*Li*	*Le*
Dative	*Gli*	*Le/Gli*	*Gli*	*Gli*

There is an ongoing debate on gender distinctions in Italian DAT clitics. As shown in Table 1, only the feminine singular form differs from the others. This asymmetry has led Cardinaletti, Cerutti, and Volpato (2021) to propose that DAT clitics lack a gender feature, as *le* is restricted to formal contexts and often replaced by the default *gli*. Under this view, DAT clitics are morphologically simpler than ACC clitics, as they do not require gender agreement. If clitics follow a complexity hierarchy in acquisition (Jakubowicz, Nash, Rigaut 1998; Jakubowicz, Rigaut 2000; Tuller et al. 2011), this difference may affect their developmental order.

The acquisition of clitics in Italian is complex and non-uniform, shaped by morphosyntactic and prosodic factors. While early research focused on ACC, recent studies highlight asymmetries across clitic types, particularly between ACC and DAT forms. ACC emerge early (~22-24 months), often as unanalyzed enclitic forms with imperatives (e.g., *eccolo*) (Antelmi 1997; Cipriani et al. 1993). Antelmi (1997, 102-4) reports an initial preference for using the clitic together with the full DP: *me **lo** fai chiuso **questo**?* (25 months), and certain omission of ACC clitics at 25-28 months, mostly in dislocated structures: *questo no, non ti do* (=non te **lo** do); typically in combination with indirect objects: *dopo dammi* (=dopo dammelo), *mi chiudi?* (=me lo chiudi), in which the ACC is the one systematically omitted, probably because it is more pragmatically salient and hence, recoverable. By age 3, ACC clitic use increases but can remain optional, improving by age 5 (Guasti 1993-94). Beyond this stage, persistent omission or substitution is linked to Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) (Tuller et al. 2011; Varlokosta et al. 2016), supporting their role as clinical markers. However, not all clitics develop simultaneously. A proposed development places reflexives first, followed by ACC, DAT, and partitives (Antelmi 1997), often linked to increasing syntactic and morphological complexity rather than input frequency. This aligns with the Complexity Hypothesis (Jakubowicz, Nash, Rigaut 1998; Jakubowicz 2011) if complexity is defined in syntactic terms (e.g., additional projections and/or merging operations). If defined morphologically, which is the approach mostly adopted in Cardinaletti, Cerutti, and Volpato (2021) and Tuller et al. (2011), then ACC, marking gender and number with distinct forms, may instead be more complex.

Although DAT have traditionally been considered more complex and later-acquired, recent findings challenge this view. In a large-scale study, Cardinaletti, Cerutti, and Volpato (2021) reported higher accuracy for DAT clitics (*gli*/*le*) than for ACC (*lo*, *la*), despite slightly higher omission rates for DAT in school-aged children. This suggests that, at least in singular forms, DAT may not be structurally more complex. Similar results were found in Cerutti, Cardinaletti, and Volpato (2024), suggesting that, at least in singular forms, DAT may not be structurally more complex. One explanation lies in morphological agreement: *gli*, as a default form, lacks gender agreement and may therefore impose lower processing. Substitution strategies also vary by clitic type: ACC are often replaced by lexical DPs (e.g., *legge il libro* for *lo legge*), while DAT are replaced by prepositional phrases or strong pronouns (e.g., *a lui, al nonno*) (Antelmi 1997; Guasti 1993-94; Caprin, Guasti 2009).

The current study directly compares ACC and DAT clitics in contrastive environments, using ditransitive verbs for DAT. While ACC have long been viewed as primary in early grammar, recent evidence suggests that DAT may be more accessible in some contexts. This highlights the importance of direct comparisons across clitic types in complex syntactic environments.

3 The Present Study

3.1 Objectives and Research Questions

This study investigates whether ACC and DAT clitics are acquired simultaneously or follow a stepwise developmental path in L1 Italian children raised and schooled in Italy.

The following research questions are addressed:

- **RQ1:** Are ACC and DAT clitics acquired at the same age, or do they follow different developmental timelines?
- **RQ2:** When clitic production is avoided, which alternative strategies do children employ?

3.2 Participants

A total of 111 children participated (age range=3;6-11;2, *M*=8;6, SD=2;1). For statistical analyses, age is treated as a continuous variable (in months) but is presented in age bins for visualization. None had a diagnosis of DLD or conditions affecting language development. At the time of testing, all participants were attending pre-school or primary

school in the metropolitan area of Venice (Northern Italy).[1] They were L1 Italian speakers, with limited exposure to English (a maximum of three hours per week through school). As shown in Figure 1, all age groups were represented, although older children were more numerous. Informed parental consent was obtained before data collection.

