

Building a world: how English-acquiring children learn to manage the common ground in conversation

Rebecca Woods, Newcastle University

In this talk I will present two case studies from the acquisition of English question structures. I will argue that pragmatic and syntactic acquisition proceed in tandem and support each other in children's earliest acquisition of speech acts. I will also demonstrate how acquisition data can inform syntactic and pragmatic theorising, and how pragmatic theory helps us make sense of children's behaviour.

The first case study concerns the earliest production of distinct clause types. New data from two cognitively typical British English-acquiring early talkers, Paddy and Teddy, demonstrate that the declarative-assertion and interrogative-question mapping is not based on innate categories or biases, as these children initially use auxiliary-initial structures with falling contours to make assertions (1):

- (1) *Context: Becky & Paddy are looking at a picture of a tyrannosaurus rex with big teeth.*
 Becky: Has the dinosaur got little teeth?
 Paddy: Has he not? Paddy diary data, 2;3

Building on work by Woods, Heim and Wallenberg (2022), I will contrast these children with other early talkers from CHILDES to demonstrate that differences in their syntactic and pragmatic input influence their early form-function mapping. Higher rates of polar questions in the input, often used as test questions, lead children away from associating inversion with speaker ignorance. I speculate that they retreat from the mapping in (1) as they gain and refine their prosodic knowledge, helping them to associate auxiliary-medial structures with falling contours with assertive acts.

The second case study concerns children's production of 'high' negation questions, or, the mapping of a single structure (fronted auxiliaries with clitic negation) onto multiple different interpretations (in order of earliest use: tag questions, negative polar questions, negative polar exclamatives, "persuasion" questions). Building on work by Woods and Roeper (2021, in press), I discuss why different uses for the same surface structure emerge step-wise, concluding that this results in part from differences in the complexity of the underlying syntactic structures, as in (2).

- (2) a. You like it, don't you? = [QUESTION [DECL [You like it]] \wedge [INT [don't you like it]]] TagQ
 b. Don't you like it? = [QUESTION [[Do]+n't [INT [you do like it]]]] HiNegQ

However, I will also argue that, throughout their acquisition trajectory, children appear to first employ a given structure to share information with an addressee (develop a common ground), then develop means of using the same surface structure to persuade, impose upon or manipulate an addressee. Therefore, acts that rely on abstract morphosyntactic means to extract a specific response from an addressee, to block certain responses, or to express divergent ideas, emerge later than those employing similar abstract means to reach agreement (as schematised in Table 1).

Table 1: Syntactic and pragmatic acquisition in tandem

	>1 year-		~18 months-		~2 years-		~2.5 years-	
Syntax	Fragments		Simplex clauses		Conjoined clauses		Complex clauses	
Pragmatics	Share	Persuade	Share	Persuade	Share	Persuade	Share	Persuade

In conclusion, pragmatic information in children's input that indicates the addressee's knowledge state, along with the frequency of morphosyntactic features, affects how children group these features into clause types and assign uses to those types. Syntactic acquisition also scaffolds children's ability to express complex meanings. Prosodic information may also play a minor role, but does not appear to help children's earliest speech act categorisation, in line with Yang (2022).

