The curious case of resumptive pronouns in Cantonese relative clauses

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Resumptive pronouns are often regarded as a last-resort strategy for rescuing illicit long-distance dependencies. Previous work has demonstrated a facilitative role for resumptive pronouns in production as well as in comprehension, though not a grammatical option in the languages. This study examined the role of resumptive pronouns in Cantonese, a language that allows resumption as a legitimate relativization strategy. Young Cantonese monolingual children were tested for both comprehension and production of object relative clauses using different relativization strategies (the gap strategy vs. the resumptive pronoun strategy). Although children did not perform better on either strategy in comprehension, and never employed resumptive pronouns in their production, resumption did prevent misanalysis of prenominal relative clauses as matrix clauses, suggesting that these elements help reveal the full structure of the relative clause to the processor.