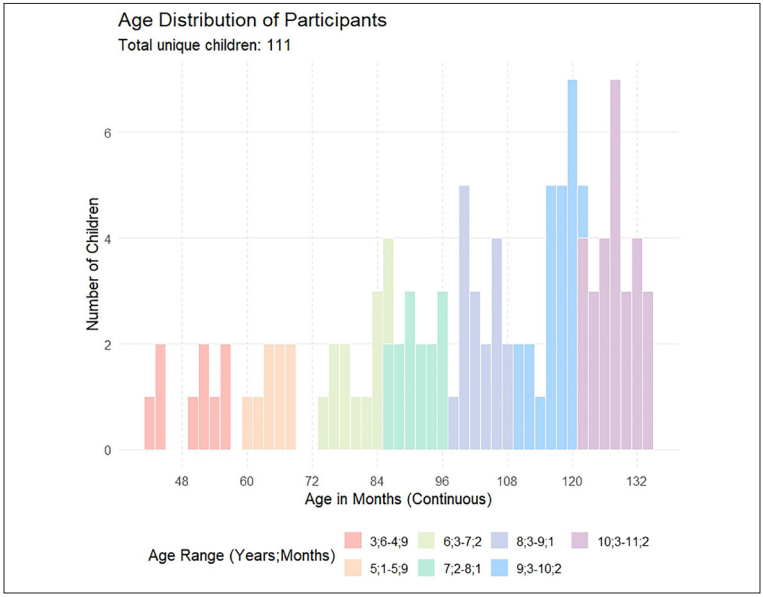


Figure 1 Distribution of participants by age (in months) and age-bins (by color)

3.3 Materials and Procedure

An elicited production task, adapted from Soto-Corominas (2018, 2020), was developed to elicit single clitic pronouns (ACC, DAT, and partitive) and clusters. In the present analysis, we focus on ACC and DAT contexts (16 items out of 32). To create a more communicative

1 In Venetian, ACC clitics display gender distinctions: *lo* is used for masculine referents and *la* for feminine ones (e.g. *el lo vède/el la vède* "he sees him/he sees her"), where the initial /l/ weakens or is realized as a glide, a phenomenon known as *l evanescente* (Cardinaletti 2010). In contrast, DAT clitics are gender-invariant, with *ghe* is used for both masculine and feminine IO (e.g. *el ghe dà el libro* "he gives him/her the book").

methodology than in previous studies (e.g., Arosio et al. 2010),[2] we designed a task with two gender-neutral characters introduced as behavioral opposites: Oli, a disobedient mouse, and Flo, a compliant one who always followed the plan. This contrast generated a corrective context in which children were required to confirm or disconfirm a statement by completing a sentence. Our design may have been more demanding than that of Arosio et al. (2010, 2014) and Cardinaletti, Cerutti, and Volpato (2021), potentially revealing asymmetries between clitic types, underestimating children's overall competence.

Stimuli consisted of short stories depicted in three pictures with oral narration from the experimenter. The first image introduced the scenario, with both mice planning an action together **[figs 2a, 3a]**; the second showed the disobedient mouse (*Oli*) performing a different action **[figs 2b, 3b]**; the third image depicted the obedient mouse (*Flo*) completing the planned action **[figs 2c, 3c]**. The experimenter (first author) described each step. To elicit the target structure, children were asked to finish the story: "*I will start telling the story, and when I stop, you have to finish the last sentence for me, okay?*". This prompt required a clitic pronoun referring to a previously introduced antecedent. If needed, the item was repeated up to two times. The task included five familiarization items followed by 32 experimental items. ACC contexts **[fig. 2]** included four feminine and four masculine inanimate ACC through four transitive verbs: *comprare* 'to buy', *leggere* 'to read', *colorare* 'to color', and *preparare* 'to prepare'. DAT contexts **[fig. 3]** included four feminine and four masculine gender-matched ACC-DAT pairs to avoid gender agreement problems (Cardinaletti, Casani 2019; Casani 2020), using verbs that contextually required a direct object and an indirect object (*dare* 'to give', *regalare* 'to gift, *fare* 'to do/make', *prepare* 'to prepare'); only the indirect object was elicited in these ditransitive contexts.

2 Our task was originally designed for trilingual children (Spanish/Catalan/Italian) to be tested in all three languages. In Spanish – and to some extent Catalan – the questions used in Arosio's methodology to elicit ACC and DAT clitics require a DAT clitic: It. *Cosa sta facendo al castello?* Sp. ¿Qué (le) *está haciendo al castillo*?; It. *Cosa sta facendo al papa?* Sp. *¿Qué le está haciendo al papá?* Thus, to avoid priming effects, Arosio's methodology was not adopted.

