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Доц. д-р Иво Братанов – отговорен редактор

Проф. д-р Кина Вачкова

Гл. ас. д-р Ани Ангелова

Гл. ас. д-р Жанета Андреева

Гл. ас. д-р Стефка Александрова

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# CLITIC CONSTRUCTIONS IN MONOLINGUAL BULGARIAN CHILDREN

*Tanya Ivanova-Sullivan*  
*University of California, Los Angeles*  
*e-mail: tivanovasullivan@humnet.ucla.edu*

*Iliyana Krapova*  
*Ca' Foscari University of Venice*  
*e-mail: krapova@unive.it*

**Abstract:** This study explores the acquisition of clitic constructions in monolingual Bulgarian children by integrating experimental findings with longitudinal data from the LabLing corpus. The analysis reveals early and stable clitic realization, accurate prosodic–syntactic alignment, and limited omission rates best explained by processing constraints and interface factors rather than syntactic immaturity. Bulgarian offers a particularly illuminating context for understanding the interaction of syntax, prosody, and discourse in early acquisition.

**Keywords:** child production, clitic acquisition, LabLing corpus, prosodic-syntactic alignment

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Acquisition of clitics requires a mastery of morphological form and syntactic placement of clitics, an intricate task shaped by linguistic and developmental factors. This process offers valuable insight into the ways syntax interacts with prosody and discourse in early language acquisition. In Slavic languages, frequent clitic omission has been attributed either to maturational syntactic constraints such as the *Unique Checking Constraint* (UCC) or to discourse-pragmatic factors [Ivanova-Sullivan & Rodina, forthcoming; Sopata 2016; Tryzna, 2015]. Despite extensive cross-linguistic work, the precise mechanisms underlying clitic realization, omission, and mastery remain under debate.

This article examines clitic constructions in monolingual Bulgarian children by integrating experimental findings with longitudinal corpus data from the LabLing corpus [Popova and Popov 2023]<sup>2</sup>. The corpus provides new evidence on the emergence and consolidation of clitics in spontaneous speech and helps reconcile inconsistencies in prior experimental findings. Bulgarian is particularly well suited for this inquiry because it lacks participle agreement and generally disallows null objects (aside from limited Topic-drop contexts), enabling a clearer evaluation of the role of syntactic, prosodic and discourse-pragmatic factors in clitic development.

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<sup>1</sup>We sincerely thank the editors for inviting us to contribute to this *Festschrift* celebrating Prof. Popova's remarkable contributions to research on child language and acquisition.

<sup>2</sup>The LabLing corpus, created by Professors Velka Popova and Dimitar Popov (Shumen University), represents the only published and freely accessible corpus of child Bulgarian. It is available through the TalkBank/CHILDES database at <https://sla.talkbank.org/TBB/childes/Slavic/Bulgarian/LabLing>.

## 2. Approaches to cross-linguistic variation in clitic omission

A central explanation for early clitic omission invokes maturational constraints on child grammar. The *Unique Checking Constraint* [Wexler 1998] posits that early grammars cannot check the same functional feature more than once, predicting optionality and omission that gradually disappear as children feature-checking mechanisms mature [Radeva-Bork 2012; Wexler 2003].

While the UCC explains much of the cross-linguistic variation in clitic realization, it does not account for all observed patterns. For instance, in European Portuguese — a language without participle agreement — high omission rates have been linked to children’s overgeneralization of adult-like null-object strategies [Costa et al., 2012]. Likewise, Polish-speaking children occasionally omit clitics in contexts where discourse recoverability allows the referent to be inferred [Sopata, 2016], suggesting that pragmatic mechanisms may temporarily compensate for underdeveloped syntactic linking. Because Bulgarian lacks participle agreement and only marginally allows null objects, it provides as an ideal testing ground for teasing apart syntactic and discourse-based factors in clitic omission.

