INTRODUCTION

Article omission is a common feature of agrammatic and child speech, but is not unique to these peculiar conditions, as it is a widespread option in a register of the normal language: headlines. Our aim is to show that article omission is not arbitrary, but is regulated by syntactic constraints.

METHODS

The data are:
- Italian headlines: a corpus of 1021 headlines from several newspapers
- Children data: spontaneous production of 59 Italian speaking children (Mean age=28.92, SD=2.8 - cross-sectional data available in Caprin, 2003)
- Aaphasic data: spontaneous speech of 7 Italian agrammatic patients recorded longitudinally after cerebral damage

Coding and Analysis

Spontaneous production data have been transcribed using the CHAT system of CHILDES (MacWhinney, 2000). Agrammatic data were coded morphosyntactically using Ayda (kindly made available by Capelli, CNR, Pisa).

Omission and presence of articles were classified according to whether it occurred in:
- utterances with verbs
- utterances lacking a verb
- utterances with/out copula/auxiliary be

RESULTS

ITALIAN HEADLINES

I. ARTICLES ARE MOSTLY OMITTED FROM INITIAL POSITIONS

(1) Manager vince all’asta un Picasso (Manager wins a Picasso at the auction)
(2) Pensioni, riforma rinviata al 18 aprile (Pensions, reform postponed to April 18)
(3) Tanzi, ricovero d’urgenza all’ospedale (Tanzi, urgent hospital admission)

Articles are mostly omitted before the first noun (which can either be the subject, as in (1), or the Happing Topic HT, a phrase that introduces the topic of the headline, as in (2)) or before the phrase following the HT, as in (2) and (3). Articles are rarely omitted from a clause internal position.

The association between presence/omission of articles and position is significant (x^2=199.4; p<.0001).

| Table 1 - Percentages of article omission depending on the position in the sentence |
|----------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Initial position | After HT | Non-initial position |
| Nonverbal utt. | 47% | 25% | 34% |
| Verbal utt. | 42% | 27% | 34% |

II. ARTICLES ARE OMITTED MORE OFTEN IN NONFINITE VERBAL UTTERANCES OR IN VERBLESS UTTERANCES THAN IN FINITE VERBAL UTTERANCES

(4) a. Pitbull ferisce (un) bambino (a Pitbull ferides a child)
   b. (Milan) salva cucciolino di foca (Milan saves baby seal)
(5) ‘Un pitbull ferisce bambino (A pitbull ferides a child)

When the verb is present, the article can be omitted from the object position only if it is also omitted from the subject position (as already observed by Stowell, 1999 for English headlines) or if the subject is null or it’s a proper noun. In fact, (4-a-b) are attested as headlines but (5) is not.

IV. ON THE PRE-COPULAR NP, ARTICLES ARE NEVER OMITTED IF THE COPULA OR AUXILIARY BE ARE PRESENT

(6) a. Pitbull ferisce (un) bambino (a Pitbull ferides a child)
   b. (Milan) salva cucciolino di foca (Milan saves baby seal)
(7) a. Tanzi, ricovero d’urgenza all’ospedale (Tanzi, urgent hospital admission)
   b. (Tanzi) ricovero d’urgenza all’ospedale (Tanzi, urgent hospital admission)

III. OMISSION FROM OBJECT NP IS POSSIBLE ONLY IF THE SUBJECT NP LACKS THE ARTICLE

(8) a. Pitbull ferisce (un) bambino (a Pitbull ferides a child)
   b. (Milan) salva cucciolino di foca (Milan saves baby seal)
(9) a. Manager vince all’asta un Picasso (Manager wins a Picasso at the auction)
   b. (Tanzo) ricovero d’urgenza all’ospedale (Tanzo, urgent hospital admission)

Articles are never omitted in pre-copular position, as in (6); they can be omitted, if the copula is also omitted (62%), as in (7). Similarly, articles in front of the subject are omitted when compound tenses lack the auxiliary be (38.8%), as in (8), but they are not when the auxiliary be is present, as in (9).

CHILDREN DATA

Collapsing together verbal and nonverbal utterances, we found a significant effect of position in article omission (Friedman test: x^2=12.316, d.f.=2, p=0.002). omission is higher from sentence initial position than from a position after a verb (Wilcoxon test z=-4.4, p<.001), as displayed in table 3.

In addition, omission is higher in nonverbal utterances than in verbal utterances (Wilcoxon test, z=3.8, p<.001), as displayed in table 4.

We also note that article omission from initial position occurs in the vast majority of the cases when the subject is null; in the few cases in which a subject is present, it is a proper noun, a pronoun (personal or demonstrative) or a bare noun.

We also found a tendency to omit the article before the subject more often when be is absent (6/14=42.9%) than when it is present (4/23=17.4%).

AGRAMMATIC DATA

Overall, article omission is significantly higher from initial position than from utterance internal position (Wilcoxon test: z=-2.4; p=0.01), unlike Bauw, de Roo and Avrutin, 2002 for Dutch, as shown for each patient in table 5.

In addition, it is higher from nonverbal utterances (M=30, SD=10) than from verbal utterances (M=16, SD=14) (Wilcoxon test: z=2.2; p=0.02), as shown in table 6.

| Table 5 - position in the sentence |
|----------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Initial position | Non-initial position |
| Nonverbal utt. | 45% | 29% |
| Verbal utt. | 45% | 29% |

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Some generalizations can be derived from the data presented:
- articles are generally omitted from first clausal position (unless a copula is present)
- article omission is higher in utterances with no verb or with a nonfinite verb than in utterances with a finite verb
- omission of functional material from the highest clausal position is a universal option of UG that the processing system can exploit under limited resources.

Some articles are tended to be omitted more from utterances with a verb or with a nonfinite verb than from utterances with a finite verb. This follows from a variable constraint holding between Spec and head: a -R NP requires a -R tense (a deficient tense) and reduction of tense can be more or less radical and be achieved in different ways: by omitting the verbal lexemes, by using a nonfinite verbs or by using a verb whose tense is deficient in that it is encoded through the aspectual feature of the verb. This happens in the present tense, which is the tense generally used in headlines. This tense is deficient, however, in that it is encoded through the aspectual feature of the verb: if the verb is stative it refers to the present. Finally, article omission is not possible when copula/be is present, since this verb is just the pure expression of tense: it refers to the present and it is inserted to carry this tense feature. Hence, be expresses a -R tense and therefore a -R NP (i.e., a noun with the article).

In conclusion, article omission is not the expression of an incomplete grammatical system, but of a system that, under reduced capacity, adopts options that are regulated by syntactic constraints.

References