

ABSTRACT

The Acquisition of the /-s/ Morpheme in English

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In this study, we investigated children's understanding and production of the English complex possessive phrases. Children are able to learn language without any instruction other than what they hear from the adults around them. This input, however, is not labeled or organized in any way. Due to the homophony between the possessive and plural constructions in English, there must be some way in which children organize and learn these rules.

During the study, we presented children ages 3-5 with different options on how to form complex possessive structures. Surprisingly, their preferred construction is also one that Universal Grammar predicts never will occur. By looking at how they chose to form the construction and how adults form the construction, we hoped to shed more light on not only the children's understanding of the structure, but the adults' as well.

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THE ACQUISITION OF THE /S/ MORPHEME IN ENGLISH

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Language is a trait common to all human beings. All naturally developing humans learn to communicate with the people around them. Some have writing systems, while some do not. Some use tone as a word marker while in others it denotes the attitude of the speaker. Varied would be an apt word to describe the many languages of the world.

Linguistics, the study of these languages, also looks at how they are similar. Universal Grammar (UG) (Chomsky, 1975), a hypothesis in the field, presents ideas about what all languages have in common. One such hypothesis specifically pertains to this study: phrase constituency. According to UG, words can be grouped together in particular ways based on their function in a sentence. In fact, they must be grouped in this way. These groups – called phrases – operate together as a unit within an utterance. These phrases must operate together, as shown by several constituency tests used in the field.

The first of these tests is called the movement test. In this test, the potential phrase should be able to move to the front of the sentence without producing an ungrammatical utterance. This can be seen in (1) and (2).

(1) The dog ate his apple under the rug.

(2) Under the rug the dog ate his apple.

Even though (2) is not something a native English speaker would ordinarily produce, it is still a grammatical statement suggesting that “under the rug” is a phrase. The second test

is called the replacement test. For this test, a *pro* form must be able to replace the potential phrase, as seen in (3) and (4).

(3) The dog ate his apple under the rug.

(4) The dog ate his apple there.

In this sentence, *there* is considered a *pro* form because it still conveys information about location of the action, but does not give the specifics. Another test used for constituency is a fragment test. In this test, a question about the information should be able to be answered with only the words in the potential phrase. This can be seen in (5).

(5) Where did the dog eat his apple? Under the rug.

The final test we will mention is that of coordination. A phrase in a sentence should be able to be coordinated with a like-structured phrase within the same sentence. For example, a noun phrase should be able to be connected with another noun phrase in the same sentence using a conjunction. This is seen in (6).

(6) The dog ate his apple under the rug and in the tree.

Because the group of words *under the rug* can pass all of these tests, it is considered a phrase under UG. This principle holds for all languages. Phrases as a property of language relate to the formation of the construction in this study.

In this particular study, we will be investigating an English construction, that of possession, as seen in (7).

(7) the boy's book

In particular, we will look at how children acquire this construction. By considering children's knowledge and understanding of this structure, I hope to shed light on the

structure in general as well as how speakers of English differentiate between the plural and possessive structures. Both possessives and plurals are represented by an /s/ suffix in English, potentially causing confusion in the language acquisition process. In order to investigate this knowledge, I conducted tests with a group of children through a recorded puppet show to discover their current knowledge and understanding of the possessive structure.

First in Chapter 2, I will look at the possessive structure itself. The idea of possession and its representation in English will be discussed. Also of note is the similarity between the sound of the plural and possessive constructions in English. I will also offer an explanation of a simple possessive versus a complex possessive, an important distinction over the course of the study. This will also offer an explanation of the differences in nature between the plural and possessive morpheme as well as how this study can contribute to the understanding of the possessive construction.

The next chapter, Chapter 3, will give a brief overview of previous research relating to the study I conducted. Two studies, the first investigating structure dependency by Crain and Nakayama (1987) and the second discussing frequency in the input by Nicoladis and Marchak (2011), will both play key roles in the discussion of my experiment.

After the overview of these previous studies, I will outline the methodology for my study in Chapter 4 explaining how I structured the interactions with the children as well as my reasons for structuring it the way I did. I also present the path of the story

design explaining why adult controls were necessary in this experiment. A copy of the script used for the study can be found in the Appendix.

The final two chapters, Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, present the results and analysis. The data is not what is predicted by UG; in fact, it presents some challenges to the idea of constituency presented earlier in this chapter. In the data I collected, children appear to have no sense of these constituents and break them up on a regular basis in the test I gave. I have investigated two different possibilities to account for this challenge and some reasons for the plausibility of each one.

