

On the Role of Modality in the Semantics of Root Infinitives in Child L2 English
Elena Gavruseva
University of Iowa

A well-known empirical observation about child second language (L2) English/French is that lexical predicates unmarked for tense/aspect/agreement – the so-called ‘root infinitives (RIs)’ - have syntactic properties distinct from those in child first language acquisition (e.g. lack of null subjects, lack of genitive/accusative subjects) (Belletti & Hamann 2004; Haznedar 2001). A question addressed less often is whether there are also child L1/L2 differences in the domain of temporal/aspectual characteristics of RI predicates. A typical RI in child L1 has volitional modality semantics and is realized by an eventive verb (Ferdinand 1996). Furthermore, modal RIs increase in number over time as children transition to finite representations, a development known as Modal Shift (Blom 2007). An important implication of Modal Shift is that finite syntactic structures emerge by temporal domain, with children facing problems when finiteness is instantiated by modal elements (e.g. future auxiliaries).

Against this background, our research has three goals. First, we ask: Does Modal Shift characterize the development of RIs in child L1/L2 English? Second, we ask: Are there child L1/L2 differences in the semantics of modal/future RI predicates? (Future is considered a modal category according to Iatridou 2000.) Third, we ask: Does inherent lexical aspect influence the acquisition of modal/future elements? (Here we build on the findings that inherent lexical aspect plays a role in the acquisition of past/present morphology [Housen 2002].)

The study uses production data from three CHILDES children: Nina (ages 1;11.24 - 2;3.28), Peter (ages 1;11.17-2;4.15), Naomi (ages 1;11.20 – 2;3.19). (The selected files cover the earliest stages of language.) Child L2 data come from the authors’ longitudinal study of three children (ages 6-8 at the onset of L2) whose English was tape-recorded in spontaneous one-to-two hour play sessions every month over a year-long period. (The first languages are Russian [two children] and Japanese [one child].) The recordings started one-to-two months after the children’s arrival in the US. Language acquisition proceeded naturalistically, with no formal instruction.

A distributional analysis of inflected and uninflected predicates by temporal domain suggests that there are child L1/L2 differences in all three areas addressed by the study. First, there is evidence for the Modal Shift in child L1 English but not in child L2 English: child L2 RIs do not become progressively modal over time. Second, there are striking L1/L2 differences in the semantics of both modal and future RIs: in child L2, modal/future RIs are not primarily volitional but rather

express a wide range of modal/future meanings (e.g. near and distant future with specific temporal anchoring: ‘Saturday I go to Baltimore’, ‘We call you today’, etc.). Third, there are no clear influences of inherent lexical aspect in the future/modal domain in our child L2. However, in the child L1 data, an aspectual prototype in the future domain is an inchoative event (that is, an event that is just about to begin, a category that we label ‘ultra-near future’). We conclude by discussing the grammatical status of modality, tense and aspect in the child L2 grammatical system vis-à-vis child L1.