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# THE SYNTAX OF EARLY CYPRIOT GREEK: EVIDENCE FROM L1 ACQUISITION OF CLITICS<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper discusses the syntax of pronominal clitics in early Cypriot Greek in the light of new evidence from spontaneous speech data, both cross-sectional and longitudinal, as well as experimental data. An elicited production task for 3<sup>rd</sup> person object clitics was performed by 2-, 3-, and 4-year-olds. The results revealed an interesting discrepancy regarding children's performance in the two critical conditions: enclisis-contexts are adult-like, while in proclisis-contexts children misplace clitics. Our findings are compared with other studies on the acquisition of clitics in Cypriot Greek and we sketch the developmental stages CG-speaking children pass until they reach adult-like clitic placement.*

**Keywords:** Cypriot Greek, Acquisition, Clitics, Syntax

## 1. Introduction

The syntax of pronominal clitics is one of the most important and well-known differences between Cypriot Greek (henceforth CG) and Standard Modern Greek (henceforth SMG). CG is a Tobler-Mussafia language, in which clitics are banned from clause initial position, with a mixed pattern of clitic placement: clitics either precede or follow the finite verb depending on the syntactic context. On the other hand, SMG is a mainly proclitic language, with clitics immediately preceding the finite verb in all constructions apart from imperatives; in SMG clitics follow the gerund as well. Interestingly, while SMG-speaking children have adult-like clitic production and placement from very early on (Marinis 2000, Stephany 1997), in early CG a non-adult-like pattern of clitic placement has been attested (Petinou & Terzi 2002).

The discussion in this paper revolves around the first language acquisition (henceforth L1A) of clitic constructions in CG. The second section offers a brief overview of the placement restrictions for pronominal clitics in CG in a number of syntactic contexts. The third section presents the research carried out so far on clitic L1 acquisition in CG and points out the main findings as well as the questions that are still open. This leads to a formulation of a number of research questions that need to be answered on the basis of a large database of child data. The fourth section offers a summary of the work carried out on the L1 acquisition of CG clitics by Neokleous and Parodi (Neokleous *to appear*, Neokleous & Parodi *to appear*). The fifth section discusses the phenomenon of clitic misplacement attested at the initial stages of L1A in CG, compares the results obtained from our studies with the outcome of Petinou and Terzi's (2002) study and discusses the stages of language development for young Greek Cypriot children.

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## 2. The Syntax of clitics in CG

Cypriot Greek shares with SMG the morphological paradigm of pronominal clitics (table 1). Clitics in both varieties inflect for number, case, person and gender (in 3<sup>rd</sup> person). The same forms are used in both CG and SMG, with the exception of the feminine plural accusative; in CG only the form *tes* is used, unlike SMG where both *tis* and *tes* are used. In both Greek varieties pronominal clitics, unlike strong pronouns, are morphologically deficient in Cardinaletti & Starke's (1999) sense. They are monosyllabic elements, that cannot be coordinated or stressed and cannot introduce a new referent. Furthermore, they are verb adjacent, with no other element intervening between the clitic and the verbal host.

Number / Case	1 <sup>st</sup> person	2 <sup>nd</sup> person	3 <sup>rd</sup> person		
			Masculine	Feminine	Neuter
Singular					
Genitive	mu	su	tu	tis	tu
Accusative	me	se	to(n)	ti(n)	to
Plural					
Genitive	mas	sas	tus	tus	tus
Accusative	mas	sas	tus	tes	ta

**Table 1** The morphological paradigm of Cypriot Greek clitics

Despite the convergence of the two varieties at the morphological level, clitic placement in SMG is very different from clitic placement in CG (Agouraki 2001, Terzi 1999a; 1999b). SMG patterns like Italian and Spanish and exhibits preverbal clitic placement in all syntactic contexts (1, 4-6), except for imperatives (3) and clauses involving gerunds. On the other hand, the main characteristic of CG clitics is that they are banned from clause initial position, like any other clitic language that adheres to the Tobler-Mussafia law. CG clitics never occupy clause initial position, but they either precede or follow the finite verb depending on the syntactic context. While in bare finite clauses CG clitics follow the verb (2), in negatives (5), clauses headed by modal particles (4) or wh-elements (6) the clitic precedes the verb<sup>2</sup>.