Cross-linguistic comparisons also reveal a disparity in clitic emergence. In languages with participial agreement (Italian, French, Catalan), object-related  $\phi$ -features are split across AgrO (the projection associated with the participle) and CIP (the clitic projection). This configuration triggers *double checking* of the same features, which violates the UCC. As a result, one of the two elements – either the clitic or the participle agreement – is omitted, yielding high omission rates.

By contrast, in languages without participial agreement between the clitic and the past participle, clitic omission depends on the valuation of the D-feature in AgrO. If this feature is [+interpretable], as in Spanish and Greek [Tskali and Wexler 2004], clitic omission is expected to be minimal because a single instance of D-checking is sufficient.

## 3. Structural representation of clitics in Bulgarian

Following Sportiche [1996], we assume that direct and indirect object clitics are not arguments of the verb, but heads of a dedicated functional projection, the Clitic Phrase (CIP), while the object DP (e.g., *Decata obiĉat majka si*) is the true argument of the verb. Bulgarian is a bundling language, meaning that when the argument is realized as a clitic, all  $\phi$ -features (person, gender, and number) are bundled in the head of CIP and checked within that local domain. Clitics are thus fully specified referential heads with inherent  $\phi$ -features rather than mere agreement markers. In constructions such as *Decata ja obiĉat pro*, no overt object is present; clitic doubling represents the alternative configuration where an overt DP co-occurs with the clitic (see §4.2).

Structurally, CIP is positioned above AgrO and below TP (the inflectional domain), accounting for the fixed preverbal placement of Bulgarian clitics and their consistent occurrence after subjects and material at the Left Periphery. This higher position allows all object-related features to be checked within a single high functional domain, eliminating the need for multiple feature-checking operations across lower projections such as AgrO (Fig. 1).

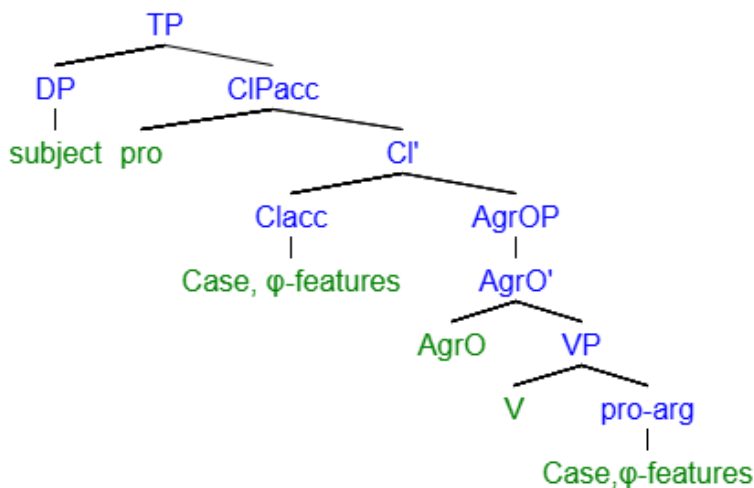


Fig. 1

#### 4. Acquisition of Bulgarian Clitics: Experimental and Corpus Evidence

##### 4.1. Clitic realization

To test the structural predictions of the UCC, we examine developmental data from experimental studies and longitudinal corpora. The two available experimental studies (Table 1) reveal general developmental trends and highlight methodological contrasts that inform our interpretation of the corpus evidence.

Study	Age group	Clitic production	Clitic omission
<b>Ivanov (2008)</b>			
	2;0-2;6	39.2 %	60.8 %
	2;7-3;0	50.6%	49.4 %
	3;1-3;6	75.2 %	24.8 %
	3;7-4;6	93.6 %	6.4 %
<b>Radeva-Bork (2012)</b>	2;2-3;0	58 %	31 %
	3;1-3;7	80%	15 %
	3;8-4;3	99 %	0 %

Table 1. Development of clitic production in Bulgarian

Ivanov [2008] reports high early clitic omission (60.8%) that decline sharply by age 4;6, whereas Radeva-Bork [2012] finds lower omission (31%) and shows that

the *Mean Length of Utterance* (MLU) predicts clitic production better than age. Children with persistently high omission rates also exhibit broader morphosyntactic delays, such as article omission and reduced phrase length. Longitudinal data from five children aged 1;01-3;01 in the LabLing corpus partly corroborate these findings: omission is much lower at the onset of clitic production (as early as 1;01; ex. 1), indicating stabilization earlier than what some of the experimental results suggest.