CHAPTER TWO

Phenomenon and Background

Universal Grammar

Before embarking upon a discussion of possessive structures, a few more words should be said about Universal Grammar. In general, this hypothesis says that language is innate to all human beings; every human can and will learn language if he or she is developing normally. Within this innateness hypothesis, it also states that certain parts of language do not have to be taught. Children automatically recognize certain aspects of language because they exist in every human language. In addition to constituency as discussed in Chapter 1, structure dependency is an idea pertinent to this study on possessives. This is the idea that children recognize language not as a string of words, but as a more complex structure consisting of phrases working together in particular ways. This will be further discussed in the next chapter.

The structure dependency hypothesis becomes most important, however, when it is potentially challenged. In general, first language learners of a particular language should never make mistakes that violate Universal Grammar. This does not just mean that adult speakers do not make particular mistakes, but that even children should only make certain mistakes and not others. Pertaining to this investigation, UG restricts how the phrases can be formulated and manipulated. As mentioned in Chapter 1, UG states that a phrase should not be broken; it is a group of words that must operate together. The children in this study, however, did not appear to have either the understanding of the existence of a phrase or a sense of these rules governing phrase manipulation.

Concept of Possession

More broadly, possession is a fairly accessible concept in languages of the world. The idea of something belonging to someone comes up daily in speech without speakers even thinking about it. The idea is the same, even though different languages express the concept differently, such as case or word order. English uses two different syntactic constructions for the concept of possession. The first possessive construction is in a prepositional phrase, such as “the book of the boy.” The second option for a possessive construction in English, and the one I will discuss in this paper, utilizes a morphological marking. In English, adding /s/ to the end of a noun can denote that the individual referred to by the noun is the owner or possessor of another object, such as “the boy’s book.”

Homophony

The morphological possessive construction, however, could potentially be confusing to someone acquiring English, especially as a first language, where the structure is not being directly taught. In addition to marking possession, /s/ added to the end of a word can also denote the plural form of the noun. As a result, the sound segment [ðə boyz] can mean either that something belongs to this particular boy or that multiple boys are being discussed. In written English, an apostrophe is added to distinguish between the possessive and the plural, as in examples (8) and (9). Here (8) is a plural and (9) is a possessive.

(8) The boys ran.

(9) the boy’s book

In spoken English, however, no distinction between these two structures is made. Without the context of the sentence, there is no way to tell the difference between a plural and a possessive based only on the sound sequence itself. Somehow, children acquiring English sort these homophonous constructions into two types. Discovering how they do this can have important implications for better understanding the mechanisms of human language.

Simple versus Complex Possessives

There is, however, a construction in English where this homophony between the possessive and the plural does not exist. As discussed in Milligan (2004), the plural and possessive are two different types of morphological affixes, a necessary distinction due to their different meanings. The plural construction uses a lexical affix, meaning the /s/ attaches directly to the noun needing the plural marking. The possessive, however, uses a phrasal affix, or clitic. The /s/ attaches to the noun phrase, as opposed to the noun itself, which contains the possessor.

Clitics are morphological features that can serve various roles in syntax. Although most linguists agree they exist, little agreement exists on how to define them. According to Spencer (1991), clitics “are elements which share certain properties of fully fledged words, but which lack the independence usually associated with words.” The most important distinction for purposes of discussing possession according to Milligan is that “affixes usually attach to specific classes of words or stems, clitics are free to attach to any word, as long as it is in the right position in the sentence.” This proves true when looking at the possessive construction. This differentiation shows its importance when comparing the plural and possessive. If they were both the same type of affix, then there

would be no differentiation between the two constructions, requiring a search for another way that English speakers can tell the difference. As it is, the contrast allows comparison between the uses of the two.

This difference becomes evident when an additional phrase is added to the structure to describe the possessor noun, the possessive /s/ moves to the end of the entire noun phrase. This stands in contrast to the plural /s/ that would not move if a phrase were added. This is shown in the contrast of (10) and (11), with (10) being the plural.

(10) The boys across the street ran.