- (1) To efera. (SMG)  
It-CL bring-1S.+PAST.+PERF  
“I brought it”
- (2) Efera to. (CG)  
Bring-1S.+PAST.+PERF it-CL  
“I brought it”
- (3) Fer(e) to. (SMG & CG)<sup>3</sup>  
Bring-3S it-CL
- (4) Na to fero. (SMG & CG)  
M it-CL bring-1S.+FUT.+PERF  
“To bring it”
- (5) (Δ)en to efera. (SMG & CG)  
NEG it-CL bring-1S.+PAST.+PERF  
“I didn't bring it”
- (6) Pcos to efere? (SMG & CG)  
Who.NOM it-CL bring-3S.+PAST.+PERF  
“Who brought it?”

<sup>2</sup> This is by no means an exhaustive description of enclisis and proclisis contexts in CG. Yet, the focus is on syntactic constructions found in early data. In addition, in these contexts, the choice of one of the two patterns is clear cut, unlike clauses headed by elements realized in the left periphery of the clause, where clitic placement depends on other factors (e.g. Agouraki's (2010) proposal on correlation between enclisis-proclisis alternation and emphasis specification on C).

<sup>3</sup> In examples (3-6) SMG and CG pattern alike modulo phonological differences.

If we compare the system of clitic placement in the two varieties with respect to learnability, the SMG pattern constitutes a much more plausible case in relation to the CG pattern. To clarify, young children acquiring SMG need to learn a system that involves pre-verbal clitic placement, with the exception of imperatives and gerunds. The gerundive construction is not frequently used in adult SMG, and it is absent from child speech at the early stages of language acquisition. As for the imperative clause, it constitutes a construction widely used in both child speech and child directed speech. Thus, for SMG-speaking children, the syntax of clitics is acquired once they have established the contrast between imperatives that require post-verbal clitic placement and all other constructions, where clitics immediately precede the finite verb. As expected, and on the basis of acquisition studies in SMG (Marinis 2000, Stephany 1997), clitic placement is adult-like from very early on. However, this is not the case for early CG, since some children exhibit non-adult-like clitic placement at the onset of L1A (Petinou & Terzi 2002, Neokleous *to appear*, Neokleous & Parodi *to appear*). This is not surprising, though, if we take into account the complexity of the system of clitic placement in Cypriot Greek with a number of restrictions imposed on CG clitics. The phenomenon observed at the early stages of L1A in CG is clitic misplacement, which will be discussed in the remainder of this paper on the basis of the results obtained from Petinou & Terzi (2002) study, as well as our studies. The section that discusses our systematic investigation of clitic placement in early CG is preceded by an overview of all the other studies on the L1A of CG clitics so far conducted.

### 3. L1A of CG Clitics

The first study on the acquisition of clitic constructions in CG was carried out by Petinou and Terzi (2002), who investigated clitic placement on the basis of a corpus of spontaneous speech recordings of five typically developing (henceforth TD) children and five children diagnosed with SLI. Since our paper discusses language development in typically developing populations, we will not discuss the data of the SLI children, but we will rather focus on the performance of children with normal language development. TD children were followed longitudinally within the age range of 32 to 36 months and were recorded three times, with a two-month interval between the recordings. The data analysis Petinou and Terzi conducted involved calculations of the percentages of misplaced clitics in subjunctives and negatives out of the children's overall clitic production in these two construction types. The negative and the subjunctive clause are both proclisis-triggering contexts, thus they require a pre-verbal clitic. Clitic misplacement would involve post-verbal clitic placement. Table 2 summarizes their results and reports the Proportion of Clitic Misplacement (PCM) as well as the MLU (Mean Length of Utterance in words) per child per developmental stage.

Child	32 months		34 months		36 months	
	PCM	MLU	PCM	MLU	PCM	MLU
OX	10% (3/30)	3.0	2% (1/52)	3.6	0% (0/61)	3.3
NA	66% (16/24)	2.8	28% (5/18)	3.1	12% (4/33)	3.3
AM	7% (2/26)	2.8	0% (0/17)	3.2	0% (0/34)	4.0
AI	21% (3/14)	2.4	14% (3/21)	3.0	5% (2/37)	3.4
AX	62% (20/32)	2.9	44%(13/29)	3.1	0% (0/38)	4.0
M	33	2.8	18%	3.2	3%	3.6
SD	28	0.22	16%	0.23	5%	0.36

**Table 2** Proportion of misplaced clitics in proclisis contexts (Petinou & Terzi 2002: table 2, pp.13)

The results reported in table 2 reveal the phenomenon of clitic misplacement in proclisis contexts, with the participants exhibiting proportions ranging from 7% to 66% at the first developmental stage at which they were recorded (32 months). In the subsequent two stages (34 and 36 months), the proportions of incorrect clitic placement for all the participants decreases rapidly relative to their performance at the previous stage. By the age of 36 months, three out of five children have reached adult-like clitic placement, with no misplaced clitics, while the other two children exhibit significantly low percentages.

