

# Children's syntax: a parametric approach

Keynote lecture

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## Outline

This talk will present some reasons to take a “parametric” approach to children’s acquisition of syntax. Specifically, I will review findings from three case studies which, in my view, offer important insights into what happens when a child’s syntax undergoes a change. Each case study is based on longitudinal corpora of spontaneous-speech samples from children acquiring English or Spanish, and each one examines the initial emergence of syntactic structures that are subject to cross-linguistic variation. My principal claims will be that changes in a child’s syntax are *decisive*, *additive*, and *interconnected*.

The first case study (drawn from Snyder 2007, Chapter 4) examines *error patterns* in the speech of Sarah (Brown 1973), when she is first beginning to use English verb-particle constructions (e.g., rip the lid off). The key result is that Sarah makes an abrupt, “*decisive*” change (at age 2 years, 6 months) from producing very few (if any) genuine verb-particle combinations, to suddenly producing verb-particle combinations that are overwhelmingly correct from the adult perspective, and producing them fairly frequently. Almost all the errors that occur are errors of *omission*, *not commission*; and these errors do not begin to occur until the same point when the correct forms have also begun to occur.

The second case study (from Sugisaki & Snyder 2006) concerns acquisition of prepositional questions (‘P-questions’) in English and Spanish. In English, the P is normally “stranded” (e.g., *What* was Peter talking *about*?), while in Spanish the P is “pied-piped” along with the wh-expression (e.g. *De qué* hablaba Pedro?, lit. “[About what] was-talking Peter?”). What if a child wants to ask a P-question and does not yet know how? Is there a “default” way? (The English way? Spanish? Something else?) To find out, we examined ten longitudinal corpora for English, and four for Spanish, and discovered that children *never used a “default” option*. When children acquiring English first began producing P-questions, they used P-stranding, just like adults; and in children acquiring Spanish, they used pied-piping, just like adults.

Moreover, four of the children had a substantial gap (range: 2.0-9.0 months; mean 5.2), between the point when they had already begun producing both direct-object (DO) questions and the declarative counterparts to P-questions; and a later point when they began producing P-questions. In other words, these children went for up to *9 months* without asking P-questions, even though they were producing numerous DO-questions

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(range: 11-48; mean: 29.8) in the same recordings. Once the children began producing P-questions, however, the P-questions were almost as frequent as DO-questions. Hence, it appears that a child who does not yet know how to produce a P-question correctly in her target language simply refrains from asking the question. This suggests the child temporarily has a grammar providing the correct structure for DO-questions but providing no structure for P-questions; a subsequent syntactic change “*adds*” P-questions to the grammar.

The final case study (from Snyder 2007, Chapter 5) shows that acquisition can be “*interconnected*”: a study of (19) children acquiring English shows that children vary considerably in the age when they acquire verb-particle combinations, and also vary considerably in the age when they acquire Noun-Noun compounding as a process of novel word-formation; yet, for any given child, the ages of onset for verb-particle constructions and novel N-N compounding are almost identical ( $r=0.937$ ,  $t(17)=11.1$ ,  $p<.0001$ ).

I will argue that these findings (i.e., the findings that syntactic changes are decisive, additive, and interconnected) have important implications for the mechanisms of acquisition, and the nature of the information being acquired - in brief, that they favor a “parametric” approach.