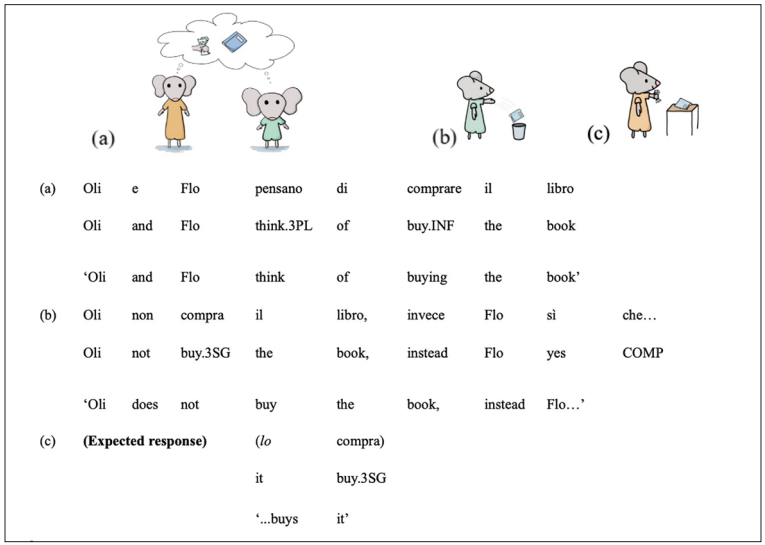


Figure 2 Example of ACC context (Masculine)

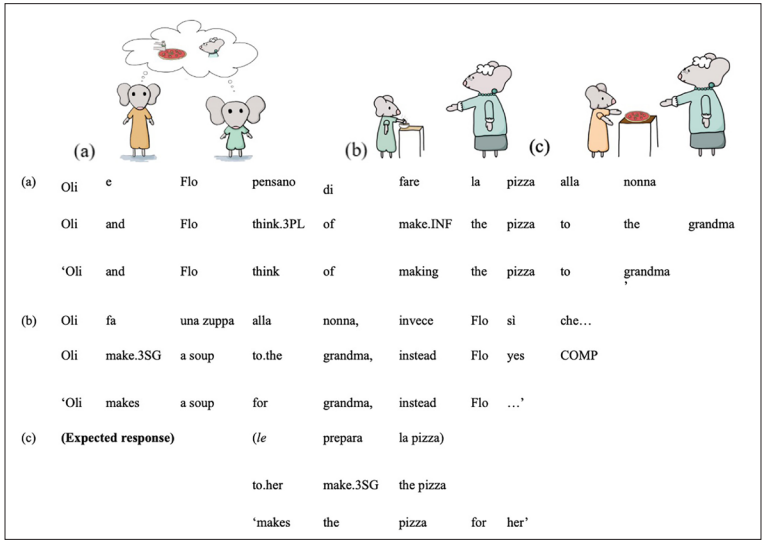


Figure 3 Example of DAT context (Feminine)

Participants were tested individually in a quiet room at their school. The experiment was conducted in Italian with standardized instructions. The task lasted about 15 minutes within a 30-minute session that also included a sentence-comprehension task, which is not

reported here. All responses were audio-recorded for transcription and analysis. Informed consent was obtained from the parents of all participants prior to their inclusion in the study.

3.4 Response Coding and Analysis

Coding varied by structure, as each context elicited distinct strategies. Initial coding categories are summarized in Table 1 (ACC) and Table 2 (DAT).

Table 2 Response coding categories for ACC clitics

Response type	Description	Example
Target clitic	Target-like response	*Lo* legge
Full DP	Substitution with a full lexical DP	Legge *il libro*
Omission	Omission of the target clitic or cluster	Ø legge
Doubling	Clitic reduplication	*Lo* legge *il libro*
Cluster	Production of a cluster instead of a single clitic	*Glielo* legge
Number	Number agreement error	*Li* legge
Gender	Masculine produced for feminine (or vice versa)	*La* legge
DAT-for-ACC	DAT produced instead of the ACC	*Gli* legge
Other	Residual strategies not included in the categories above	Oli è bravo.

Table 3 Response coding categories for DAT clitics

Response type	Description	Example
Target	Target-like response	*Le* prepara la pizza.
Full DP	Substitution with a full lexical DP	Prepara la pizza *alla nonna*.
Omission	Omission of the target clitic or cluster	Ø prepara la pizza.
Doubling	Clitic reduplication	*Le* prepara la pizza *alla nonna*.
Cluster	Production of a cluster instead of a single clitic	*Gliela* prepara.
Wrong	Wrong form	*Li* prepara.
Gender	Masculine produced for feminine	*Gli* prepara.
ACC-for-DAT	ACC produced instead of the DAT	*La* prepara.
Other	Residual strategies not included in the categories above	Fa bene.

4 Results

Statistical analyses were conducted in RStudio (v. 2025.09.2, 2025). Accuracy and strategy distributions were calculated by clitic type (ACC, DAT) and gender. Descriptive and inferential analyses

(GLMM and Type III ANOVA) compared performance across age groups, examining effects of clitic type, age, accuracy, and gender as fixed factors, with participant as a random factor.[3] Overall, the plots presented below display clear differences in accuracy across structures: ACC clitics improve earlier **[fig. 4]**, especially in masculine forms, whereas DAT clitics remain challenging for a longer period, with lower accuracy and slower growth **[fig. 5]**.