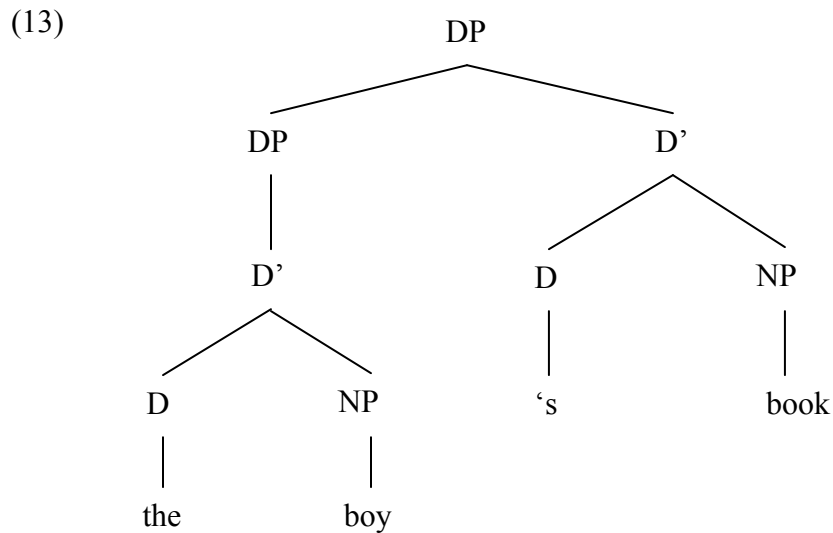
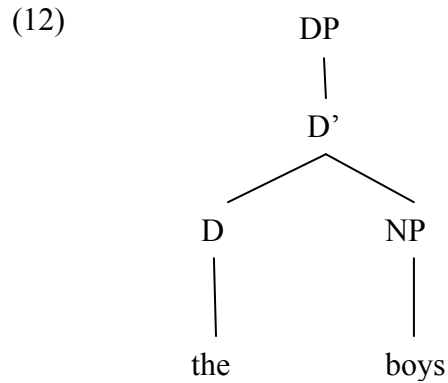
(11) the boy across the street's book

In these examples, the plural and the possessive do not sound the same, making it much easier to hear how the speaker is constructing the phrase. In addition, it helps classify the possessive /s/ as a clitic. In (11), it is not important exactly which word the morpheme attaches to, but to what part of the sentence. It must go at the end of the noun phrase, wherever that may be.

This creates two different types of environments for the plural/possessive distinction to be analyzed. The first I will refer to as a *simple possessive*. This construction occurs when the sound sequence does not make the distinction between a plural and a possessive readily apparent, such as (9). This occurs when the word boundary of the possessor and the phrase boundary occur in the same place, meaning that a phrasal and lexical affix would attach at the same place. The second construction, as seen in (11), I will call a *complex possessive*. These do offer distinct sound sequences for the plural and possessive constructions because the word boundary of the possessor and phrase boundary do not occur at the same location in the sentence.

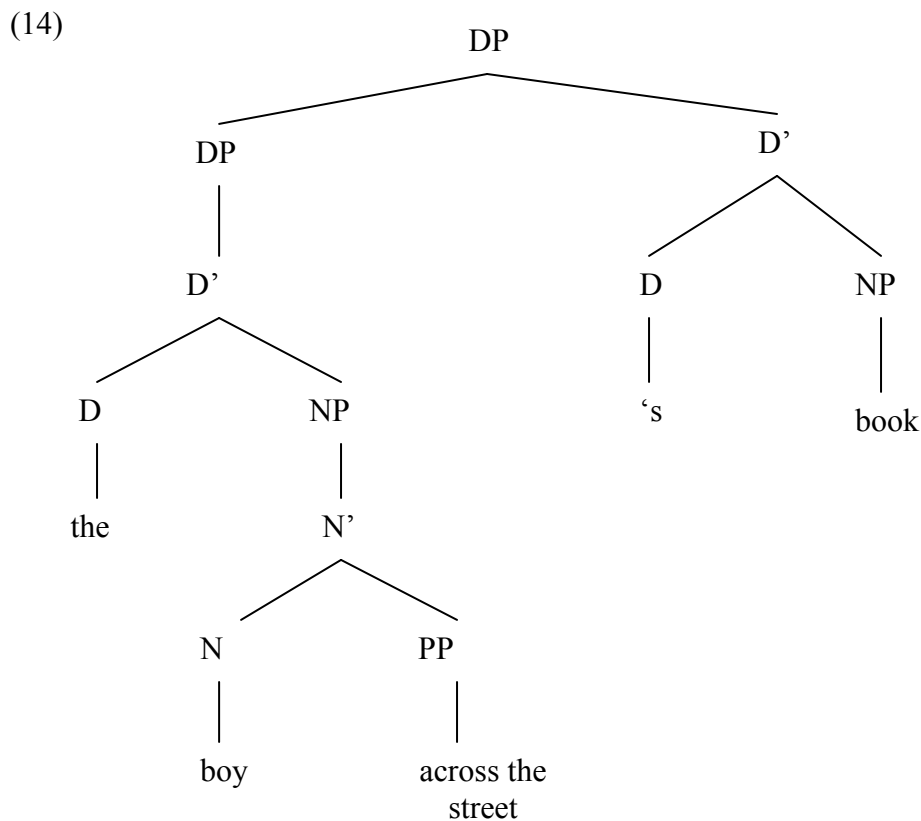
Syntactic Construction

The contrast becomes clearer when looking at the respective syntactic trees for these constructions. Examples (13) and (14) follow the structure proposed by Abney (1987), which is currently the generally accepted structure in the literature. The first contrast to examine is the one between a simple possessive and a plural. The contrasting structures are given in (12), a plural, and (13), a simple possessive.



