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# The English proform *one* in second language acquisition: Ambiguity and learnability

Takaaki Suzuki<sup>a,\*</sup>, Naoko Yoshinaga<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of English, Faculty of Foreign Studies, Kyoto Sangyo University, Japan

<sup>b</sup> Department of English Language and Literature, Hirosaki Gakuin University, Japan

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## Abstract

Acquisition of the English proform *one* raises a serious learnability problem in second language (L2). Focusing on the Semantic Subset Principle, which should overcome the learnability problem, this study investigates how Japanese-speaking L2 learners of English interpret *one*. Two experiments were conducted to examine the interpretations of *one* in an ambiguous pattern allowing subset/superset readings (e.g., *This student with long hair is smarter than that one*) and an unambiguous pattern allowing only the subset reading (e.g., *This student of philosophy is smarter than that one*). The results indicated that the L2 learners are similar to the English control group in that they correctly interpreted *one* in an unambiguous pattern by allowing the subset reading but not the superset reading. However, in the ambiguous pattern, the L2 learners in the upper-proficiency group allowed both the subset and superset reading as the native speakers of English did, whereas those in the lower-proficiency group interpreted *one* with the restricted subset reading. These results suggest that L2 learners start with the restricted option and that they start allowing the superset reading only later. The Semantic Subset Principle forces Japanese-speaking learners to be initially conservative, allowing their subsequent development in accordance with input.

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**Keywords:** L2 acquisition; Semantic Subset Principle; Proform *one*

## 1. Introduction

The English proform *one* has received considerable attention, particularly in the analysis of the internal structure of noun phrases (NPs) and its implications for language acquisition (e.g., Baker, 1978; Crain and Lillo-Martin, 1999; Lidz et al., 2003; Lightfoot, 1982; Radford, 1988). It has traditionally been claimed that the properties of the proform *one* and its substitution for a syntactic constituent (i.e., *one*-substitution) are difficult for English-speaking children to acquire from the input because the input provided by adult native speakers is insufficient for them to learn this complex and complicated phenomenon.

In the present study, we address this learnability issue in second language (L2) acquisition and examine Japanese-speaking English learners' interpretation of the proform *one*. Our focus is on the semantic aspects and the learning mechanism called the Semantic Subset Principle (Crain et al., 1994; Crain and Thornton, 1998). We investigate whether

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [takaaki@cc.kyoto-su.ac.jp](mailto:takaaki@cc.kyoto-su.ac.jp) (T. Suzuki).

the Semantic Subset Principle operates in L2 acquisition to overcome the learnability problem raised in the acquisition of the proform *one*.

Assuming that human beings are endowed with certain linguistic knowledge, a number of researchers of L2 acquisition have explored whether L2 linguistic knowledge is identical to the linguistic knowledge of native speakers. An equally important question is how L2 linguistic knowledge is acquired. The Subset Principle attempts to describe how certain linguistic knowledge becomes available. It forces the learners to initially select the most restricted option of a parametric value of a certain principle in Universal Grammar and warrants that the acquisition proceeds only on the basis of positive evidence (e.g., Berwick, 1985; Clark, 1992; Manzini and Wexler, 1987; Wexler and Manzini, 1987). The Subset Principle was first proposed in first language (L1) acquisition of syntax, and its role has been extensively explored in the studies of L2 syntax. Many studies on the role of the Subset Principle in L2 acquisition focused on the parameter that determines the domain of the antecedents of pronouns and found that L2 learners could not reset the L1 value of the parameter, if the learners' L1 has a superset value, and L2 has a subset value (e.g., Finer, 1991; Finer and Broselow, 1986; Hiramawa, 1990; Thomas, 1993). Thus, unlike the early acquisition of anaphor in L1 (e.g., Chien and Wexler, 1990; Guasti, 2002), it is generally agreed that the Subset Principle is not available in the acquisition of L2 syntax (see, e.g., White, 1989 for a summary). Regarding the Subset Principle in semantics, however, we do not know whether this has an effect on L2. In this study, we investigate the acquisition of *one*-substitution from the point of view of the Semantic Subset Principle.

In the next section, we first describe the properties of the proform *one* in English, followed by brief explanations of the Japanese equivalent. In section 3, we address the learnability problem involved in the acquisition of the English proform *one*. In section 4, the Semantic Subset Principle is introduced as a plausible solution to the learnability problem. Our experimental studies are presented in sections 5 and 6, followed by a general discussion and conclusion in section 7.

## 2. Properties of proforms

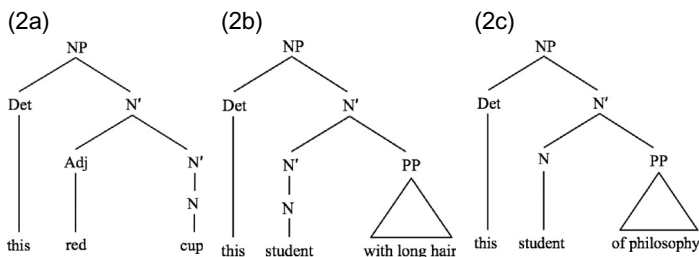
### 2.1. The proform *one* in English

The basic properties of the proform *one* are shown in (1) (e.g., Crain and Lillo-Martin, 1999).

- (1) a. Bill bought this red cup and Alex bought that one.  
 b. This student with long hair is smarter than that one.  
 c. This student of philosophy is smarter than that one.

In sentence (1a), the proform *one* refers to either *red cup* or *cup*. In the interpretation of the proform *one*, it is possible to both include and not include the meaning of an adjective. Likewise, *one* in (1b) refers to either *student with long hair* or *student* alone, suggesting that it can be interpreted either with the meaning of a prepositional phrase (PP) or without it. In both sentences, *one* has multiple interpretations; therefore, these sentences are ambiguous. In contrast, the proform *one* in (1c) refers to *student of philosophy* but not to *student* alone. In this sentence, the interpretation of the proform *one* not including the meaning of PP is impossible, and thus this sentence is unambiguous.

This asymmetry has traditionally been attributed to the structure of NP and the property of the English proform *one*. The structures of NP relevant here are presented in the tree diagrams (2a), (2b), and (2c), which correspond to (1a), (1b), and (1c), respectively.



The claim is that the proform *one* can be substituted for N' but not for N (Baker, 1978; Crain and Lillo-Martin, 1999; Lidz et al., 2003; Lightfoot, 1982; Radford, 1988). As shown in (2a), *red cup* as well as *cup* is N'; therefore, *one* in (1a) is anaphoric to either of them. Similarly, *student with long hair* as well as *student* is N', as shown in (2b), so *one* in (1b) can also be anaphoric to either of them. In contrast, *one* in (1c) is anaphoric to *student of philosophy*, but it cannot be anaphoric to *student* because only the former constitutes N', as shown in (2c).

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