4.1 ACC Contexts

Tables 4 and 5 show the distribution of response strategies for masculine and feminine ACC clitics, respectively, across age groups. Children showed a clear developmental progression in clitic production. For masculine clitics, target responses increased from 47% at age 4;2 to over 91% by age 10;8. Early non-target responses included full DP substitutions, minimal omissions, and occasional use of DAT clitics, all decreasing with age. Feminine ACC clitics followed a similar pattern but started from a lower baseline (19% of target responses at age 4;2) and showed greater variability. Non-target responses included full DPs, gender mismatches (i.e., masculine clitic used instead of feminine), and fewer omissions. Accuracy increased steadily for both ACC clitics, though the feminine trajectory lagged slightly behind, suggesting later acquisition. Overall, both structures followed a shared developmental path, with increased accuracy and reduced variability by the end of primary school. Omissions were minimal and disappeared by age 5 in masculine contexts, age 6 in feminine ones, as expected for typically developing children.

Table 4 Distribution of Response Strategies (in %) for Masculine ACC Contexts by Age (in years)

Age Group(*M*)	Target	Full DP	Omission	Cluster	Dative	Other
3;6-4;9 (4;2)	47.22	41.67	8.33	0	2.78	0
5;1-5;9 (5;5)	43.75	34.38	12.5	6.25	3.13	0
6;3-7;2 (6;9)	62.5	33.33	0	4.17	0	0
7;2-8;1 (7;8)	78.57	19.64	0	0	0	1.79

3 Open access to the analysis scripts and statistical model outputs is provided through the following link: `https://osf.io/ftnpb/overview`.

Age Group(*M*)	Target	Full DP	Omission	Cluster	Dative	Other
8;3-9;1 (8;8)	66.18	32.35	0	1.47	0	0
9;3-10;2 (9;10)	60.87	35.87	2.17	0	0	0
10;3-11;2 (10;8)	91.96	5.36	0	1.79	0	0.89

Table 5 Distribution of Response Strategies (in %) for Feminine ACC Contexts by Age

Age Group(*M*)	Target	Full DP	Omission	Cluster	Dative	Masculine	Other
3;6-4;9 (4;2)	19.44	38.89	8.33	2.78	8.33	19.44	2.78
5;1-5;9 (5;5)	25	46.88	9.38	6.25	3.13	9.38	0
6;3-7;2 (6;9)	37.5	41.67	0	8.33	4.17	8.33	0
7;2-8;1 (7;8)	67.86	25	1.79	0	0	3.57	1.79
8;3-9;1 (8;8)	54.41	38.24	2.94	1.47	0	0	2.94
9;3-10;2 (9;10)	59.78	38.04	1.09	1.09	0	0	0
10;3-11;2 (10;8)	85.71	9.82	0.89	1.79	0	1.79	0

For statistical and visualization purposes, and following previous research, we recoded clitic clusters and ACC clitic doubling as target responses; less frequent responses were grouped as *Other* **[fig. 4]**.

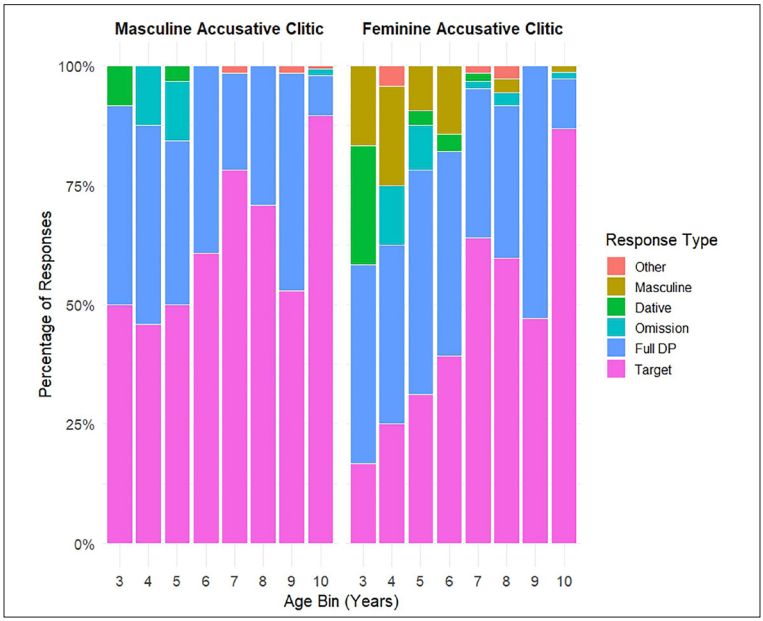


Figure 4 Recoded Responses for ACC Contexts, by Gender and Age

Binomial GLMMs were used to examine the development of clitic production in relation to age, case (ACC vs DAT), and clitic gender (masculine vs feminine). For ACC, results showed a significant effect of age (p <.001), with accuracy increasing over time. Masculine forms were produced significantly more accurately than feminine ones (p <.001), and this difference decreased with age, as shown by a significant age × gender interaction (p =.006).

4.2 DAT Contexts

DAT clitics were the most challenging in our task. Strategies employed in DAT contexts are quantified in Table 6 (masculine) and 7 (feminine), with slight differences across genders. The most frequent alternative strategies for both genders are the use of *full PPs* and *omissions*, which persist up to age 11, unlike ACC, where omissions were minimal. A third alternative strategy was replacing the DAT clitic with an ACC one; the opposite (using DAT for ACC) was very rare.