As (12) shows, the /s/ on the plural does not occupy its own place in the structure; it is part of the noun being pluralized. The possessive, however, operates differently. In (13),

the /s/ used in the possessive structure does occupy its own place in the structure, that of the determiner of the possessee noun. This same situation is shown in the syntactic tree for a complex possessive, as in (14).



When looking at the tree in examples (13) and (14), the /s/ fits cleanly into the determiner position of the noun being possessed. This /s/ in fact does the job of a determiner; it denotes exactly whose book is being discussed. Instead of just any book, we are discussing the boy's book. The only difference is how the determiner is inserted into the sentence; it is connected to the preceding word instead of standing on its own. This refers back to Spencer's (1991) comment regarding clitics having properties of words; in this instance the possessive clitic can fill the syntactic place in the structure all

on its own. In the same way, the use of a possessive /s/ precludes the use of another determiner (L. Grebenyova, class notes, Fall 2011). As an example, see (15).

(15) *the boy's the book

A native English speaker would find (15) ungrammatical. This makes sense if the /s/ is filling the determiner spot in the determiner phrase. It lacks an explanation, however, if the /s/ fills another spot in the syntactic construction. In fact, it would require creating another spot in the tree for the /s/ to fill. This does, however, create an interesting situation for the complex possessive in (14). In this syntactic tree, the possessive /s/ also fits into the construction of the sentence at the end of the phrase, it just does not come directly after the possessor noun. As a result, however, it does give other potential locations in the construction to place the /s/, such as directly after the possessor noun. As previously mentioned, however, there is no available structural location for the /s/ after the possessor.

Implications

With these constraints on the placement of the possessive /s/ morpheme in mind, the question remains how English speakers formulate this syntactical rule. This homophony between the possessive and the plural is not seen in every language. Could this distinction between the use of a lexical affix for a plural and phrasal affix for possessive be innate? How do their response reflect and affect current theory on possessive structure? Do children ever make the mistake of putting the /s/ on the possessor even if it is in the middle of the phrase? If they do, at what point do they learn that the end of the phrase is the correct placement? This is not a concept taught to

children, so there must be some mechanism children use to make the differentiation between the two structures.

Looking at the acquisition of the structure can show another piece of evidence for the structure dependency hypothesis proposed by Crain and Nakayama (1987), as will be discussed in a subsequent chapter. If young children understand that the possessive /s/ cannot fit into the middle of a phrase, it shows that they recognize the existence of that phrase. It also shows that they recognize the /s/ morpheme can only go at the end of the phrase, not in the middle of it, supporting the idea of layers of phrases within sentences and its status as a clitic.

Investigating this question could also have implications for how children store lexical items at an early age. Are they storing each form separately or is it originally learned as a rule? Most linguists do believe that the mind stores language using rules, but we are unsure if that is the original way it is learned by children acquiring a particular language. If they correctly make this lexical/phrasal distinction when using possessives, it suggests that they do begin with the rule. If it were a separate lexical item, they should automatically retrieve the noun with the possessive /s/ marking, even when it is a complex possessive, and completely ignore the phrasal aspect of the construction. In the next chapter, I will provide a brief overview of some studies in the literature pertinent to this investigation of complex possessives.

CHAPTER THREE

Previous Research

Introduction

According to my research, there is little previous research addressing the English possessive structure itself. The following studies, however, address aspects of language acquisition that could potentially play into the acquisition of this structure. The first study by Crain and Nakayama (1987) investigates phrasal structure, a concept I discovered was very important for the possessive construction because of its contrast with the plural. The second study by Milligan (2004) actually discusses the possessive itself, looking at problems and strategies English speakers use to form the structure when it is not in a simple possessive form.

The final two studies mentioned here by Nicoladis and Marchak (2011) and Yang (2002), respectively, relate to each other as well as to the study discussed in this paper. They both look at potential methods of children acquiring syntactical and morphological rules in their native language. Both authors have slightly different takes on the same idea of frequency in the input.