The most important contribution of Petinou and Terzi (2002) was that they were the first to observe and report the phenomenon of clitic misplacement in early CG. Yet, a drawback of their study is the small number of participants. This challenges the generalizability of their results: no safe conclusions can be drawn as to whether all or just a subset of CG-speaking children aged 2;0-3;0 exhibit this non-adult-like pattern for clitic placement. In Petinou and Terzi's (2002) study, the phenomenon is robust only in the speech of two out of five participants. In specific, the percentages of misplaced clitics in the speech of these two children, N.A. and A.X., reach 66% and 62% respectively, while for the other two participants are significantly low, even for the earlier developmental stage reported in the study (for A.M. is calculated at 7% and for O.X. at 10%). For the last child, A.I., the relevant percentage is not high either: it only reaches 21% of his overall clitic production. Thus, the question that remains open is whether all 2- to 3-year old Greek Cypriot children exhibit the phenomenon of clitic misplacement or just a subset of them. And, if the latter is true, the question posed is what is the size of this subset relative to the whole TD population.

Grohmann and colleagues have recently conducted a second study on CG clitics (Grohmann 2011 and Grohmann et al. *to appear*). This study was carried out within COST Action A33, a project aiming to investigate the performance of typically developing children across Europe at the age of 5, with respect to five areas of grammar including clitic production. For the purposes of that project, twenty four typically developing children aged 5 to 6 participated in Grohmann's study (2011) (see table 3), but the test developed within COST project was also administered to a larger group of participants, aged 2- to 7-years (Grohmann et al. *to appear*).

The test developed within COST Action and used by Grohmann and colleagues was a clitics-in-islands test, an elicitation production task for 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular accusative object clitics within syntactic islands. After the introductory sentence followed by a question, children were confronted with an embedded *because (jati)* – clause, which they were prompted to complete; a sample of the experimental material taken from Grohmann (2011) is presented in (7) and the targeted structure is given in parenthesis. All the eight adults that participated in Grohmann's (2011) study as the control group have produced exclusively post-verbal clitics. On the basis of this outcome, Grohmann (2011) and colleagues (Grohmann et al. *to appear*) assumed that the adult-like pattern in this construction type requires post-verbal clitic placement.

- (7) I mama xtenizi ti gorua tfe i korua en omorfi.  
 “Mommy is combing the girl and the girl is beautiful”  
 Jati i korua en omorfi?  
 “Why is the girl beautiful?”  
 I korua en omorfi jati i mam:a tis [*htenizi tin-CL*]  
 The girl is beautiful because mommy [*combs her*].

We summarize the results for all the children that participated in this study in tables 3 and 4; the former unifies tables 1 and 2 from Grohmann (2011) and the latter is taken from Grohmann et al. (*to appear*).

Age Groups	N	Clitics		Omission	NP	No Answer	Other
3;0-4;0 (N=10)	120	Overall Post-verbal	110 (91.7%) 110 (100%)	2 (1.7%)	3 (2.5%)	0 (0%)	5 (4.2%)
5;0-6;0 (N=24)	288	Overall Post-verbal	276 (95.8%) 139 (50.3%)	2 (0.7%)	2 (0.7%)	1 (0.35%)	7 (2.45%)

**Table 3** Results of TD 3- and 4-year-olds for clitics-in-islands test (Grohmann 2011: table 1 (pp.193) & 2 (pp.195))

Age Groups	2;0–2;11	3;0–3;11	4;0–4;11	5;0–5;11	6;0–6;11	Control
Overall	98.6%	86.7%	88.5%	94.3%	87.3%	100%
Post-verbal	90.0%	89.0%	88.0%	68.0%	47.0%	100%

