

Absence of Do-support in Early English: Parameter resetting or deficient grammars?

The aim of this study is to provide evidence in favor of a parametric account for the Optional Infinitive (OI) Stage in Child English, in line with the Continuity Hypothesis (Crain, 1991; Pinker, 1984). Verbal morphology omissions (1a) and non-agreeing do-support (1d) have been previously claimed to derive from a deficient grammar that does not project Tense (Harris and Wexler, 1996). We will present data from a longitudinal study of three two-year-old children that demonstrate that the OI stage may be captured by parametric distinctions in the inflectional dimension, thereby avoiding an appeal to a 'deficit in interpretive/pragmatic abilities' (Wexler, 1995). Specifically, we show that declarative utterances with omissions like (1a) and (1d) in Early English dramatically decrease once agreeing do-support (i.e. 'doesn't') becomes productive. In turn, we take the emergence of agreeing do-support as a signal that the child grammar has converged parametrically on the target grammar.

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| 1) | a. He like pizza | d. He don't/ not like pizza |
| | b. He likes pizza | e. He not likes pizza |
| | c. He doesn't like pizza | |

Harris and Wexler (1996) claim that two-year-old English-speaking children go through a stage in which the Tense category can be optionally omitted from their syntactic representations as in (1a). In English, the effects of the OI stage can be directly observed in negative contexts as the Tense feature cannot be checked unless a semantically null verb 'do' is inserted. If Tense is omitted, on the other hand, there are no features in the derivation that would trigger this operation. Therefore, according to Harris and Wexler (1996), do-support is predicted to be operative during the OI stage whenever Tense is present in the derivation obtaining (1d) or (1c). It is also predicted that children would never produce finite medial negation (1e), as verbal features cannot be checked without violating the Head Movement Constraint.

In order to evaluate Harris and Wexler's predictions, we searched our data set from 3 children: C.M. (1;9-2;8), C.W. (2;0-3;0) and SL (1;10-2;8). We examined the prediction that utterances with 'doesn't' should occur alongside utterances with omissions (1a) and medial negation (1d). Contrary to this prediction, however, our data show that agreeing do-support is practically absent during the period in which the highest number of omissions is attested. It is only produced 4% of the time in negative contexts, while uninflected verbs are produced 45% of the time across subjects. Moreover, utterances like (1e) are attested in two of the three children exclusively during this period, approximately 24% of the time. Once do-support becomes a productive operation, a dramatic change occurs. The proportion of uninflected verbs drops to 16% across subjects and forms like (1e) disappear (see charts in the next page). The concomitant distribution of agreeing do-support and medial negation –evidence of optionality according to Harris and Wexler- is not replicated in our study, contra the predictions for the OI stage in early English.

Based on Lasnik's (1995), we claim that languages can be parametrically distinguished by having either a *featural* or *affixal* INFL. English, however, has a 'hybrid' system; modals and auxiliaries are realizations of *featural* INFL and 3rd sg [-s] is the realization of *affixal* INFL, affixation being a morphological operation. In trying to figure out the correct values for the INFL items, we suggest that some children mistakenly entertain a featural INFL for lexical verbs. However, a featural INFL for lexical verbs is problematic because English lexical verbs cannot move -a property that English-speaking children seem to master early on (Poeppl and Wexler, 1993). This dilemma gives rise to a period of fluctuation as children attempt to ascertain the correct parameter setting. Therefore, we propose that omissions of inflection reflect uncertainty generated by setting the INFL parameter. Given that English requires the insertion of do-support to avoid stranding an affix (Lasnik, 1981), we can now explain the emergence of do-support as a consequence of children resetting the INFL parameter to the adult affixal value. An affixal value should eradicate uncertainty and with it, omissions. Both predictions are confirmed by our results.

