This book explains a well-known puzzle that helped catalyze the establishment of generative syntax: how children tease apart the different syntactic structures associated with sentences such as “John is easy/eager to please.” The answer lies in animacy: taking the premise that subjects are animate, the book argues that children can exploit the occurrence of an inanimate subject as a cue to a non-canonical structure, in which that subject is displaced (The book is easy/*eager to read). The author uses evidence from a range of linguistic subfields, including syntactic theory, typology, language processing, conceptual development, language acquisition, and computational modeling, exposing readers to these different kinds of data in an accessible way. The theoretical claims of the book expand the well-known hypotheses of Syntactic and Semantic Bootstrapping, resulting in greater coverage of the core principles of language acquisition. This is a must-read for researchers in language acquisition, syntax, psycholinguistics, and computational linguistics.

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THE ACQUISITION OF SYNTACTIC STRUCTURE

ANIMACY AND THEMATIC ALIGNMENT

MISHA BECKER

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Contents

List of figures  page x
List of tables  xi
Acknowledgements  xiii

1 Introduction  1

2 The syntax of displacing and non-displacing predicates  14
  2.1 Raising-to-subject and subject control: seem vs. claim  16
      2.1.1 The structure of raising  19
      2.1.2 The structure of control  25
      2.1.3 Raising-to-object and object control: expect vs. persuade  28
  2.2 Tough-constructions: easy vs. eager  30
      2.2.1 Structure of tough-constructions  32
      2.2.2 Related constructions  36
      2.2.3 Structure of control adjective constructions  39
  2.3 Unaccusatives and unergatives: arrive vs. dance  39
      2.3.1 A semantically-driven syntactic distinction  40
      2.3.2 Formal representations of unaccusativity  42
  2.4 Passive  45
      2.4.1 Structure of passive  46
      2.4.2 A different displacing predicate  49
  2.5 The learning problem  52

3 Argument hierarchies  61
  3.1 The Animacy Hierarchy  63
      3.1.1 Linguistic effects of animacy: morphosyntax and argument structure  64
      3.1.2 Animacy, agency, degree of control, and teleological capability  69
  3.2 The Thematic Hierarchy  75
      3.2.1 A brief history of thematic roles  76
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.2.2</td>
<td>Formal accounts of thematic role assignment</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Animacy and thematic roles in opaque constructions</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.1</td>
<td>Raising constructions across languages</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.2</td>
<td>Tough-constructions across languages</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Properties of derived subjects</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.1</td>
<td>Argument structure universals, and the “problem” of ergativity</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>A learning procedure</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Animacy and adult sentence processing</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Relative clauses</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.1</td>
<td>Reduced relative clauses</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.2</td>
<td>Subject vs. object relative clauses</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Processing of raising and control</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.1</td>
<td>Sentence completion</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.2</td>
<td>Novel verb learning</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Psycholinguistic effects of animacy on production of the passive</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Animacy and children’s language</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Development of the animacy concept</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.1</td>
<td>Featural properties of animates</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.2</td>
<td>Behavioral properties of animates</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.3</td>
<td>Intentional properties of animates</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.4</td>
<td>Further conceptual change</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.5</td>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.6</td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Children’s use of animacy in learning argument structure</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.1</td>
<td>The power and limitations of Semantic Bootstrapping</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2</td>
<td>The power and limitations of Syntactic Bootstrapping</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Children’s acquisition of displacing predicates</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.1</td>
<td>Acquisition of raising and control</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.2</td>
<td>Acquisition of tough-constructions</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.3</td>
<td>Acquisition of unaccusatives</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.4</td>
<td>Animacy and the acquisition of the passive</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Modeling the acquisition of displacing predicates</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Displacing predicates in the input to children</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Computational modeling of language acquisition</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6.2.1 Learning as generalization 258
6.2.2 Restricting the hypothesis space 261
6.3 Hierarchical Bayesian Models 265
  6.3.1 A model of learning raising and control 267
  6.3.2 A model of learning tough-constructions 276
  6.3.3 A model of learning unaccusatives and unergatives 279
6.4 Summary of modeling results 281

7 Conclusions and origins 283
  7.1 Origins of knowledge of the animacy distinction 286
  7.2 Origins of knowledge of linguistic animacy and displacing predicates 289
  7.3 Further questions 296