Table 6 Distribution of Response Strategies (in %) for Masculine DAT Contexts by Age Groups

Age Group(*M*)	Target	Full DP	Accusative	Omission	Cluster	Doubling	Other
3;6-4;9 (4;2)	22.22	19.44	13.89	41.67	0	0	2.78
5;1-5;9 (5;5)	21.88	28.13	6.25	37.5	3.13	3.13	0
6;3-7;2 (6;9)	14.58	39.58	12.5	14.58	8.33	10.42	0
7;2-8;1 (7;8)	28.57	25	5.36	26.79	10.71	1.79	0
8;3-9;1 (8;8)	30.88	32.35	1.47	32.35	1.47	1.47	0
9;3-10;2 (9;10)	36.96	20.65	2.17	33.7	3.26	3.26	0
10;3-11;2 (10;8)	56.25	15.18	0	18.75	4.46	3.57	0

Table 7 Distribution of Response Strategies (in %) for Feminine DAT Contexts by Age Groups

Age Group(*M*)	Target	Full DP	Accusative	Omission	Cluster	Gli
3;6-4;9 (4;2)	2.78	33.33	13.89	30.56	11.11	8.33
5;1-5;9 (5;5)	3.13	43.75	3.13	31.25	0	18.75
6;3-7;2 (6;9)	2.08	33.33	20.83	20.83	0	22.92
7;2-8;1 (7;8)	7.14	21.43	0	28.57	10.71	28.57
8;3-9;1 (8;8)	16.18	38.24	1.47	22.06	1.47	20.59
9;3-10;2 (9;10)	16.3	25	0	34.78	1.09	22.83
10;3-11;2 (10;8)	16.96	16.07	0.89	17.86	3.57	44.64

In feminine DAT contexts, some responses involved the default DAT clitic *gli*, which is a generalized strategy and has been recoded as a target response, as well as the use of clitic clusters and DAT doubling for statistical analysis and visualization. Figure 5 shows this recoding: default *gli* in feminine contexts is coded with the etymological feminine *le* as *target*; and clusters or DAT doubling are also treated as target responses.

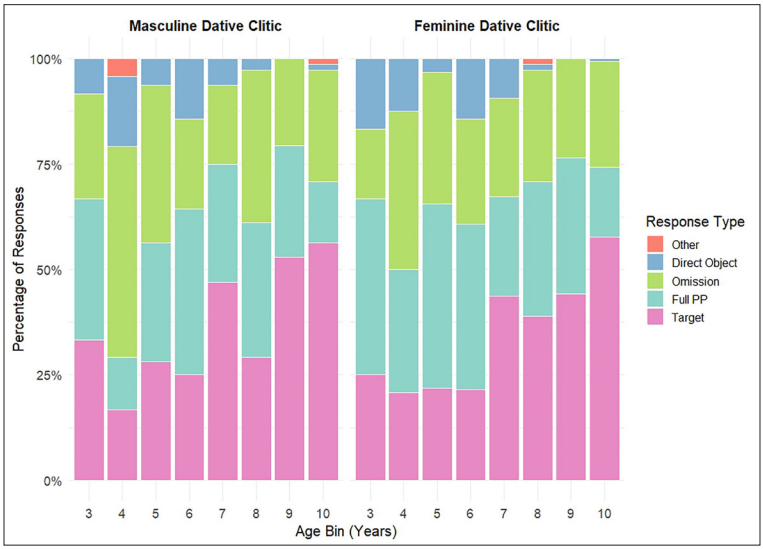


Figure 5 Recoded Responses for DAT Contexts, by Gender and Age

DAT clitics accuracy improves with age: only age was a significant predictor (p <.001); gender (p =.666) and the age × gender interaction (p =.688) were not significant. Both *gli* and *le* were analyzed as *target* responses. Unlike ACC, DAT clitic production improved similarly over time for both genders. Both clitic types, ACC and DAT, show age-related improvement, but DAT clitics (*gli* and *le*) are produced later and show more persistent non-target strategies. This difficulty does not seem to be gender-specific, as gender is not a relevant factor in DAT contexts. A third GLMM tested the interaction of case (ACC vs. DAT), gender (masculine vs. feminine), and age. Age (p <.001), gender (p =.0035), and case (p <.001) are significant predictors: overall performance improves with age, and accuracy is higher for masculine and ACC contexts. No significant three-way interaction was found (p =.145), but a significant case × gender interaction (p =.0059) confirmed that gender effects differed across ACC and DAT forms.

Given the contrast between our results and those reported previously for comparable language users (Cardinaletti et al. 2021), we further examined the difficulty of DAT constructions by analyzing the type of verb used to elicit DAT clitics. DAT contexts were divided into true ditransitive constructions, where the DAT is a goal argument (verbs *dare*, *regalare*), and transitive + benefactive constructions, where the DAT is pragmatically required by the given context but not by the verb's thematic structure (*preparare*, *fare*). This distinction was somewhat significant in Romanian (Babyonyshev, Marin 2006)

but not in Catalan (Gavarró, Mosella 2009), despite a significantly reduced production of benefactive DAT reported in Mosella (2007). It has not been investigated in Italian (Cardinaletti et al. 2021; Cerutti, Cardinaletti, Volpato 2024), even though both DAT constructions appeared in previous experimental tasks (*regalare*, *portare*, *dare* vs. *leggere*, *lanciare* from their experimental items). In our data, this semantic distinction proved relevant, as the statistical model indicates.