**Table 4** Clitic production for all age groups for clitics-in-islands test (Grohmann et al. *to appear*: table 3)

Based on the results of the studies by Grohmann and colleagues reported in tables 3 and 4, we can argue that CG-speaking children as young as 2 years of age have adult-like clitic production, with percentages ranging between 86.7% and 98.6%. As for clitic placement, no safe conclusions can be drawn on the basis of this study, because, contrary to what is assumed by Grohmann (2011), the construction under investigation, namely *because (jati)* – clauses, may allow for both enclisis and proclisis in CG depending on various factors. For instance, the presence or absence of an overt subject in the embedded clause is an important factor that affects clitic placement. Moreover, an overt subject would yield a different pattern depending on whether it is stressed or not. Notably, Grohmann *et al.* (*to appear*) mention that children got used to the pattern of the test and would produce the *because (jati)*–clause prior the experimenter, yet without clarifying whether the elicited clause in this case would involve an overt subject or not. Grohmann *et al.* (*to appear*) report a mixed pattern of clitic placement not only in 5- and 6-year-olds, but in adult population as well. Therefore, the results of the study in discussion are not indicative for the developmental stages of clitic placement in early CG. They instead reflect sociolinguistic facts, given that one of the available patterns for clitic placement in *because (jati)* – clauses in CG, namely the pre-verbal pattern, resembles the SMG pattern in the corresponding construction. Greek Cypriot children once they attend primary school, where SMG is the means of instruction, show an inclination to the use of the SMG pattern in *because (jati)*–clauses (Grohmann 2011, Grohmann *et al.* *to appear*).

Summarizing the discussion in this section, we point out that the important outcome of the study carried out by Grohmann (2011) and colleagues (Grohmann *et al.* *to appear*) is that CG-speaking children have adult-like clitic production from the onset of L1A. The phenomenon of clitic misplacement observed by Petinou and Terzi (2002) in early CG remains to be further studied on the basis of a larger database and there are a number of research questions that are yet to be answered, such as:

1. Is the phenomenon of clitic misplacement generalizable across participants?
2. Is misplacement attested in proclisis contexts alone or in enclisis contexts as well?
3. At what age do Greek Cypriot children reach adult-like clitic placement?

The research to be described in the following section aims at providing satisfactory answers to the above questions.

## 4. Method

This section summarizes two studies on the L1 acquisition of CG clitics reported by Neokleous (*to appear*) and Neokleous and Parodi (*to appear*). The aforementioned studies have investigated the acquisition of clitic placement by young Greek Cypriot children, with a monolingual CG-speaking background and no language related or unrelated impairments, nor any behavior problems. In the first part, we discuss a study based on spontaneous speech data, both cross-sectional and longitudinal, reported in Neokleous and Parodi (*to appear*) and in the second part we present the results of an experimental task carried out by Neokleous (*to appear*).

### 4.1. Spontaneous Data

Our investigation of clitic placement in early CG (Neokleous & Parodi *to appear*)<sup>4</sup> was based on a corpus comprised of spontaneous speech data from eight monolingual Greek Cypriot children aged 2;3-3;4 while they interacted with the experimenter. We studied clitic constructions triggering the two patterns of clitic placement in CG: structures in which the clitic follows the verb, namely bare finite clauses and imperatives (examples 2-3), and structures in which the clitic precedes the verb, i.e. negatives, wh-questions, clauses headed by modal elements (examples 4-6). Data analysis revealed that all the participants placed clitics post-verbally in enclisis contexts, as in adult language. Yet, in proclisis contexts, a subset of the participants misplaced clitics, namely they placed them post-verbally. The results of data analysis in proclisis contexts are plotted in figure 1. Children's data show a bi-modal distribution: five of them have ceiling percentages of correct and three of them of incorrect clitic placement.

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<sup>4</sup> The data were transcribed following the conventions of the CHAT format (MacWhinney 2010).

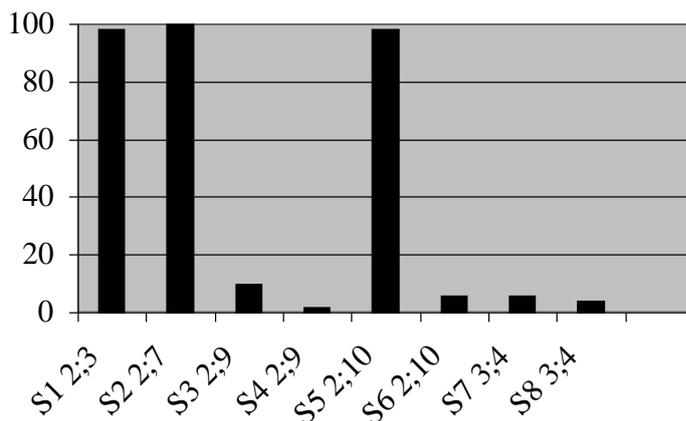


Figure 1 Percentages of incorrect clitic placement in proclisis contexts (Spontaneous Data)

