

Ling 417—Lecture II: The Development of Agreement

Two- and three-year-old children generally go through a stage during which they sporadically omit possessive 's, so alternating between saying (e.g.) *Daddy's car* and *Daddy car*. At roughly the same age, children also go through a stage (referred to by Wexler 1994 as the **optional infinitives** stage) during which they sporadically omit the third person singular present tense +s inflection on verbs, so alternating between e.g. *Daddy wants one* and *Daddy want one*. The question addressed here is whether children's sporadic omission of possessive 's is related to their sporadic omission of third person singular present tense s—and if so, how.

(1)	OCCURRENCE IN OBLIGATORY CONTEXTS		
	AGE	3sgPres s	Poss 's
	2;3-3;1	0/69 (0%)	0/118 (0%)
	3;2-3;6	72/168 (43%)	14/60 (23%)

- (2) (a) That *Mommy car* (2;6). No *Daddy plane* (2;8). Where *Daddy car*? (3;0).
(b) *Daddy's turn* (3;2). It's the *man's paper* (3;4). It's *big boy Nicolas's*.
- (3) (a) Baby *have bottle* (2;8). No *Daddy have Babar* (2;9). The *car go*. (2;11).
(b) Yes, this *works*. This *car works*. It *hurts*. The leg *hurts*. (3;4).

The data suggest a parallel between the acquisition of third person singular +s and possessive 's, and raise the obvious question of why there should be such a parallel. Both possessive 's and third person singular s are reflexes of the same functional agreement relation between an inflectional head and its specifier (see lecture on Phrase Structure):

- (4) (a) [_{IP} Mummy [_I +agr 's] driving]
(b) [_{IP} [Mummy [_I -agr ∅] driving]

In much the same way, we might suggest that possessive structures like *Mummy's car* contain an IP projection headed by an inflectional node fully specified for agreement with its possessor-specifier *Mummy*, whereas s-less possessives like *Mummy car* contain an IP projection with an inflectional head which is non-specified with respect to agreement:

- (5) (a) [_{IP} Mummy [_I +Agr 's] car]
(b) [_{IP} Mummy [_I -Agr ∅] car]

Consider English as having the following Case system:

- (6) An overt (pro)nominal is:
(a) nominative if in an agreement relation with a verbal INFL
(b) genitive if in an agreement relation with a nominal INFL
(c) objective otherwise (by default) (e.g., 'me' subjects).

If we assume that two and three-year old children go through a stage during which functional heads are optionally underspecified with respect to the features they encode, we can provide a straightforward account of why two- and three-year olds alternate between forms like *I'm playing* and *Me playing*. The two types of clause would have the respective (partial) structures (7a/b) below:

(7) (a) [_{IP} I [_I +agr 'm] playing]

(b) [_{IP} Me [_I -agr ∅] playing]

Since INFL is fully specified for agreement in (7a), the overt auxiliary 'm is used, and the subject is nominative by (6a). But since INFL is underspecified with respect to agreement in (7b), it remains null and has a default objective subject by (6b).

If possessive nominals contain an IP headed by an INFL that may either be fully specified or underspecified for agreement, we would expect to find a similar alternation between nominal structures like (8a) below with genitive possessors and those like (8b) with objective possessors:

(8) (a) [_{IP} My [_I +agr ∅] dolly]

(b) [_{IP} Me [_I -agr ∅] dolly]

In (8a), INFL is fully specified for agreement with its possessor-specifier and so the possessor has genitive case by (6b); but in (8b), INFL is underspecified for agreement, and so its possessor-specifier has objective case by (6c). In both structures, INFL is null because 's is used only where the specifier is third person.

Other Agreement Data:

(9) Frequency of occurrence of first person singular possessors

AGE	OBJECTIVE ME	GENITIVE MY/MINE
2;6-2;8	53/55 (96%)	2/55 (4%)
2;9	11/25 (44%)	14/25 (56%)
2;10	4/14 (29%)	10/14 (71%)
2;11	5/24 (21%)	19/24 (79%)
3;0	4/54 (7%)	50/54 (93%)
3;1-3;6	6/231 (3%)	225/231 (97%)

Examples of first person/sing possessive structures produced by Nicolas are given below:

(10) (a) That *me* car. Have *me* shoe. Where *me* car? I want *me* car. (2;6-2;8).

(b) I want *me* duck. That *me* chair. Where *me* Q-car? No *me*, daddy (= It isn't mine, Daddy). *Me* pasta. *Mine* pasta. *My* pasta. In *my* key.

(c) It is *my* TV. Where is *my* book? Where is *my* baseball? Don't touch *my* bike

(11) **Frequency of *I/me* subjects in copular sentences**

AGE	NOMINATIVE I	OBJECTIVE ME
2;6-2;8	10/14 (71%)	4/14 (29%)
2;9	15/19 (79%)	4/19 (21%)
2;10-3;0	51/55 (93%)	4/55 (7%)
3;1-3;6	105/111 (95%)	4/111 (5%)

(12) (a) [IP I [I +agr 'm] sick]

(b) [IP Me [I -agr \emptyset] wet](13) **Frequency of second person possessors**

AGE	YOU	YOUR
3;2-3;4	14/16 (88%)	2/16 (12%)
3;5	7/34 (21%)	27/34 (79%)
3;6	2/29 (7%)	27/29 (93%)

(14) (a) No *you* train. (=It's not your train). No it's *you* train, no (idem).(b) That's *your* car. Close *your* eyes. No it's *you* house. Where's *your* friend? (3;4)(15) (a) [IP your [I +agr \emptyset] car](b) [IP you [I -agr \emptyset] car]

Third person singular subjects produced by Nicolas at 3;6 are illustrated below:

(16) (a) Him is alright. Him is my friend.

Him is a big woof-woof. Him is hiding. What's him doing?

Where's him going? Where's him?

(c) He's happy. He's bad. He is a bad boy. He's in there.

(d) He happy. He a elephant.

The overall conclusion: There is an interesting symmetry between the development of subject+verb structures on the one hand and possessor+noun structures on the other. Nicolas seems to pass through an initial *no inflection* stage during which subject-agreement and possessor-agreement are not marked (a stage characterised by the use of objective possessors/subjects and the omission of possessive 's and third person singular s). At around the age 2;6 he seems to enter an *optional inflection* stage at which he alternates between agreement-specified forms like *my car* and *I'm sick* and agreementless forms like *me car* and *Me wet*: The overall conclusion we reach is that the *optional infinitives* stage which two- and three-year-old children go through should more properly be thought of as an **optional inflection** stage during which both nominal and verbal inflectional heads may be underspecified in respect of the features they encode (the partial features which we have been concerned with here being agreement features).

On-line discussion: <http://www.csun.edu/~galasso/contents.htm> (§§2.1, 2.3 DP & MVP tree diagrams. <http://www.csun.edu/~galasso/arjg.htm> (for complete paper).