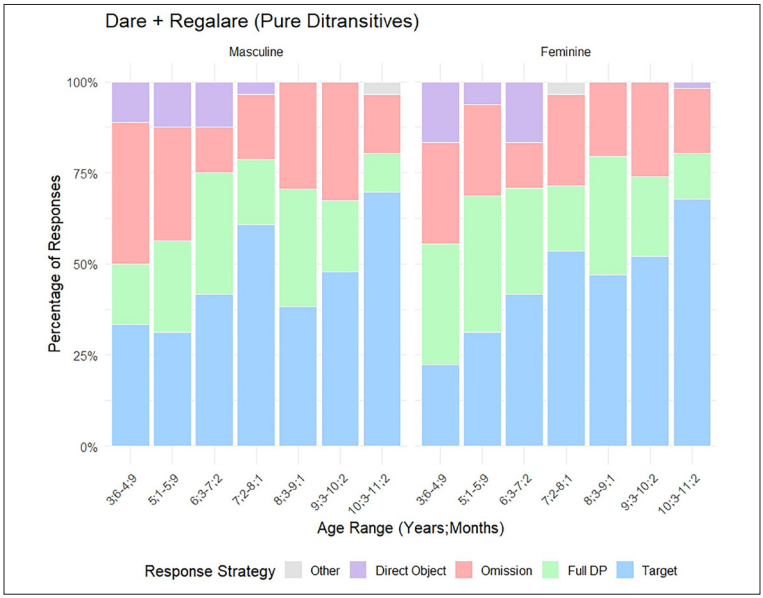


Figure 6 Production of DAT clitics according to verb type

Figure 6 shows the proportion of response types for children aged 3-10 in tasks targeting masculine (left) and feminine (right) DAT clitics in Italian, categorized by verb type and role of the DAT elicited (true ditransitives with a goal argument vs. transitive verbs used as ditransitives with a benefactive). Developmental trajectories differed by verb/DAT type. For true ditransitives, target DAT clitics (goals) gradually increased with age, and omission is less prevalent. In contrast, for non-true ditransitives that elicited a benefactive indirect object, the production of DAT clitics remains low (~25%) until around age 10, and children rely on full lexical PPs and omissions to a similar extent to target clitics to express the benefactive role, suggesting that transitive verbs used ditransitively in this methodological design are not optimal for eliciting DAT clitics. A GLMM with accuracy as the dependent variable and verb type and age as fixed factors showed that these two verb types elicited DAT clitics to different extents (*p*

<.001), with an age × verb type interaction (p <.05) indicating that this asymmetry persists throughout development.

5 Discussion

The present study examined the acquisition of ACC and DAT clitic pronouns in masculine and feminine contexts, in Italian-speaking children aged 3-11, focusing on developmental trajectories and alternative strategies. The results revealed asymmetries between ACC and DAT clitics, both in accuracy and shape of non-target strategies. While both clitic cases show steady improvement with age, ACC clitics – particularly masculine forms – reach near-ceiling levels by age ten, whereas DAT clitics, especially feminine ones, remain less stable and more variable. Recall that the statistical analysis revealed no significant differences between the acquisition of masculine and feminine DAT forms once *gli* was coded as an acceptable option in feminine contexts. Thus, although the DAT clitic is less specified with respect to its phi-features (we treat it as genderless), it still lags behind with respect to the ACC clitic. Indeed, ACC clitics are hardly omitted, whereas omission of DAT clitics is pervasive. Gender effects, while significant for ACC, were not found for DAT, aligning with Cerutti, Cardinaletti, and Volpato's (2024) proposal that Italian DAT clitics lack gender specification. The default form *gli* – frequently used across genders in both child and adult Italian – emerged as a productive strategy among older children. We interpret this result as evidence that difficulties in acquisition do not stem from morphological specification, but rather from the antecedent's argument position, its theta role, and the structural complexity involved. This idea is further supported by the asymmetries found between the different types of DAT (goal vs. benefactive) and the verb constructions employed to elicit DAT clitics. DAT clitics that referred to argumental DAT (goals) elicited with true ditransitive verbs were produced significantly more than DAT clitics that referred to benefactives elicited with transitive verbs employed ditransitively. Still, no DAT clitic reached the levels of production of ACC clitics, which were elicited with significantly simpler sentences. This suggests that ditransitive constructions are structurally more complex than transitive ones, particularly if they introduce an additional argumental layer which increases semantic complexity. Thus, the delayed mastery of DAT, we argue, reflects greater processing, structural, and semantic demands as it requires a more complex derivation, in line with the Complexity Hypothesis (Jakubowicz, Nash, Rigaut 1998; Jakubowicz 2011). Children appear to rely on lexically overt alternatives (full PPs) when unable to map the DAT position onto a pronominal clitic, maintaining grammaticality through compensatory means. The third alternative strategy, the

replacement of a DAT with an ACC clitic, provides further evidence of children's reliance on syntactically simpler forms, as the ACC position is closer to the verb rather than preposition-mediated. This substitution implies that the mapping of DAT arguments to DAT clitic morphology may remain problematic even after children have mastered the mechanics of cliticization for ACC.

