

Competing constraints in the acquisition of referential choice: the contribution of grammatical and discourse-pragmatic effects on subject realization in child English

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It has been widely observed that young children acquiring a first language omit arguments more frequently than their adult counterparts whether the target language allows it or not. Two competing approaches attempt to explain this phenomenon: competence-based accounts [1] and discourse-pragmatic accounts [2]. Typically, grammatical and discourse-pragmatics approaches are considered orthogonal because they are concerned with explaining unrelated aspects of the null argument phenomenon. However, this assumption has never been explored or tested empirically. It seems more likely that these two accounts interact in some important ways. In the present study, the assumption that these two accounts are orthogonal will be tested.

Specifically, under the grammatical approach, subjects are omitted more frequently in the context of non-finite verbs than in the context of finite verbs. Although null subjects occur more frequently in this context, there are still overt subjects that occur in non-finite contexts and vice versa. Moreover, the grammatical account does not address the full range of subjects that can occur (i.e., null, pronominal, demonstrative, and overt). The discourse-pragmatic approach predicts that subjects are more likely to be omitted when referents are accessible rather than inaccessible and does a better job at predicting the full range of referential forms; however, overt subjects still occur when referents are fully accessible. Can these two accounts be reconciled? This study will examine the connection between referential form, verb finiteness, and discourse pragmatics. Investigating these two competing accounts (i.e., grammatical and discourse-pragmatic) will help to determine ways in which they complement each other and will demonstrate how different theoretical approaches can work together to provide a fuller picture of language development than each can provide alone.

The corpus for this study consists of videotaped spontaneous interactions between four monolingual English-speaking children (2;0-3;1) children and their caregivers [3]. A total of 1836 child third person arguments were examined. Consistent with the hypothesis that cognitive development is a crucial factor in referential choice, the utterances were analyzed for subject omission at two different age ranges: Time 1 (T1) from 2;0 to 2;7 and Time 2 (T2) from 3;0 to 3;1. The data were coded for discourse-pragmatic information by a set of six binary features which predict the accessibility of a referential argument (i.e., *animacy*, *contextual disambiguation*, *physical presence*, *prior mention*, *linguistic disambiguation*, and *joint attention*). Each argument was also coded as null, pronominal, demonstrative, or lexical, and all verbs were coded for tense and agreement.

As predicted by the grammatical account, initial findings show that the children at both Time 1 and Time 2 omit more subjects in the context of non-finite verbs (T1: 49% and T2: 17%) than they do in the context of finite verbs (T1: 12% and T2: 1%). When four or more discourse-pragmatic features were inaccessible, subjects were more likely to be realized overtly whether the verb was finite or not. Moreover, when subjects were categorized as null, pronominal, demonstrative, and lexical, it was found that discourse-pragmatic features were able to more strongly predict referential form. This predictive ability became stronger at Time 2, showing development in the acquisition of referential choice. Furthermore, certain discourse features were shown to have a stronger effect than others. In particular, the features *physical presence*, *prior*

mention, and joint attention were found to be the most predictive, replicating results found in an earlier studies by Hughes and Allen [4].

The significance of this work is far-reaching. Most importantly, this will be the first study to explicitly compare two different theoretical accounts of early null subjects in the same data set and to determine the extent to which these two accounts complement each other or are completely orthogonal to each other. This will provide a model and foundation for further studies comparing theoretical accounts of the same phenomenon.

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