

The Ontogeny of Grammatical Variation

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Child language acquisition involves learning both categorical and variable grammatical patterns. Categorical patterns are invariable; language users do not deviate from them. For example, English determiners always occur before nouns, as in *the computer* rather than after nouns, as in **computer the*. In contrast, variable patterns are characterized by optionality; speakers can choose from more than one form to express the same basic meaning. For example, speakers of English can express or omit complementizer *that*, as in ‘I think (that) Ana is nice’. Similarly, in Spanish and many other languages speakers have the option of expressing subjects or omitting them. Patterns of grammatical variation are highly systematic among adults (Carvalho et al., 2015; Labov 1994, Poplack 2018, Tagliamonte 2012, among others). Nevertheless, we still know very little about how such patterns develop during childhood.

In this talk, I present Shin and Miller’s (under review) four-stage developmental pathway for the acquisition of morphosyntactic variation, according to which children must first override the tendency to regularize variable input (Stage 1) and then override the tendency to assign different meanings to different forms (Stage 2). Development then proceeds in a piecemeal fashion such that children first alternate between variable forms in contexts for which there is abundant evidence for variation in the input (Stage 3), and over time they vary between constructions in more contexts (Stage 4). I will also discuss later stages of development and show that linguistic factors that constrain variation emerge over time, with discourse factors emerging earlier than morphological or verb class factors (e.g. Shin 2016; Shin, forthcoming). These studies also show that some patterns of variation emerge first with frequent items and only later with infrequent ones, which supports the interpretation that high frequency items provide more evidence for learning variable patterns (Erker & Guy 2012).

References

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