Explaining errors in children's questions ☆

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Abstract

The ability to explain the occurrence of errors in children's speech is an essential component of successful theories of language acquisition. The present study tested some generativist and constructivist predictions about error on the questions produced by ten English-learning children between 2 and 5 years of age. The analyses demonstrated that, as predicted by some generativist theories [e.g. Santelmann, L., Berk, S., Austin, J., Somashekar, S. & Lust. B. (2002). Continuity and development in the acquisition of inversion in yes/no questions: dissociating movement and inflection, *Journal of Child Language*, *29*, 813–842], questions with auxiliary DO attracted higher error rates than those with modal auxiliaries. However, in wh-questions, questions with modals and DO attracted equally high error rates, and these findings could not be explained in terms of problems forming questions with why or negated auxiliaries. It was concluded that the data might be better explained in terms of a constructivist account that suggests that entrenched item-based constructions may be protected from error in children's speech, and that errors occur when children resort to other operations to produce questions [e.g. Dąbrowska, E. (2000). From formula to schema: the acquisition of English questions. *Cognitive Liguistics*, *11*, 83–102; Rowland, C. F. & Pine, J. M. (2000). Subject-auxiliary inversion errors and wh-question acquisition: What children do know? *Journal of Child Language, 27*, 157–181; Tomasello, M. (2003). *Constructing a language: A usage-based theory of language acquisition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press]. However, further work on constructivist theory development is required to allow researchers to make predictions about the nature of these operations.
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1. Introduction

Although a substantial proportion of children's utterances are correct from the beginning of multi-word speech, there are significant pockets of systematic error in certain parts of the system. Many of these errors have been intensively studied and have been influential in theory development (e.g. case errors and past tense over-generalisation errors; Maratsos, 2000; Marcus, 1995; Rispoli, 1998, 1999; Schütze, 1997) but the errors that children make in learning to form questions have attracted less interest in recent years. This may be because early descriptions of children's questions over-estimated the prevalence of such errors, but it still remains true that children make a significant number of errors in their early questions.

In English, most errors in children's questions are errors of auxiliary omission (e.g. *what he doing?* instead of *what is he doing?*, see Rowland, Pine, Lieven, & Theakston, 2005). However, children also make a number of commission errors. The most well known of these are subject-auxiliary inversion errors, which are perhaps the most common word order error in English acquisition and indicate that children struggle to master the rules governing auxiliary placement in questions (producing for example *why he can go?* instead of *why can he go?*). Children also make a substantial number of other errors including double auxiliary errors (e.g. *what can he can do?*), double tensing errors (e.g. *what does he likes?*) and raising errors (e.g. *what he likes?*; see e.g. Hurford, 1975; Kuczaj, 1976a; Radford, 1990; Rowland et al., 2005). There are also reports of errors indicating that children fail to apply correct nominative case to the syntactic subject or fail to apply subject-auxiliary agreement correctly (e.g. *where can me go?, where does the boys go?*; see Radford, 1990). Finally, although most of the work has focussed on wh-questions, similar types of error can be found in children's early yes–no questions (Derwing & Smyth, 1988; Klee, 1985; Valian, Lasser, & Mandelbaum, 1992).

Two key factors about these errors make them an important test case for the investigation of current theories of language acquisition. First, they seem to demonstrate a failure on the part of the child to master the grammatical rules governing question formation, yet they occur at the same time as correct questions (see e.g. Rowland & Pine, 2000; Stromswold, 1990). It is clear that children who can demonstrate mastery of rules such as movement and case and agreement marking in some questions are not freely applying their knowledge across all questions. Second, the patterning of correct use and error, and the nature of the errors produced, indicate areas in which children have particular difficulty mastering correct production. Successful theories of language acquisition must be able to account for these factors. The aim of this paper is to investigate the pattern of errors in ten children's naturalistic data to test the solutions proposed by some current accounts of question formation.