- (1) *Mamo, da ja složa li tam?* (1;01)  
 Mommy, COMP it.CL. put Q there?  
 “Mommy, should I put it there?”

Across experimental and corpus datasets, MLU correlates with clitic realization, suggesting that perhaps it serves as a proxy for syntactic maturity, namely, when functional projections beyond VP increase, opportunities for clitic realization expand. Morphosyntactic complexity, rather than chronological age, thus emerges as the more reliable predictor of development. For example, one child with a low MLU produced few clitics over the course of six months (1;01-1;07), mainly in fixed expressions such as *Eto go* (“Here he is”) and *Njama go* (“He/it is not here”), whereas others with more complex phrases displayed greater morphosyntactic diversity and correspondingly higher rates of clitic realization.

The early and stable clitic realization evident in the LabLing data is consistent with the UCC predictions for languages without participial agreement. Occasional omissions in (2) are better attributed to interface or performance factors (e.g., discourse recoverability or temporary mismatches between syntactic and prosodic domains) than to structural challenges:

2.  
 (a) ADULT: *Daj na Stefčeto igrata.*  
 Give to Stefčeto the game  
 „Give the game to Stefčeto.“  
 CHILD (2;02): *Njama da \*Ø dam na Stefčeto*  
 Will not COMP give to Stefčeto  
 „I will not give (it) to Stefčeto.“  
 (b) *Mamo, daj go stolčeto, az \*Ø xranja* (2;02)  
 Mommy, give it.CL the chair I feed  
 „Mommy, give me the chair, I will feed (it).“  
 (c) *Njama da gi butam, samo šte \*Ø slagam* (2;03)  
 Will not COMP them.CL push, only will put  
 „I will not push them, I will only put (them).“

Overall, the child grammar treats the clitic as a single morphological exponent bundling Case and  $\phi$ -features. The relatively low omission rate suggests that children’s grammars circumvent the UCC through early feature bundling and a reduced structural complexity of the clitic domain, yielding overt clitic realization.

#### 4.2. Clitic Doubling and the Syntax–Discourse Interface

Further evidence for the early availability of the clitic domain comes from clitic doubling (CD). In clitic doubling, the clitic and its co-referential DP jointly realize the object argument. Unlike simple clitic constructions, where the internal argument is null (pro), clitic doubling involves an overt DP that remains in the clause and checks its features against the clitic head.

Experimental work by Radeva-Bork [2012] shows that comprehension of clitic doubling remains at chance levels until around age 4;2, suggesting a delayed integration of syntactic and discourse information. This finding supports the view that clitic doubling — unlike clitic realization or placement — belongs to the syntax-discourse interface, where feature checking interacts with information-structural interpretation, such as topicality, referential specificity, and discourse activation.

By contrast, LabLing production data show clitic doubling much earlier (1;9 - 2;0), especially in contexts where the doubled DP object remains *in situ* within VP. Examples (3) through (7) illustrate productive use across clitic types and argument structures:

- (3) *Daj go na mene kubčeto* (1;09)  
 give it.ACC.CL to me the cube  
 „Give the cube to me.“
- (4) *I az ja skrix pitčicata* (1;10)  
 and I it.CL hid the bread  
 „And I hid the bread.“
- (5) *Maxam go nego* (1;11)  
 remove him.CL him.PRN  
 „I am removing him.“
- (6) *Dvete gi dadax na tebe* (2;03)  
 two.DEF them.CL gave to you  
 „I gave you both of them.“
- (7) *Vsičkite prikazki gi razkazax* (2;11)  
 all.DEF stories them.CL told  
 „I told all the stories.“

