

Merge over Move:
Children's failure to apply local movement at stage-1

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Abstract

The present paper provides one theoretical account for the failure of young children to apply local movement at the otherwise well known stage-one of syntactic development. In examining the data taken from of a longitudinal case study, we determine that the lack of inversion and local movement can be theoretically modeled by addressing developmental issues which speak to the role that “Move” plays in securing morpho-syntactic inflection. The paper attempts to address the question as to why children should fail to invert the compound *cup-coffee* (= *coffee-cup*) from the base structure *cup of coffee*? For example, Inflectional Phrase (IP) compound structures which yield *coffee-cup* [[IP *coffee_i cup*] θ *coffee_i*] may require a higher clitic position as a result of a local movement operation from the base [PP *Cup for coffee*] (Roeper, 1999). A non-compliance of movement would then account for attested stage-1 child word-order deviance of the type *cup-coffee* found in our data. The earlier stages of syntactic development then might suggest that children first learn fixed word-order before they acquire any simple local movement. Other more ubiquitous examples come from IP-based movement analogies whereby nominal/verbal inflection is seen as a result of movement—e.g., *Tom's book* [IP *Tom* [I 's] *book*], *drinks milk* [IP *drink*] [I {s}] *milk*] (Kayne, 1994). Thus, a child goes from [-'s [*Tom book*]], *He* [-s [*drink*]] (before movement) to *Tom's book*, *He drink-s* (after movement). Our data bear this progression out. The proposed theoretical model presented in this paper shows how the delay follows from a protracted development in which “Merge” operations emerge in the child's grammar slightly ahead of “Move”—a Merge-first over Move-later account of syntactic development. Furthermore, we examine recent evidence taken from ERP-related studies (Osterhout, 2007; Clahsen et al., 2007) which show (respectively) that earlier stages of L2 learning as well as L1 acquisition demonstrate an extended N400 signature to inflectional over-regularization; such over-regularizations are treated as lexical violations by these groups. Regarding L1 acquisition, the proposed model attempts to attribute a single mechanism “Merge” to the young child prior to the development of those brain processes which underpin the dual mechanism model “Move”. We can then attribute the extended N400 signature of over-regularization by these young children as a sign that they are incorporating the attested affix into the stem by a lexicalization process of (external) merge-first, i.e., a linear fixed word-order sequence. By incorporating both single and dual processing models in an ontogenetic manner, we can account for the gradual, protracted onsets of Move-related syntactic phenomena. Our current analysis calls for developmental discontinuity whereby a dual processing model is indeed justified on theoretical grounds—viz., a processing which seeks to distribute specific

language tasks related to stem+affix separation to certain areas of the brain, inflection being just one such processing task—but that this dual processing must await maturational development of those regions of the brain which support “trace-theory” indexing (Grodzinsky) involved with (internal) Move.

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