The Dual Processing Model and the Non-Inflectional Stage-1 in Early Child English Syntax: A Case Study

Abstract

The study of syntactic development in children, for all intents and purposes, is reducible to a single minded inquiry into how the very young child (implicitly) knows to distinguish between lexical *stems* and functional *affixes*. Hence, the overriding question burning in the minds of most developmental linguists is morpho-phonological in nature. For instance, it would seem that the child must at least know (*a priori*) the stem before she can then engage in a dual-track process by which ambient separation of the morpho-phonological distinction attributive to past tense is carried out, say, between the paradigmatic representation of the English word *play* vs. *play-ed /ple-d/* (a Dual Processing Model (DPM) which provokes separation of the /*play*/-stem and the /*d*/-affix). Otherwise, it could be conceivable for the young child that the pair *play-played* would represent altogether two different lexical stems, and, stored as such, reflect two distinct though relatively similar semantic notions (a single processing).

In this paper, we argue based on data taken from a single case study that all instances of inflectional morphology remain dependent on movement operations as defined by the DPM—i.e, inflection requires movement all the time. Based on our findings, it is argued that children first enter into a stage during which they only have access to non-movement (external) 'Merge' analogies. We believe it is due to this initial dependence on 'Merge' that the young child altogether lacks inflectional morphology as well as correct word order settings for the earliest possible MLU stage. We believe it is only with the subsequent onset of (internal) 'Move' that the child gains access to inflectional morphology.

Empirically, our findings go against the so called 'Optional Infinitive Stage-1' (Wexler) by showing that a 'first stage' should be more accurately called a 'Non-Inflectional Stage'. Theoretically, we believe our findings parallel much of the current research as interpreted within the Minimalist Program (Chomsky), and/or Distributional Morphology (Halle & Marantz). For instance, our analysis suggests that while a DPM 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—the DPM must also await maturational development of those regions of the brain which are responsible for 'trace-theory' indexing (Grodzinsky) involved with (internal) 'Move' and movement analogies.

References:

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