These data indicate the syntax of doubling is acquired early even, if its interpretative component matures later. The dependency between the clitic and its DP associate is relatively stable across person, number, and gender distinctions, and applies uniformly to direct and indirect objects. If CIP is located high in the clause (above AgrO, below TP), a single local feature-checking relation suffices, satisfying the UCC. What develops more slowly is the mapping of this syntactic relation to discourse functions

The discourse-pragmatic interpretation of clitic doubling correlates with movement of the overt DP to the left periphery, yielding what is often analyzed as a Clitic Left Dislocation (CLLD) construction [Cinque 1990]. In this configuration, the doubled DP expresses topic continuity, discourse activation, specificity, and D-linking, among other discourse-related features. The production-comprehension asymmetry observed in child Bulgarian thus reflects a division between early syntactic acquisition and later discourse interpretation. As children begin to use doubling for discourse management in spontaneous speech, comprehension accuracy correspondingly increases.

In sum, clitic doubling provides compelling evidence that the syntax of the clitic domain is established before the pragmatic use of doubling becomes adult-like, supporting an interface-based view of development. In particular, syntactic feature checking within CIP matures first, while the discourse mapping associated with left-dislocated or topic-marked objects develops more gradually.

## 5. The Left Edge: Intonational Phrasing, Clitic Placement, and Verb Movement

### 5.1. Prosodic and Syntactic Mapping

Having established that clitic realization in Bulgarian is stable from the earliest stages, we now turn to the structural and prosodic mechanisms that govern clitic placement. Cross-linguistically, the Tobler–Mussafia Law [Pancheva 2005; Franks 2008; 2017] captures the restriction against clitics in absolute initial position: enclisis arises whenever no phonological host is available on the left. In Bulgarian, this principle is grammaticalized and interacts with both the syntax of the Clitic Phrase (CIP) and the prosodic organization of the clause. Because the CIP is located below TP, any element in the higher functional projection Spec,TP can serve as a potential host for proclisis.

Following Harizanov [2014], we distinguish between the Intonational Phrase (i) and the Maximal Intonational Phrase (imax), which roughly correspond to the TP and CP domains, respectively. The clitic's prosodic dependency must be satisfied within imax, the prosodic domain corresponding to the entire clause. When only a smaller intonational phrase (i) is formed—typically aligned with TP – the clitic is not at the left edge of the maximal prosodic unit and therefore requires no additional support.

This distinction accounts for the distribution governed by the Tobler–Mussafia Law. The restriction against clause-initial clitics applies only at the level of imax (CP), the maximal intonational phrase corresponding to the utterance domain. Within smaller i-phrases – such as conjunct or embedded clauses – clitics may surface immediately after a conjunction or comma without violating prosodic well-formedness. In these environments, the *Strong Start* constraint [Harizanov 2014; Selkirk 2011], which bans prosodically weak elements from occurring in initial position within the imax, is satisfied because the utterance does not begin with a prosodically weak element and the initial prosodic boundary belongs to a lower, non-maximal phrase.

### 5.2. Evidence from Child Production

Data from the LabLing corpus demonstrate that Bulgarian-speaking children respect the same prosodic constraints as adults. From the earliest stages, they distinguish between TP-level and CP-level prosodic domains. Clitics occur freely within TP-level intonational phrases (e.g., after conjunctions or commas), but never at the left edge of imax.

(8) [*i majkata mu se skarala*] i [*na mišlenceto se skarala*] i [*go udarila s opaškata si*] (2;11)

„And his mother scolded him and she scolded the little mouse and hit him with her tail.“

(9) *Mama mi beše kupila edna dāvka i az, kato ja dāvčex, ja zalepvax.* (2;03)<sup>3</sup>

„My mom had bought me a chewing gum, and I, while chewing it, was sticking it ...“

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<sup>3</sup> Unpublished data from J. Stojanova

In (9), the second occurrence of the clitic *ja* is not clause-initial but embedded within a lower *ι*-phrase nested inside *u*<sub>max</sub>, which, as mentioned above, corresponds to the highest functional domain of the clause, the CP or Utterance domain [Franks 2017]. These patterns indicate that children have internalized the mapping between syntactic edges and prosodic boundaries, reserving *u*<sub>max</sub> for the utterance-level domain where Tobler-Mussafia and Strong Start apply.

