

Child Language Imperatives: Questioning the ‘Imperative as an RI-analogue’ Hypothesis

Studies on many child languages have shown that most children start off with a root infinitive (RI) stage, except Catalan, Spanish, Italian and Slovenian. This raises a question of why some languages lack an RI stage, and, more broadly, if there is a universal RI/RI-analogue stage in early grammars. Salustri & Hyams (2003) [henceforth S&H] argue that in early Italian, it is the *imperative* that represents an RI analogue. S&H state that *null subject Non-RI child languages* exhibit an early *imperative stage* when the frequency of imperatives is extremely high as compared to other verb forms, as well as to the frequency of imperatives in the target language. Child imperatives in these languages lack TP/AgrP projections and have the same semantic interpretation as RIs (in terms of states/events, as well as realis/irrealis semantic opposition). Hence, the “imperative as an RI-analogue” hypothesis (IRIAH) provides a “universal” explanation of children’s syntax and semantics of early root nonfinites and their analogues.

In our study, we investigate root nonfinites and imperatives in very early Child Slovenian (age 1;3 - 2;0; mean age: 1;7; MLU 1;4 – 2;31; mean MLU: 1.94), trying to shed light on the IRIAH. Slovenian makes an extremely interesting case in terms of imperatives since (i) the imperative paradigm exhibits a separate conjugation paradigm with [person] and [number] agreement, not overlapping with any other finite or nonfinite verb form in any mood, (ii) in syntactic literature, Slovenian imperatives have always been claimed to be finite clauses in both matrix and embedded contexts (Sheppard & Golden 2000, 2002; Rus 2005), and (iii) Slovenian is a null subject second position (Wackernagel) clitic language with raised imperative verbs preceding the clitics.

Child Slovenian shows an extremely high number of imperatives (56% of all verb forms) and Bare Participles (16.3% of all verb forms), with practically no RIs (<1%). However, imperatives in this language do *not* lack the TP/AgrP projection(s) because (i) they show perfect [person] and [number] agreement (99.7 % corr.), and (ii) they show structures with object scrambling and post-imperative clitic placement, which in the present minimalist paradigm require a full clause structure, contra S&H’s “missing/eliminated functional heads” account.

Conceptually, we also add that we need not posit an RI-analogue, and that whatever biological learning and/or processing mechanism is responsible for the differences in early root nonfinites (Rizzi 2002), early grammars seem to opt for one “salient” verb form besides the indicative finite verb, and that form can be an infinitive (“true RIs” as in German or Dutch), an imperative and/or a bare participle (“Non-RIs” as in Italian or Slovenian), or even a bare stem (as in English or Inuktitut).

Word Count: 436

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