Crain and Nakayama 1987

In the placement of the possessive and plural /s/, the existence of structure dependency places a vital role in choosing between potential structures. Crain and Nakayama (1987) investigated the viability of structure dependency in language during their study with 3- to 5-year-old children. This hypothesis is included in Chomsky's

formulation of Universal Grammar and states that children never formulate rules based on a linear string of words. Instead, they have a grasp of the internal structure of their language and use this knowledge in the manipulation of words without ever needing to have overt instruction in the language they are learning.

During this experiment, the researchers prompted the children to formulate a yes/no question from an indirect question, thereby requiring the child to perform movement in the formation of the question, as seen in (16) and (17).

(16) Ask the cow if the dog is happy.

(17) Is the dog happy?

Although the children did produce ungrammatical questions, none of them produced questions that would come from a structure independent hypothesis. Any movement that occurred followed the constraints of an understanding of the underlying syntactic structure in the language. The errors that did occur did not have a ready explanation, but they attributed many of them to processing difficulties due to the complexity of the questions.

Crain and Nakayama also performed a follow-up experiment due to the high number of utterances with incorrect movement in the first test. In the second experiment, the methodology was very similar except for the introduction of a modal into the question formation. The researchers again asked children to form yes/no questions from indirect questions with a very similar experimental design. This addition, however, caused more confusion for the children. They performed even more poorly on the constructions with modals than those without. Again, this confusion and the mistakes could be accounted for by processing errors. A lack of comfort with modal constructions could also

contribute to the experimental results because children acquire modals later than other auxiliary verbs. None of the error types directly pointed to a structure independent understanding of question formation. As a result, neither of the experiments directly pointed to children violating the principles of Universal Grammar as it relates to structure dependency.

This finding relates to possessive formation in several ways. Primarily, the complex possessives elicited by my test require an understanding of basic English syntax, including structure dependency. Without this understanding, the task of forming a complex possessive takes on a completely different issue; it would sound the same as a plural. Although children might not always add the possessive morpheme due to not having acquired this construction yet, they should never place it directly after the possessor noun as a word final morpheme because this would split the noun phrase and come into conflict with the structure dependency hypothesis and Universal Grammar.

Milligan 2004

Relating to the English possessive structure itself, Milligan (2004) conducted a series of experiments and surveys with adults and children investigating production and attitude towards possessive forms of coordinated noun phrases. She especially took note of these phrases when one of the possessors was represented by a first person singular personal pronoun, such as I or me.

The data collection conducted included the children (all girls) reporting about her and a classmate's tower that they built. Slightly older girls were asked how they would describe something that they and a partner did if "our" could not be used. The adults

were also given a survey intended to investigate adults' production of the structure as well as their acceptability judgments about other's attempts at the construction.

In the experiments with children ages five to twelve, the construction "me and Mary's" was used in over half of utterances. This, however, was not the case with older speakers. Their responses had more variety overall with teens and young adults primarily using "Mary and I's" or "Mary and my" and older adults using "Mary's and my" or "Mary and my." None of these utterances comprised at least 50% of the data. The children's preferred construction, "me and Mary's" showed up, but accounted for less than 10% of the data in both adult age groups.

Milligan (2004) also notes the syntactical formation of each response in her study. The children's preference, "me and Mary's," is the construction predicted by the grammar and is formed by the same rules as "John and Mary's." The use of "me" also follows the rule of using English's default accusative case when there is nothing else to assign case to the noun or pronoun. "Mary's and my" is formed by the rules to express individual tandem ownership instead of joint ownership. This distinction, however, can be small and the message is usually conveyed. On the other hand, "Sean and I's" appears to follow the correct structure rules but nothing in a surrounding sentence can trigger the nominative "I" that appears in the phrase. The final common construction given, "Mary and my," appears to have a weaker conveyance of joint ownership and, furthermore, does not follow the predictions of any of the current coordination theories.

A complex possessive frequently prompts similar hesitation when someone is prompted to produce one. Although Case assignment appears to play less of a role in this construction, the placement of the /-s/ morpheme still has multiple spots where it could

phonetically be placed. Placing it in different positions sometimes produces a grammatical statement, but the semantics of the statement do not match the situation the speaker is trying to describe. This study on possessives helps to show which rules native speakers recognize in forming the construction, which could relate to the rules speakers recognize when forming complex possessives. Her analysis of the patterns of mistakes in possessives looks at how adults understand the possessive, which is important in looking at how children understand the structure. Insight into the final understanding can help in the investigation of how children parse through a possessive structure by seeing what elements of the structure we should expect them to be acquiring.