Appendix 298
Bibliography 300
Index 322
Figures

4.1 Percent “Correct” responses for novel raising (target) and control (filler) verbs; list condition only, averaged across frequency conditions  
5.1 Mean RT in msec (log10) to warm-ups and fillers  
5.2 Mean RT in msec (log10) to hard and afraid  
5.3 Mean RT in msec (log10) for Group 1  
5.4 Mean RT in msec (log10) for Group 2  
5.5 Mean RT in msec (log10) for Groups 1 and 2, novel tough-adjectives  
5.6 Percentage of correct categorizations of novel raising (target) and control (filler) verbs in adult experiment, 1-exemplar condition (Becker and Estigarribia, 2013)  
6.1 A power law distribution, illustrating Zipf’s law  
6.2 A power law distribution plotted on a log–log scale  
6.3 Graphical representation of the Hierarchical Bayesian Model  
6.4 Graphical representation of $\beta$ and $\lambda$ in Hierarchical Bayesian Model  
6.5 Posterior distribution plots for $\lambda$; CHILDES data  
6.6 Posterior distribution plots for $\lambda$; Switchboard data  
6.7 Posterior distribution plots for $\lambda$ for each adjective  
6.8 Posterior distribution plots for $\lambda$; unaccusative and unergative verbs
## Tables

3.1 Raising and control verbs in German and Italian  
3.2 Raising and control verb meanings in Polynesian, European  
3.3 Properties of tough-adjectives across languages  
3.4 Properties of “basic” and derived subjects across languages  
3.5 Typical properties of subjects and non-subject arguments  
4.1 Percentage of raising and control responses in Becker (2005), Experiments 1–3  
4.2 Percentage raising and control responses in Becker (2005), Experiment 4  
4.3 Percentage raising and control responses in Becker (2005), Experiment 4 (separated by aspect of embedded verb)  
4.4 Novel verbs and their pseudo-definitions  
4.5 Observed mean percentage “Correct” responses  
5.1 Mean percent correct (with predicate type)  
5.2 Examples of test items in Becker (2006b)  
5.3 Predicted responses depending on child’s assumptions  
5.4 Results of experiment: relative proportion of OK/silly responses  
5.5 Response time in msec to transitive vs. there-construction questions (5-year-olds)  
5.6 Design of tough-adjective study  
5.7 Response Time (msec) for novel tough-adjectives, group 2  
5.8 Children’s use of animate subjects with unaccusative vs. unergative verbs in spontaneous speech  
6.1 Mothers’ use of animate/inanimate subjects with raising and control verbs  
6.2 Adults’ use of animate and inanimate subjects with tough/control adjectives
## List of tables

| 6.3 | Mothers’ use of animate and inanimate subjects with unaccusatives and unergatives | 254 |
| 6.4 | Distribution of raising and control verbs with animate/inanimate subjects, from CHILDES | 270 |
| 6.5 | Distribution of raising and control verbs with animate/inanimate subjects, from switchboard | 271 |
| 6.6 | Adults’ use of animate and inanimate subjects with tough/control adjectives | 277 |
| 6.7 | Distribution of *ready* in speech to children | 279 |
| 6.8 | Mothers’ use of animate and inanimate subjects with unaccusatives and unergatives | 280 |
Acknowledgements

While working on my dissertation on the acquisition of the copula in child English, I happened to read an article by Bob Frank on the relative structural complexity of raising and control constructions. In the Tree Adjoining Grammar (TAG) framework, Frank argued, raising constructions involve additional complexity not found in control constructions. Because of this difference in complexity, he surmised that if someone heard the sentence Gabriel glorp to eat gouda, that person would first assume that the sentence had a control structure, and therefore that glorp was a control verb. When I read his prediction I thought, “I bet he’s right that people will assume glorp is a control verb, but I bet it’s for a different reason.” I quickly conducted an informal survey of the members of my department by giving them this very sentence and asking them what glorp meant. Sure enough, everyone offered me control verbs for glorp; not one person said it was a raising verb.

Initially, my hunch about why people would have this preference was that raising verbs are in some sense midway between functional and lexical categories (they are like function words, e.g. auxiliaries, in their argument structure, but lexical in their marking of subject agreement and lack of inversion), and I thought that people might be unwilling to assign a novel word to a category that is similar to closed class categories. But as I began to test people’s assumptions about these sentences with different kinds of inputs, in particular, with fill-in-the-blank sentences (where the participant is not assigning a novel verb to any category), I realized the explanation had to be something else. An early clue came from the observation that when I gave participants an inanimate subject, I got a lot more raising verb responses than I did when the subject was animate.

This was the beginning of my exploration of how learners come to identify the underlying structures of these kinds of sentences. And so although his influence was indirect and unintentional, I am grateful to Bob Frank for starting me on this path. Over the years my approach has broadened to
xiv  Acknowledgements

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