

Control in Mandarin-speaking children's early naturalistic production

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Abstract

The present research uses longitudinal production data from four monolingual Mandarin-speaking children under age 2 to investigate the acquisition of complement control in Mandarin Chinese. The main purpose of the research is to explore whether control is available to Mandarin children in early language development and to capture the emergence of control structures in child Mandarin. Our analysis of the data obtained in 145 weekly or biweekly audio- and video-taped sessions demonstrate that children produce control sentences as early as before 2. They have produced control sentences with a variety of control verbs. A scrutiny of the way in which these control sentences are used and what children do and do not do in some contexts reveals that properties of control in adult grammar also surface in early control sentences. Children's early control sentences respect structural constraints such as the generalized control rule and the overt requirement on object control. They never omit matrix objects in object control structures. Early control sentences also suggest differences from two superficially similar structures, i.e. the serial verb construction and coordination, in various aspects. Young children's control sentences exhibit universal as well as language-specific properties of development. We take such findings as cross-linguistic evidence for early child control and for the continuity view of language acquisition.

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1. Introduction

In generative grammar, the relationship between an unspoken subject in some embedded clauses and its antecedent is known as control. The missing subject is co-referential with or 'controlled' by its antecedent. As is shown in (1), the empty subject in the embedded complement clause (represented by PRO) is obligatorily co-referential with a matrix argument (i.e. the matrix subject in (1a) and the object in (1b)).

- (1) a. John wanted [PRO to play basketball].
b. John asked Mary [PRO to leave].

Sentences such as (1) have great theoretical significance and raise interesting issues for language acquisition. To understand these sentences and produce similar structures, the speaker must understand that an element is missing in the embedded subject position and know how to interpret the unspoken subject, i.e. to find out in each case the antecedent or the controller that determines the reference of the missing subject. It is not likely that knowledge of this relationship comes

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directly from the linguistic input. If adults use control structures (as a result of internalized knowledge of control), do children use them? Is control available to children in initial language development? These questions bear directly on the initial state of language acquisition and are central concerns of the acquisition research of control. In this paper, we investigate the early status of control using longitudinal production data from four Mandarin-speaking children at 2. Our focus is complement control, therefore, other types of control (e.g. adjunct control) will not be explored in this paper.

Children's comprehension of control has been extensively studied (e.g. Adler, 2006; Broihier and Wexler, 1995; Cairns et al., 1994; Chomsky, 1969; Sherman and Lust, 1993; Eisenberg and Cairns, 1994; Goodluck, 1981, 2001; Goodluck et al., 2001; Hsu et al., 1985; Kirby, 2009; Maratsos, 1974; McDaniel et al., 1991). English-speaking children generally understand complement control sentences (with verbs such as *ask*, *tell*, *want*, and *try*) by age 3–4; however, they have problems interpreting sentences with the verb *promise* (e.g. Sherman and Lust, 1993; Eisenberg and Cairns, 1994; Kirby, 2009; Maratsos, 1974).

Complement control in production has also been documented (e.g. Bloom et al., 1975, 1980; Limber, 1973; Pinker, 1984; Goro, 2004; Kirjavainen et al., 2009; Landau and Thornton, 2011; Norris, 2004). English-speaking children produce sentences with verbs such as *want*, *like* or *tell* around age 2. Pinker (1984) reports that Eve started to produce sentences with matrix verbs like *forget*, *try*, *want* and *let* when her mean length of unit (MLU) was 2.65, and a similar pattern was observed for Adam. The English child in Kirjavainen et al. (2009) produced several complement-taking verbs between 2;7;26 and 2;9;30,¹ among which *want*, *need*, and *go* were the most frequent. These studies have all observed an optional omission of the infinitival marker *to* in early infinitival clauses. In a recent study on control in early production, Landau and Thornton (2011) focus on an English-speaking child, Laura, whose diary data from age 1;6 to 2;6 were analyzed for the development of complementation of the verb *want*. The English verb *want* can take verbal complements of two types, i.e. control as in *I want to push the truck*, or raising to object (RtO) as in *I want Daddy/him to push the truck*. Laura's production data of *want* and similar production data from other studies (i.e. Goro, 2004; Kirjavainen et al., 2009; Norris, 2004) are analyzed in the light of Landau's agree-based account of control (Landau, 2000, 2004, 2006). In their analysis, English-speaking children's early use of *want*, including non-adult use, falls into 'legitimate' complement types made available by Universal Grammar (UG). Landau and Thornton argue that the young English child exhibits knowledge of control and has formulated different grammatical hypotheses about various complements the verb *want* takes in the progression toward the adult control structure.

Previous acquisition studies have contributed to the debate whether language acquisition is continuous in the sense of Pinker (1984) or Crain and Pietroski (2002). The continuity view of language acquisition claims that children's grammar consists of the same basic categories and principles as adults' grammar. Some studies provide evidence for the continuity view of control, holding that PRO is available to children right from the start (e.g. McDaniel et al., 1991; Landau and Thornton, 2011). Others argue for a maturational account of control, suggesting that children do not have access to PRO and their knowledge of control matures (Wexler, 1992). So far, the literature regarding the acquisition of control is mostly restricted to the English data (but see Goodluck et al., 2001, on control in child Greek and Spanish; and Gair et al., 1998, on control in Sinhala) and to the comprehension data. Obviously, more cross-linguistic acquisition data and early production data are needed for a complete picture of control in the initial stage of language acquisition. In this aspect, the early production data from Mandarin-speaking children under age 2 reported in this paper can make a significant contribution to our understanding of the acquisition of control.

Different from control structures in English that are marked by an infinitival marker *to* or a gerund, Chinese does not overtly mark control structures. In addition, the language allows serial verbs with no marker indicating the relationship that exists among the verbs. Control structures in Mandarin have the same surface structure NP V (NP) V (XP) as the serial verb construction (SVC). Acquisition issues that surround the absence of overt functional marking, on the one hand, and the interaction between control and SVCs, on the other, are worth investigating. We will show that young Mandarin-speaking children are sensitive to structural constraints on control as well as lexical properties of control verbs and that early control sentences differ structurally from early SVCs.

This paper is organized as follows. We will first sketch properties of complement control in Mandarin Chinese (Section 2). Section 3 introduces specific acquisition issues involved in L1 development of control in Mandarin Chinese. Section 4 presents and analyzes the early production data from four Mandarin-speaking children. Section 5 discusses the findings in general and presents conclusions.

2. Complement control in Mandarin Chinese

2.1. Basic properties

In the English examples presented above in (1), PRO obligatorily co-refers with or is controlled by either the matrix subject or object. The Mandarin sentences in (2) also involve obligatory complement control (Huang, 1989). In both cases,

¹ Figures like 2;7;26 and 2;9;30 stand for the child's age. 2;7;26, for instance, means 2 years;7 months;26 days.

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