Nicoladis and Marchak 2011

The question remains, however, how children learn to distinguish between these two homophonous morphemes. In their study, Nicoladis and Marchak (2011) looked for French language gender agreement between nouns, determiners, and adjectives in French-English bilingual children. In French, every noun is either masculine or feminine and the adjectives or determiners within the noun phrase must also be masculine or feminine to match the noun being used. They hypothesized that the bilingual children would be slightly behind their monolingual peers in this task due to token and type frequency of the nouns with their gender marker in the input being less than that of a monolingual French speaker. When vocabulary differences were accounted for, however, they thought this difference would become minimal. This hypothesis was supported by their data. When the researchers normalized the percentage of correct responses with how well the child performed on the vocabulary test, the differences between correct

gender agreement were statistically insignificant between monolingual and bilingual children.

Token and type frequency relate to the amount and type of information provided to a child in the input. A form with a high token frequency occurs many times, such as the verb *to be*. An item with a high type frequency has many things like it that occur frequently, developing a rule. This would be the case with the regular English past verb inflection, -ed. As demonstrated by this study, children need this frequency to form the rules and expectations in their language. Without enough occurrences of a type to form a rule or a token to cement the exception in the child's mind, he or she does not learn the particular form.

Possessives and plurals in English are potentially highly influenced by these two types of frequencies. Because a simple possessive sounds the same as a simple plural, they have a high potential to interact while a child is learning the rules of English. In most situations, this is not an issue because they do sound the same. Context and the surrounding structure of the sentence provide the necessary information to differentiate between the two potential meanings. Even in this process, the rules could be incorrectly or incompletely formed, leading to confusion when trying to construct a complex plural or possessive. These, however, occur less frequently in the input leading to a speaker potentially not having enough type frequency to form a rule for these complex structures.

Yang 2002

Yang (2002) also discusses rule formation in relation to frequencies during the acquisition of English past tense verb forms. Although the "regular" formation of a past

tense verb requires the stem to have –ed on the end, other “irregular” rules also exist, such as the vowel grade change in *run* to *ran* and *sing* to *sang*.

Yang proposes that these rules are formed almost in tandem. As a child hears past forms ending in –ed, he or she adds a mental tick mark to the count of words that use this rule. Other forms place tick marks in other categories. As a result, type frequency grows for rules that are more common. This helps children develop several rules for the same type of formation. Token frequency comes into play for the truly irregular verbs, such as *to be* in English, which must be learned individually.

Yet again, the interaction due to homophony comes into play with the possessive and the plural. What if a child does not correctly understand the meaning of a statement because the two constructions sound the same and places a tick mark in the wrong column? This misunderstanding due to the similar sounds of these two structures could also lead to confusion in forming the structure. Not only could it lead to confusion in the data, but mistakes in the data as well.

Summary

All four of these studies tie into concepts integral to the discussion of complex possessives. Structure dependency and – more generally – structure recognition play a critical role in determining where children decide to place the possessive morpheme in their utterances. It also influences making the contrast between the plural and possessive structures and morphemes in English. The hypothesis of token and type frequency also plays a role in the discussion of this contrast. How children make this distinction is an important question in the scope of the study. Finally, the study by Milligan gives some

insight into problems that children and adults have with other types of possessive structures with which they are not as familiar.

CHAPTER FOUR

Methodology

Choosing the Right Task

Choosing the right task was essential in the experimental design for this study. Truth-value judgment tasks, where the subject decides on the value of a statement, is usually used for semantic tests and was therefore inappropriate for this type of investigation. Acceptability judgments are often used for syntactic constructions. In this task, the subject decides whether an utterance is grammatically acceptable in his or her native language. I was unsure, however, if children as young as three and four years old would be able to handle that task. Ideally, I wanted to collect data on the children producing the construction, but children do not use complex possessives very often. This would suggest an elicitation task, where stories would prompt the child to produce the desired construction (Thornton 1990). Due to the rarity of this construction in a child's speech, however, it was not likely that I would be able to get enough data by a simple elicitation task. Even if I prompted a complex possessive, other types of constructions would be more felicitous for the child to use.

The complex possessive construction, however, offered a third option. There are two potential places where an English speaker can place the possessive morpheme in the possessive construction; it can go at either the end of the word or the end of the phrase. As previously mentioned, however, only placement at the end of the phrase is considered acceptable in English. Because there are two distinct options, I designed a task in which I offered both to the child in order to see which one he or she picked. In this way, I made

the complex possessive structure the most felicitous structure to give without having to block every other possible option. Having children choose between two options also allowed me to test the comprehension instead of just the production of the structure, at least to a certain extent. Even if the child had trouble coming up with the correct structure on his or her own, the prompting of both options would at least show a preference for one or the other. In addition, choosing lowered the chance of mistakes in production because the child was primed with the correct way to produce the structure. This option also introduces an incorrect response into the situation, but the child's natural intuition of the language should prevent this from being an issue. Ideally, this presentation lowers the influence of type versus token frequency as previously discussed (Nicoladis and Marchak, 2011). Even if the child would originally choose the unacceptable English structure due to it sounding similar to a plural – high type frequency – hearing the correct structure could help him or her not make this mistake.