Violations of these constraints are rare and virtually absent even in heritage child Bulgarian [Ivanova-Sullivan 2019]. Occasional deviations in monolingual data, such as those in (10–11), most likely reflect temporary uncertainty about prosodic phrasing rather than syntactic misanalysis. Specifically, they may arise when children have difficulties identifying whether a given prosodic phrase constitutes the initial domain of the utterance or a subordinate *ι*-phrase. Such isolated misplacements are best viewed as cases of prosodic misparsing rather than evidence of structural immaturity.

(10) *Arina blizala \*ja* (2;02)

Arina licked it.CL  
 „Arina licked it.“

(11) *Tuk kači \*go, ama iskam da go dyržiš* (2;09)

Here put up it.CL but want COMP it.CL hold  
 „Put it up here but I want you to hold it.“

Children also demonstrate an early understanding that Strong Start can be satisfied not only by a preverbal host but also by moving another constituent to the CP edge (Fig. 2). In such cases, a topic, focus (12), or *wh*-phrase (13) can provide the necessary prosodic onset for *u*<sub>max</sub> and license proclisis to the finite verb:

(12) *S VODA ja polej* (2;01)<sup>4</sup>

With water.FOC it.CL water  
 „Water it with water!“

(13) *Kolko te obiçam, tebe biçam [ : obiçam ], bebiçam [ : obiçam ]* (1;07)

How you.CL love you.PRN love  
 „How much I love you!“

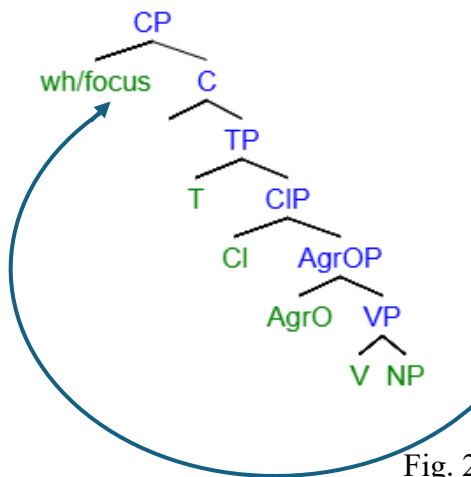


Fig. 2

<sup>4</sup> Capital letters indicate a focalized phrase.

In imperatives, by contrast, the finite verb itself moves to C<sup>0</sup> (Fig. 3), driven by the need to check the illocutionary feature associated with command or directive force [Rivero & Terzi 1995]. As Pancheva [2005] argues, Bulgarian clitics are not lexically specified as either proclitic or enclitic; rather, their surface position depends on the syntactic and prosodic configuration in which they occur. In environments where no preverbal constituent can serve as a host, the finite verb can also raise to C<sup>0</sup>, providing a prosodic host for the clitic. In our syntax-based account, this enclitic pattern thus derives from V-to-C movement, which operates as a Last Resort mechanism ensuring compliance with the Tobler–Mussafia Law and yielding a verb–clitic sequence:

- (14) *buj ja* [: *obuj ja*] (1;06)  
 put her.CL  
 „Put her shoes on.“
- (15) *pusni go* (1;10)  
 release him.CL  
 „Let him go.“
- (16) *zema go* (1;08)  
 take it.CL  
 „He is taking it.“

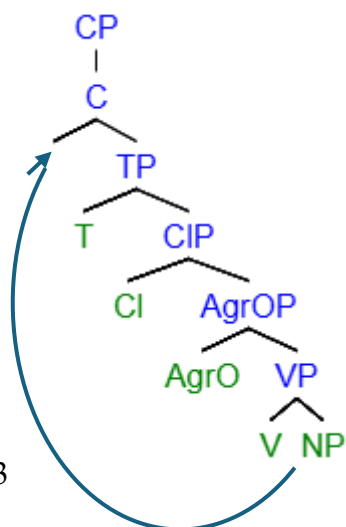


Fig. 3

To sum up, by around 18 months, children already conform to Strong Start and avoid placing clitics at the left edge of *imax*. Their production reveals consistent alignment between syntactic and prosodic structures, with clear distinctions between TP (*t*) and CP (*imax*).

