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978-1-107-00784-0 - The Acquisition of Syntactic Structure: Animacy and Thematic Alignment

Misha Becker

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THE ACQUISITION OF SYNTACTIC STRUCTURE

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.

MISHA BECKER is an Associate Professor in the Linguistics Department at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, where she has taught courses in linguistic theory and child language acquisition since 2002.

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ANIMACY AND THEMATIC
ALIGNMENT

MISHA BECKER

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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 glorps 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

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include different constructions (*tough* vs. control adjectives, and unaccusative vs. unergative verbs), child and adult participants, and different methodologies, all of which have been profoundly influenced by my colleagues around me. My early work on this topic was much influenced and enriched by Lila Gleitman, John Trueswell and the wonderful and insightful folks who made up the Cheese seminar at University of Pennsylvania's Institute for Research in Cognitive Science. I am deeply grateful to IRCS and NSF for the opportunity to be immersed in that stimulating environment for two years.

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