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Investigating ‘‘wanna’’ contraction through an emergentist approach among Iranian EFL learners applying usage-based model of language acquisition

Mehrdad Rezaeian [a], Firooz Sadighi [a,*], Mortaza Yamini [b], Mohammad Sadegh Bagheri [a]

[a] Department of Foreign Languages, College of Humanities, Shiraz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, Iran
[b] Zand Institute of Higher Education, Shiraz, Iran

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Abstract

In this study, we followed an emergentist view on the acceptability of ‘‘want to’’ contraction in both comprehension and production of Subject Extraction Question (SEQ) and Object Extraction Question (OEQ). Earlier experimental work (e.g. Bailes, 2000) showed that such a contrast is not robust for EFL learners. To study this hypothesis, one hundred EFL learners were randomly chosen among advanced EFL students. They were given two types of tests. One was a grammaticality judgment test, and the other was an elicited production test. The results showed that EFL learners had a propensity to contract ‘‘want to’’ both in OEQ and SEQ wherever want and to were adjacent.

Keywords: Want to contraction; Emergentism; SEQ; OEQ

1. Background

The standard view of the computational system for language is that it incorporates a grammar—a set of rules (constraints, principles) that specify the properties that a well formed sentence must have. This is the view adopted in essentially all formal work on language, including of course theories that take Universal Grammar to be at the heart of the human language faculty (e.g. Chomsky, 1980; Chomsky and Lasnik, 1993).

The emergentist view, in contrast, asserts that the properties of language are shaped by more basic, nonlinguistic forces (e.g. Elman, 2005; MacWhinney, 1999; O’Grady et al., 2007). O’Grady (2005) has developed a new version of this theory, which proposes that the core properties of natural language syntax follow from the operation of an efficiency-driven computational system that is indistinguishable from a processor (see O’Grady, 2005).

O’Grady (2008) outlines the computational system which does exactly what any processor does: it operates in a linear manner, it combines elements, and it checks to make sure that lexical requirements (‘dependencies’) are being satisfied.

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: pars_rezaeian@yahoo.com (M. Rezaeian), firoozsadighi@yahoo.com (F. Sadighi), Mortazayamini@gmail.com (M. Yamini), Bagheries@gmail.com (M.S. Bagheri).

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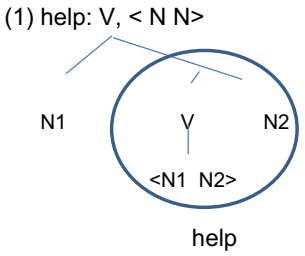
But unlike conventional processors, it is not constrained by grammatical principles. Rather it simply seeks to reduce the burden on working memory by carrying out its operations at the first opportunity (the 'Efficiency Requirement').

As a simple example, look at the verb 'help' which requires two nominal requirements.



in abbreviated form: [N1 [V N2]]

As illustrated here, the computational system consistently does what is required of it without delay. Thus, if there is an opportunity to combine two elements, as happens upon encountering N1 and helped at the beginning of the sentence, that opportunity is immediately exploited. And if this then creates an opportunity to resolve an argument dependency, as it does here (N2), this too is done immediately. And so on, until the sentence is fully formed.

We believe that when a speaker is producing 'want+ to', if they are adjacent, they can be contracted to 'wanna'. If *want + to* are not adjacent, then they cannot be contracted. ''Wanna'' is a contraction of ''want to'' when it is a verb + particle unit; in the sentence ''Max wants Mabel to sing'', ''want X to'' is not a verb + particle unit. The ''wanna'' contraction is only used when ''want'' and ''to'' are immediately adjacent. However, ''wanna'' can also be a rapid speech contraction of ''want a'' followed by an NP. ''I wanna new car'' which is not a contraction of the ungrammatical ''*I want to new car''.

2. Empirical background

One of the few L2 studies of *wanna* contraction is Kweon (2001a–c). She used three tests—an elicited production test, an oral repair test, and a grammaticality judgment test—to collect data of *wanna* contractions in SEQ and OEQ from advanced Korean learners of English. As for the grammaticality judgment test, she had the participants read some sentences in which either subject or object were extracted and judge the acceptability of the sentences. Sentence (2) shows an example of SEQ.

(2) Who do you think the boys wanna open the door?

Sentence (3) shows an example of OEQ.

(3) What do you think they wanna see in Hawaii?

She had four categorization groups depending on each participant's use/acceptance of the contraction: conservative, correctly differential, backward, and overgeneralization. They are characterized in Table 1.

Those who are in the ''conservative'' category almost always use non-contracted ''want to'' or reject contracted *wanna* in both OEQ and SEQ. The ones in the ''correctly differential'' category allow *wanna* in OEQ, but not in SEQ. Those in the ''backward'' category behave in a completely opposite manner from the ''correctly differential'' group in that they allow the contracted form in SEQ, but not in OEQ.

Lastly, those in the ''overgeneralization'' category are likely to contract ''want-to'' to *wanna* in both question types.

As an example, a participant who belongs to the conservative category, would accept *wanna* contraction in both sentences (4, SEQ) and (5, OEQ) below.

Table 1
Characterization of the four groups in Kweon (2001a).

		OEQ	
		Want to	Wanna
SEQ	Want to	I. Conservative	II. Correctly differential
	*Wanna	III. Backward	IV. Overgeneralization