## 6. What Children Know and What It Tells Us About Bulgarian Clitics

The findings discussed above indicate that the prosodic and syntactic constraints governing clitic placement are active from the earliest stages of acquisition. Bulgarian-speaking children display an adult-like understanding of how prosodic phrasing, verb movement, and clitic positioning interact, suggesting that the core grammatical architecture of the clitic system is in place well before age three.

The summary below highlights the main developmental properties and their broader theoretical implications.

### **1. Full lexical access**

Children appear to have full access to the clitic inventory from the outset. All expected forms across person, number, and gender are attested in spontaneous production, indicating early lexical specification and morphological encoding.

### **2. Accurate placement**

Clitics are rarely misplaced, whether in single-clitic or conjunction structures. The few apparent violations of Tobler–Mussafia observed in the corpus tend to involve non-finite verbs and suggest that verb movement operations (in satisfaction of the Tobler-Mussafia restriction) mature gradually and that surface irregularities reflect developing movement mechanisms rather than errors in clitic syntax.

### **3. Adult-like control of syntactic environments**

Children correctly produce proclisis when the CP hosts a topic, focus, or wh-phrases, and enclisis under *li* or in imperatives, showing that clitic placement is already treated as structurally conditioned by higher functional heads that c-command the cliticization site.

Taken together, these results show that Bulgarian children acquire clitic placement without passing through a dedicated misplacement stage. Occasional deviations reflect the timing of verb movement operations and transient processing limitations rather than misanalysis of clitics. Early adherence to Strong Start, correct mapping between syntactic edges and prosodic boundaries, and the near absence of enclisis errors all confirm that child grammars respect the CP–Intonational Phrase interface. Even at the earliest observable stages, Bulgarian child language reveals a coherent integration of syntax, morphology, and prosody, differing from the adult grammar primarily in processing capacity, not structural representation.

These empirical findings also bear on theories of clitic acquisition and the syntax–prosody–discourse interface. Bulgarian is especially revealing because it combines the morphological economy of an agreement-independent clitic system with the syntactic and prosodic complexities of preverbal clitic placement. Evidence from both experimental and corpus data points to a rapid and stable acquisition path, confirming that children master the core properties of this system by around 30 months.

The results converge on several key conclusions. First, clitic omission in early Bulgarian is infrequent and is best attributed to interface or performance factors rather than syntactic immaturity. Second, Mean Length of Utterance (MLU) emerges as a stronger predictor of clitic realization than chronological age, underscoring the role of morphosyntactic complexity in the activation of higher functional projections, including CIP. Third, the computational process Unique Checking Constraint (UCC) predicts the general stability of clitic production in Bulgarian, where  $\phi$ -features are bundled and valued locally within CIP, avoiding multiple feature-checking operations across lower projections.

The analysis also clarifies the developmental trajectory of syntax–discourse integration. The early appearance of clitic doubling in production, coupled with delayed comprehension, indicates that syntactic dependencies are established first, while their discourse–pragmatic interpretation matures later.

Finally, the Bulgarian data contribute to a broader typology of clitic systems in acquisition. Unlike languages in which clitics function as morphological agreement markers (e.g., French, Italian), Bulgarian — along with Greek, Spanish, Romanian, and European Portuguese — exemplifies a pronominal clitic system, in which clitics are referential heads rather than agreement exponents. The early stabilization of clitic placement in Bulgarian supports the view that bundling languages, which check  $\phi$ -features locally within CIP, pose fewer learnability challenges than splitting languages, where features are distributed across multiple projections.

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