On the role of frequency and similarity in the acquisition of syntactic constructions
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In formal syntax, grammar consists of syntactic categories and algorithmic rules; but in the usage-based model, grammar is commonly analysed as a dynamic network of interrelated constructions that are shaped by domain general processes of language use. In this paper, I consider the cognitive processes that are involved in the acquisition of syntactic constructions. Specifically, I consider the role of frequency (i.e. entrenchment) and similarity (i.e. analogy and categorization) in the development of syntactic schemas.

There is a large body of research indicating that frequency and similarity affect the acquisition of words and item-specific constructions (i.e. constructions that are organized around particular words); but in this paper I argue that frequency and similarity are equally important for the development of fully schematic syntactic constructions, referred to as constructional schemas. The main focus of analysis is on the acquisition of relative clauses; but the paper also considers other types of syntactic constructions.

A number of studies have shown that children’s early relative clauses appear in particular main-clause constructions that either function to establish a referent in focus position at the beginning of a new clause (e.g. That’s the doggy [that’s] barking) or else serve to answer a content question (e.g. What’s that? A picture I made). Building on this research, the current paper shows that the earliest relative clauses children produce are often only little different from simple main clauses. They typically occur in complex sentences that describe a single event or situation and that are structurally often very similar to that of simple sentences.

The paper provides a comprehensive theory of the acquisition of relative clauses that combines aspects of my previous research on this topic with new corpus analyses of the meaning and use of children’s spontaneous relative clauses. It reports the results of three studies. The first study is a corpus investigation of the external properties of children’s early relative clauses; the second study is an experimental study investigating the way children process the internal structures of English and German relative clauses; and the third study is another corpus study examining semantic aspects of children’s subject and object relatives.

Generalizing across these studies, it is argued that relative clauses constitute a network of related constructions that children acquire in a piecemeal bottom-up way by extending constructions they already know to (new types of) relative clauses. The development begins with subject relatives that are closely related to SVO sentences and it ends with genitive relatives that are both structurally and semantically very different from all other types of relative clauses.