Participant S1, one of the children who exhibited ceiling percentages of misplaced clitics, was followed longitudinally from age 2;3 until age 2;10 and was recorded five times. This child was producing exclusively post-verbal clitics for as long as seven months. This result indicates the robustness of the phenomenon observed in early CG.

Taking into account the initial observations from the spontaneous speech study by Neokleous and Parodi, Neokleous (*to appear*) has implemented an experimental task in a larger group of participants to test the generalizability of the results of both Petinou and Terzi (2002) and Neokleous and Parodi (*to appear*) studies.

#### 4.2. Elicited Production

This part is based on Neokleous (*to appear*) and describes the implementation of an experimental investigation of clitic placement in early CG: 50 Greek Cypriot children from three age groups, 2-, 3- and 4-year olds, performed an elicited production task for 3rd person singular object clitics. The task involved twelve pictures from the book “First Hundred Words in English” (edited by Amery & Cartwright 2009) matched with twelve questions. In (8) we offer an example question made by the experimenter and in (9) the expected answer.

- (8) Ti θeli na kami to koritsaki to kaðro?  
 What want-3S M do-3S the-ACC girl-ACC the-ACC frame-ACC  
 “What does the girl want to do the frame?” [Experimenter]
- (9) Na to kremasi.  
 M it-CL hang-3S  
 “(She wants) to hang it” [Elicited Clause]

The experiment was designed for the elicitation of pronominal clitics in three construction types: (1) bare finite clauses, (2) negatives and (3) subjunctives. These structures fall within two experimental conditions: the former is an enclisis context (see example 2), while the second and the third are proclisis contexts (see examples 4 - 5). The task aimed to elicit 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular object clitics; the genitive and the accusative case as well as all the three genders were equally represented in the task. Data analysis took into account only the clauses produced as a response to the corresponding question, i.e. only the subjunctive clauses produced after a question like the one in (8) would count as correct responses.

All the participants produced a good number of clitics in bare finite clauses and in subjunctives, but not in negatives; only 15 out of 50 children produced at least a single negative clause. Thus, negative clauses were disregarded from statistical analysis. The elicited clitic constructions were coded as correct or incorrect; correct clitic placement in subjunctive clauses requires a pre-verbal clitic, while in bare finite clauses a post-verbal clitic. Then, the respective raw numbers and percentages were calculated. Table 2 reports the outcome of data analysis.

Context	Age Group	Placement	
		Correct	Incorrect
FIN	A	47 (100%)	0 (0%)
	B	61 (98%)	1 (2%)
	C	28 (100%)	0 (0%)
SUBJ	A	25 (66%)	13 (34%)
	B	55 (95%)	3 (5%)
	C	27 (100%)	0 (0%)

**Table 5** Clitic placement in bare finites and subjunctives.

As we can see from table 5, children from all age groups perform at ceiling regarding clitic placement in bare finites. Yet, in subjunctives, while the participants of the second and the third age group perform adult-like, one third of the children falling within 2;6 and 3;0 years of age produce misplaced clitics. The statistical analysis performed has shown that the difference as for incorrect clitic placement between age groups A and B as well as between age groups A and C reaches statistical significance, with  $p < 0.10$  in both comparisons (see Neokleous *to appear* for a detailed description of the statistical analysis conducted).

### 4.3. Summary

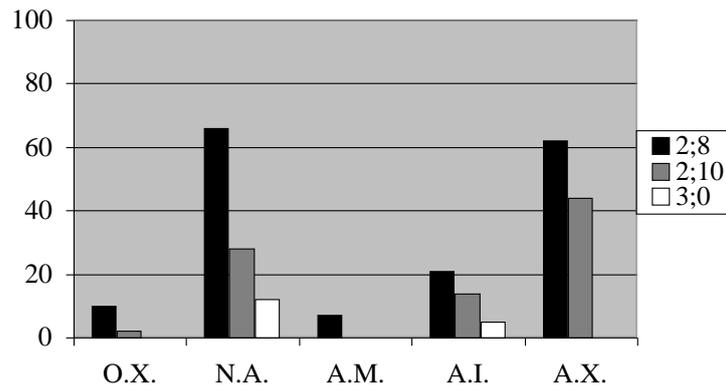
The two studies carried out by Neokleous and Parodi on the L1A of clitic constructions in CG, even though they have implemented different methodologies and have recruited different groups of participants, had the same outcome: they revealed the phenomenon of clitic misplacement attested in the speech of a subset of Greek Cypriot children younger than three years of age.