Designing the Task

After deciding on the type of task, I proceeded to work through how to best phrase the choices. Originally, I attempted to include a relative clause describing the possessor noun to add complexity to the possessive structure, as shown in figure (18).

(18) the frog who sang a song's cupcake

This, however, adds complexity to the test sentence and lengthens the distance between the possessor noun and the possessee noun in the utterance. In addition, this type of utterance is even less common in a child's speech than the complex possessive including a prepositional phrase, which I decided to use.

I also considered always having an /s/ after the possessor noun, thereby giving the child a potentially ambiguous statement depending on if there were multiple possessors, such as (19) and (20).

(19) the frogs on the stage's cupcake

(20) *the frog's on the stage cupcake

In figure (19), the phrase is acceptable if there are multiple frogs standing on a stage who all own a cupcake. In contrast, (20) is unacceptable because the apostrophe in written English shows that there should only be one frog on the stage. A child could confuse these phrases, however, if they understand the possessive /s/ as always being on the end of the word. This additional complexity could confuse the issue of where kids understand the possessive morpheme to be, and was decided against. In addition, I could not think of any value of adding a comparison with plural /s/ morpheme in the experiment itself. In addition, I considered using plural possessive nouns and seeing how kids understood a word that should have two /s/ sounds on the end, the plural and the possessive, but only one is pronounced. I also decided that this would only serve to confuse the data I was trying to collect. I eventually decided to use only singular objects with prepositional phrases giving complexity to the construction. Figure A shows the toys used in the first story.



Figure A

Regarding presentation of these structures, play is often the best way to present a test to children, especially to preschoolers. I decided to show them a puppet show and ask them to pick between the two structures based on situations presented in the puppet show. Originally, I thought two puppets could each suggest a construction and have the child choose between the two puppets, but did not want to skew the data if the children preferred one puppet or the other. In addition, I was not sure if the child would feel bad always telling a particular puppet it was wrong. I decided to use one puppet offering two answers, one of which would be correct. The puppet, shown in Figure B, would be confused about which one was right and request help from the child in choosing between the two answers.



Figure B

I used multiple short stories in an attempt to keep the child's attention throughout the task; it also served to keep kids that are more outgoing from trying to participate in the story because they did not have enough time to get accustomed to the story and characters before trying to insert themselves into the stories. New characters also helped avoid

confusion between the different stories. I also tried to vary the appeal of each story to boys or girls by using both male and female characters and not including characters or situations that might be within the knowledge range of one gender or the other.

Designing the Stories

Each set of options for a complex possessive was presented as a part of a story. I used two pretest stories to help the child understand the task, four test stories to collect data pertinent to the experimental question, and fillers between each test story to avoid having the children figure out what I was looking for and adjust accordingly. This came to nine different stories. All but the first pretest story had a possessive construction in them, but the fillers did not alter the possessive construction between the two options. By always giving a possessive structure, I hoped not to draw attention to that particular construction. While the test items had an incorrect syntactic choice, the fillers had an incorrect semantic choice. The first pretest item was also a semantic distinction. The second pretest item included a simple possessive construction with one option being a possessive and the second actually being closer to a plural, as shown in (21) and (22).

(21) the cow's lemon

(22) *the cow lemons

This served to introduce the possessive before officially testing the child on the construction and is shown in Figure C. It could also serve as an indicator if mistakes in the later test items were a result of the child not having a complete grasp of the simple possessive structure instead of confusion about the complex structure. The animacy of the characters and objects presented in the stories was also discussed. I made sure only to include one animate object to avoid confusion of who the possessor noun was supposed

to be. In a pilot study, I discovered that children sometimes have a hard time grasping who is the possessor if there are multiple options and the relationship is not explicitly stated. In addition, I made sure to have the possessor directly state their ownership of the inanimate object.



Figure C

After initial testing with an adult subject, I found some additional things in need of control. Originally, I intended the child to jump in with his or her opinion on the question, but this was not very clear in the task itself. The adult subject in the pilot study also said it was hard to remember the two options through the dialogue in between when the options were given and when the subject was supposed to respond. As a result, I had the puppet directly ask the child which option he or she thought was right as well as repeat the two options again immediately before the child was supposed to answer the question. Another note on this decision is that I did not ask the participant to help the puppet; the puppet himself asked for the help. I did not want to intimidate the child by having the authority figure ask for an answer directly. One struggle in the experimental

design in the initial pilot was signaling to the child that I wanted them to repeat one of the offered constructions, but this did not seem to be an issue with my second pilot.

