***I want hold Postman Pat*; An input-driven explanation for children's infinitival-*to* omission errors**

It is widely reported that, early in development, English-children make infinitival-*to* omissions (e.g. Bloom, Tackeff & Lahey, 1984; Diessel, 2004; Limber, 1973) and hence produce utterances such as **I want __ hold Postman Pat*. These errors occur at the same developmental period during which infinitival-*to* is produced. Therefore, they cannot be explained by a lack of knowledge of the to-infinitive marker. Bloom et al. (1984) suggest that the omissions are caused by old/new main verb distinction and Pinker (1984) by the lack of auditory salience of infinitival-*to*.

We adopted the Usage-based viewpoint and investigated whether these errors could derive from competition between different constructions in the language children hear (i.e. verb-*to* vs. verb-X). We analysed 14 children's naturalistic corpora between approximately 2;0-3;0 with reference to the two most common main verbs associated with the to-infinitive complement construction, WANT and *going*. First, infinitival-*to* omissions appearing with WANT (*want, wants, wanted, wanting*) and *going* were extracted from the corpus. Instances of infinitival-*to* in correct contexts with these verbs were also extracted to enable us to calculate the proportional use of infinitival-*to* in obligatory contexts, for each child and verb separately. Second, all instances of WANT and *going* were extracted from the mothers' speech. In addition, the number of instances of the WANT-*toV* and *going-toV* constructions was counted. The proportion of the mothers' production of WANT and *going* that was followed by anything other than infinitival-*to* was then calculated. To rule out the possibility that omission errors were related to the general input of infinitival-*to*, the frequency of use of infinitival-*to* in the mothers' speech irrespective of the main verb with which it appeared was calculated.

We found that different children produced different error rates. A Pearson's correlation test comparing the children's error proportions to the proportion of the verb-X constructions in the input showed a significant correlation for both main verbs, WANT $r = 0.573$; $n = 14$; $p = 0.032$, *going* $r = 0.716$; $n = 13$; $p = 0.006$, suggesting that those children whose input contained proportionally more verb-*to* forms produced fewer errors. The children also produced significantly more infinitival-*to* omission errors with WANT (23%) than with *going* (11%) ($t(12) = 4.063$, $p = 0.002$). This was mirrored by a significant difference in the input proportions of the verb-*to* construction with WANT (44%) and *going* (62%) ($t(12) = 6.627$; $p < 0.0005$). That is, errors were more commonly produced with the verb for which the input contained the verb-*to* construction less frequently than the verb-X constructions. The mothers' overall use of infinitival-*to* did not correlate with the

children's error rates.

Our results can explain why different children and different main verbs in to-infinitive constructions exhibit different error rates. We suggest that (a) input proportions of different constructions result in competition for output, which, in turn, results in infinitival-*to* omissions, and (b) early in life children represent infinitival-*to* as low level schemas related to particular main verbs rather than as an independent category.

Word count: 492

References:

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