This finding contrasts with previous studies reporting higher accuracy for DAT than for ACC clitics (e.g., Cardinaletti, Cerutti, Volpato 2021), findings that were also explained in terms of complexity, in this case, morphological complexity (Tuller et al. 2011). However, a note of caution is warranted, as our task design may also have inadvertently primed the use of lexical DPs or PPs, leading to their occurrence at higher rates than typically expected. If this were the case, though, we believe the effect would likely extend to both ACC and DAT contexts.

6 Conclusions

This study provides new evidence that DAT clitics are acquired later and less robustly than ACC clitics in Italian, especially in complex syntactic configurations such as ditransitives in contrastive contexts. The findings reinforce the notion that clitic acquisition is sensitive to syntactic, semantic, and processing complexity, not (only) to morphological gender marking. The data also reveal that alternative strategies – particularly lexical substitution – remain productive throughout the acquisition process, reflecting children's adaptive mechanisms for maintaining grammaticality given the experimental design of the task.

From a theoretical perspective, the results support a complexity-based model of clitic acquisition and argue against purely morphological explanations. They highlight the need to consider both structural and discourse-related factors in the acquisition of pronominal clitics. Methodologically, the study underscores the importance of testing clitic production and replicating results with several experimental methodologies and in syntactically rich contexts, as tasks may underestimate the true difficulty of DAT constructions.

Future research should further explore how input frequency, processing load, syntactic, and semantic complexity interact in shaping the acquisition of different clitic types. Longitudinal data, cross-linguistic experimental comparisons (e.g., Catalan, Spanish, or French), as well as diversified methodologies that include production and comprehension, could help clarify whether the observed patterns reflect universal developmental constraints, language-specific properties, or merely task effects in Italian cliticization.

Bibliography

Antelmi, D. (1997). *La prima grammatica dell'italiano: Indagine longitudinale sull'acquisizione della morfosintassi italiana*. Bologna: il Mulino.

Arosio, F.; Branchini, C.; Forgiarini, M.; Roncaglione, E.; Carravieri, E.; Tenca, E.; Guasti, M.T. (2010). "SLI Children's Weakness in Morphosyntax and Pragmatics". Yukio, O. (ed.), *The Proceedings of the Tenth Tokyo Conference on Psycholinguistics*. Tokyo: Hituzi Syobo Press, 57-75.

Arosio, F.; Branchini, C.; Barbieri, L.; Guasti, M.T. (2014). "Failure to Produce Direct Object Clitic Pronouns as a Clinical Marker of SLI in School-Aged Italian-Speaking Children". *Clinical Linguistics and Phonetics*, 28(9), 639-63. https://doi.org/10.3109/02699206.2013.877081.

Babyonyshev, M.; Marin, S. (2006). "Acquisition of Pronominal Clitics in Romanian". *Catalan Journal of Linguistics*, 5(1), 17-44. https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/catjl.71.

Blasco, M. (2000). *The Acquisition of Pronominal Object Clitics in Spanish* [PhD Dissertation]. New York: CUNY.

Caprin, C.; Guasti, M.T. (2009). "The Acquisition of Italian Clitic Pronouns: Syntactic and Pragmatic Aspects". *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 30(3), 481-512.

Cardinaletti, A. (2008). "On Different Types of Clitic Clusters". De Cat, C.; Demuth, K. (eds), *The Bantu-Romance Connection: A Comparative Investigation of Verbal Agreement, DPs, and Information Structure*, 41-82. https://doi.org/10.1075/LA.131.06CAR.

Cardinaletti, A. (2010). "Sulla presunta identità categoriale di articoli determinativi e pronomi clitici". Balboni P.E.; Cinque G. (a cura di), *Seminario di linguistica e didattica delle lingue. Scritti in onore degli ottant'anni di Giovanni Freddi*. Venezia: Cafoscarina, 99-113. https://doi.org/10.30687/978-88-6969-683-1/012.

Cardinaletti, A.; Casani, E. (2019). "Pragmatica nell'uso dei pronomi clitici diretti di terza persona singolare in bambini dislessici con e senza disturbo specifico del linguaggio". Nuzzo, E.; Vedder, I. (a cura di), *Lingua in contesto. La prospettiva pragmatica*. Milano: AItLA, 9-27.

Cardinaletti, A.; Cerutti, S.; Volpato, F. (2021). "On the Acquisition of Third Person Dative Clitic Pronouns in Italian". *Lingue e Linguaggio*, 20(2), 311-41.