## 5. Discussion

The acquisition of CG clitics was systematically investigated in the two aforementioned studies, namely Neokleous (*appear*) and Neokleous and Parodi (*to appear*), and the research questions posed in section 3 can be answered on the basis of the results obtained.

The existence of clitic misplacement in early CG reported by Petinou and Terzi (2002) is verified by our studies as well; the phenomenon is attested in a subset of the participants of both the spontaneous speech study and the experimental investigation. Thus, Petinou and Terzi's outcome is confirmed on the basis of a much larger database of early CG. Moreover, the results from both their and our studies point to the same conclusion as for the generalizability of the phenomenon across participants. Two out of five children in their study and three out of nine children in our spontaneous speech study had high percentages of misplaced clitics. Interestingly, the experimental investigation confirmed that the phenomenon is exhibited by around 30% of Greek Cypriot children whose age falls within 2;6-3;0 years (Neokleous *to appear*). Yet, apart from points of convergence between their study and ours, there are also some points of divergence.

We can, now, proceed to a direct comparison of Petinou and Terzi's study and Neokleous and Parodi's study, given that firstly, the methodology implemented for data collection was the same in both studies (involving samples of spontaneous speech), and secondly, the age range of their (2;8-3;0) and our participants (2;3-3;4) highly overlaps. In figure 2, we plot Petinou and Terzi's results based on table 2 from section 3.



**Figure 2** Proportion of misplaced clitics in proclisis contexts  
(based on Petinou & Terzi 2002: table 2, pp.13)

A comparison of figure 1 from our study and figure 2 from Petinou and Terzi's (2002) reveals some important differences as for the phenomenon observed, and in specific with regards to: (1) its robustness, and (2) its duration. In relation to the first point, the highest percentage of clitic misplacement reported by Petinou and Terzi is 66% of the overall clitic production, whereas in our study the children who exhibit the phenomenon do so at ceiling percentages. As for the second point, and as shown in figure 2, the three children with high percentages of clitic misplacement at age 2;8 in Petinou and Terzi's (2002) study show a rapid improvement over a period of four months; for instance, A.X. misplaces clitics at 62% at age 2;8, at 44% at age 2;10 and by age 3;0 s/he is adult-like. In contrast, the child we followed longitudinally (Neokleous and Parodi *to appear*) had ceiling percentages of misplaced clitics for as long as seven months.

As for the robustness of the phenomenon, further analysis of a subset of the experimental data reported in Neokleous (*to appear*) confirms Neokleous and Parodi's (*to appear*) outcome: children who misplace clitics do so at ceiling percentages. Moreover, the fact that on the basis of a database including 58 children, we were unable to capture several phases of this transition from the non-adult-like to the adult-like pattern indicates that this transition is quite rapid.

Some concluding remarks on the L1 acquisition of the syntax of CG clitics on the basis of all the aforementioned studies are summarized below:

1. No clitic omission is observed in CG-speaking children after two years of age (Grohmann et al. *to appear*).
2. Clitic placement in enclisis contexts is adult-like from the onset of L1A (Neokleous *to appear*, Neokleous & Parodi *to appear*).
3. Clitic misplacement is attested in proclisis contexts, where children produce post-verbal instead of pre-verbal clitics (Petinou & Terzi 2002, Neokleous *to appear*, Neokleous & Parodi *to appear*).
4. The phenomenon of clitic misplacement is attested in a subset of CG-speaking children representing the 30% of the typically developing population aged 2;6–3;0 (Neokleous *to appear*).
5. Children exhibiting the phenomenon of clitic misplacement do so at ceiling percentages and in all the proclisis-triggering contexts they produce (Neokleous & Parodi *to appear*).
6. All CG-speaking children acquire the syntax of clitics around age 3;0 (Petinou & Terzi 2002, Neokleous *to appear*, Neokleous & Parodi *to appear*).

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