

The acquisition of Tense and Agreement in Early Grammars and Early Root Nonfinites (in Child Slovenian) revisited

Four major lines of linguistic research have dominated the development of T(ense) and Agr(eement) in early grammars, namely “T/Agr underspecification” (Wexler 1994, 1998), “phrase structure truncation” (Rizzi 1993/4); “maturation of functional material” (Radford 1995), and “performance limitations accounts” (e.g., Avrutin 1999). Some mixed proposals have also been proposed, generally combining maturation and performance factors (Rizzi 2005).

These approaches all seem to agree that children learn the inflectional properties of their language extremely early—almost instantaneously, a phenomenon which Wexler (1998), for example, refers to as “Very Early Knowledge of Inflection” and Hoekstra & Hyams (1998) as “Early Morphosyntactic Convergence”, showing that the Agr error rates in null subject, morphologically rich languages (e.g., Spanish, Catalan, Italian) fall below 5%, with no attested R(oot) I(nfinitive)s (Deen 2002; Guasti 2002).

However, these theories say *very little* about other elements related to “finiteness” (e.g., Copulas, Auxiliaries, and Modals) and much less about the learning of T/Agr itself. Moreover, they do not predict or address several observations about RIs that have been recently established, namely *the gradient distribution* (Yang 2002), *variability within a speaker and across speakers* (Legate & Yang 2005; Yang 2002), *RIs as hidden finites* (Davidiak & Grinstead 2004), a high number of errors in certain contexts (Aguado-Orea & Pine 2006) and—most notably—*different morphological realizations of RI-analogues* (now referred to as E(arly) R(oot) N(onfinite)s (Gavruseva 2003; Varlokosta et al. 1998).

Similar to Aguado-Orea & Pine (2006) for child Spanish, our study shows that when *carefully quantifying* the child Slovenian (CS) data reported in Rus & Chandra (2005), we find extremely *variable* error rates, spanning from 1.7% to 6.4% on Bare Past Participles (BPastParts); from 1.4% to 20% on finite verbs (finVs); and from 16.6% to as high as 93.2% in Copula and Auxiliary *be* constructions in compositional tenses, with the overall “finiteness” error rates from 17.6%, to as high as 66.6% across all children, thus refuting a general “flipping-of-the-coin” scenario proposed by mainstream linguistic approaches.

We further also show that though previous studies on CS have reported (near)-perfect Agr on finVs, more than 90% are 3SGPRES (stems with thematic vowels only in adult Slovenian), which we analyze as ERNs (“hidden finites”) rather than correctly-inflected finVs. We crucially take 3SGPPRES forms as the initial/*default BV/RI-analogues*, with BPastParts emerging at the same time or slightly later (presumably, *Asp*), thus proposing a *developmental hierarchy*, similar to the one proposed by “morpheme studies” (Brown 1973; de Villiers & de Villiers 1973) and in line with *computational complexity accounts*, proposed by computational modelling (Kazman 1991) and cognitive neuroscience accounts on the generation and processing of functional categories (Grodzinsky 2000), specifically the Inflectional Hierarchy Hypothesis (Izvorski and Ullman 1999; Ullman et al. 2005).

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