Casani, E. (2020). "Production of Direct Object Clitic Pronouns by Italian Children with Different Acquisition Modes". Dovetto, F.M. (a cura di), *LINGUA E PATOLOGIA. I sistemi instabili.* Roma: Aracne, 445-60. https://doi.org/10.5209/cfit.74522.

Cerutti, S.; Cardinaletti, A.; Volpato, F. (2024). "On the Production and Omission of Dative and Accusative Clitics in Italian Children with Learning Difficulties". Torrens, V. (ed.), *Language Acquisition in Romance Languages*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 232-52. https://doi.org/10.1075/bpa.18.10cer.

Cipriani, P.; Chilosi, A.M.; Bottari, P.; Pfanner, L. (1993). *L'acquisizione della morfosintassi in italiano*. Padova: Unipress.

Gavarró, A. (2012). "Object Clitics in Typically Developing and SLI Catalan-Speaking Children". *Probus*, 24(2), 251-77.

Gavarró, A.; Mosella, L. (2009). "The Acquisition of Clitics in Catalan". Grohmann, K. (ed.), *Romance Languages and Linguistic Theory 2007*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 105-18.

Guasti, M.T. (1993-1994). "Verb Syntax in Italian Child Grammar: Finite and Non-Finite Verbs". *Language Acquisition*, 3(1), 1-40. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327817la0301_1.

Guasti, M.T. (2017). *Language Acquisition: The Growth of Grammar.* Cambridge: MIT Press.

Hamann, C. (2002). "The Acquisition of the Pronominal System in French—The Production of Subject and Object Clitics". Hamann, C. (ed.), *From Syntax to Discourse: Pronominal Clitics, Null Subjects and Infinitives in Child Language*, 21-63. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-010-0432-9_2.

Jakubowicz, C. (2011). "Measuring Derivational Complexity: New Evidence From Typically Developing and SLI Learners Of L1 French". *Lingua, Specific Language Impairment*, 121(3), 339-51. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lingua.2010.10.006.

Jakubowicz, C.; Nash, L.; Rigaut, C. (1998). "Determiners and Clitic Pronouns in French-Speaking Children with SLI". *Language Acquisition*, 7(2-4), 113-60. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327817la0702-4_3.

Jakubowicz, C.; Rigaut, C. (2000). "L'acquisition des clitiques nominatifs et des clitiques objets en français". *Revue Canadienne de Linguistique*, 45, 119-57. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0008413100017631.

Kayne, R. (1975). *French Syntax: The Transformational Cycle.* Cambridge: MIT Press.

Mosella, M. (2007). *L'adquisició del clític d'objecte indirecte en català* [treball de recerca]. Barcelona: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. https://doi.org/10.23923/pap.psicol2020.2937.

Rizzi, L.; Shlonsky, U. (2007). "Strategies of Subject Extraction". Sauerland, U.; Gärtner, H. (eds), *Interfaces + Recursion = Language?: Chomsky's Minimalism and the View from Syntax-Semantics*. Berlin; New York: De Gruyter Mouton, 115-60. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110207552.115.

Schmitz, K.; Müller, N. (2008). "Strong and Clitic Pronouns in Monolingual and Bilingual Acquisition of French and Italian". *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 11(1), 19-41. https://doi.org/10.1017/s1366728907003197.

Soto-Corominas, A. (2018). *Acquisition of Catalan and Spanish Morphosyntax in the Catalan-Spanish Bilingual Context* [PhD Dissertation]. Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository. 5441. London: The University of Western Ontario.

Soto-Corominas, A. (2020). "Acquisition of Quantified Partitivity in Catalan-Spanish Bilingualism: Influence from Child-Level and Language-Level Factors". *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism*, 11(6), 873-908. https://doi.org/10.1075/lab.19016.sot.

Tuller, L.; Delage, H.; Monjauze, C.; Piller, A.; Barthez, M. (2011). "Clitic Pronoun Production as a Measure of Atypical Language Development in French". *Lingua*, 121(3), 423-41. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lingua.2010.10.008.

Varlokosta, S.; Belletti, A.; Costa, J.; Friedmann, N.; Gavarró, A.; Grohmann, K.K.; Guasti, M.T.; Tuller, L.; Lobo, M.; Anđelković, D.; Argemí, N.; Avram, L.; Berends, S.; Brunetto, V.; Delage, H.; Ezeizabarrena, M.; Fattal, I.; Haman, E.; van Hout, A.; Jensen de López., K.; Katsos, N.; Kologranic, L.; Krstić, N.; Kuvac Kraljevic, J.; Miękisz, A.; Nerantzini, M.; Queraltó, C.; Radic, Z.; Ruiz, S.; Sauerland, U.; Sevcenco, A.; Smoczyńska, M.; Theodorou, E.; van der Lely, H.; Veenstra, A.; Weston, J.; Yachini, M.; Yatsushiro, K. (2016). "A Cross-Linguistic Study of the Acquisition of Clitic and Pronoun Production". *Language Acquisition*, 23(1), 1-26. https://doi.org/10.1080/10489223.2015.1028628.