Testing

After spending two weeks getting to know the children at the Piper Child Development Center during recess, my assistant and I began showing the puppet show to the children. In the presentation to the children, I was able to use a classroom in the school building where they go to school. My assistant and I performed the puppet show to every subject individually while tape-recording his or her responses. The final version of the script I used is included in the appendix.

One important element in language experimentation with children is what to do when the child gets distracted or off-task. I had few instances of getting distracted, but there were instances of the children attempting to insert their own take on the script or misunderstanding the task. For the most part, we continued through the script with little to no acknowledgement of the child's question or comment. The scenes of the script changed often enough that the child usually returned his or her attention to the show. Sometimes we did have to modify the script slightly by repeating the options another time because the child interrupted and did not hear the two constructions. We did, however, try to keep the number of times each child heard the choices about the same. In the same way, the dialogue after the child answered varied depending on how the child handled answering the task; we wanted it to be an appropriate response to his or her comment. We did not, however, give feedback as to whether the child gave the right or

wrong response to the given question as to avoid the child learning from the task through the test situation.

I used a slightly different experimental method for my adult control group. For children, I decided the human interaction and slight modifications depending on the child were necessary in order to get good data. With adults, however, this personal interaction was not as necessary. Adults generally do not get off track in the story. They also have a longer attention span and a better understanding of what they are trying to accomplish. I decided to tape the puppet show for the adult test subjects, leaving space between the lines of the script to allow a response from the subject. This was also recorded and analyzed as a control for the child data.

A control was necessary for this experiment due to the infrequency and uniqueness of the structure. Although we expect the adults to choose the version deemed acceptable in English, even they begin to second-guess their instinct when discussing the structure specifically. I wanted to have some confirmation that this was actually a descriptive account of this structure instead of a prescriptive rule that a child would not have been exposed to yet. If adults consistently produce the expected structure, we could be more confident that this was actually the more preferred construction for them.

CHAPTER FIVE

Results

Participants

The participants of this study were all enrolled at the Piper Center for Childhood Development in Waco, Texas, associated with Baylor University. Nineteen children participated in the experiment with an average age of four years and two months old, 4; 2. The youngest participant was three years, two months and the oldest was five years one month, 3; 2 – 5; 1. In this sample, there were nine boys and ten girls.

Something to consider in these results is the socio-economic status and background of the majority of the children in the study. Many of the children have parents who are Baylor professors, and even more children at the center have well-educated parents who are more likely to read and interact with their children. This interaction and exposure to books may provide more of this type of structure in the input than the average child receives. As a result, these results might not be considered a representative sample of children in the general population.

The adults tested in the control group were all students at Baylor University. There were twenty adults between the ages of 18 and 22 tested in the control group. Eleven females and nine males participated. Again, it should be considered in this control group that all the participants are enrolled in a university degree program; many were near completion of this degree at the time of the study. As a result, they also may not be considered a representative sample due to their high education level.

Types of Patterns

Four different types of patterns of production were made over the course of the experiments. The first was what I will refer to as an *incorrect location*. This pattern was characterized by containing the /s/ morpheme, but it was not placed in the acceptable location of the utterance for English syntax. For the complex possessives, this also meant that the beginning of the construction sounded the same as the acceptable form of the English plural /s/ morpheme. The end, however, with two nouns next to each other is not considered acceptable in English. This is shown in example (23).

(23) *the frog's on the stage cupcake

(24) *the frog's on the stage's cupcake

(25) *the frog on the stage cupcake

(26) the frog's cupcake on the stage

The second pattern I will refer to as *doubling*. In this situation, the child placed the /s/ morpheme in the construction twice. For a complex possessive, this means inserting the /s/ after the possessor noun and at the end of the phrase. In addition, this construction is the same as the acceptable form of the English plural possessive. This is demonstrated in example (24).

The third type of pattern was an *omission*; the /s/ morpheme did not appear anywhere in the utterance. This construction is never considered acceptable in Standard English. It is most often produced by children who have not yet acquired the possessive morpheme. This construction is shown in example (25).

The fourth and final pattern is not truly a mistake at all. I will refer to it as a *restructuring*. In these situations, the child changed his or her utterance from the given

options to encompass the meaning of the situation without having to use the possessive /s/ morpheme. I am not, however, classifying this as a correct utterance because the child chooses to not use one of the presented forms, suggesting he or she is uncomfortable choosing between them. Although the structure of these utterances varied, most participants either moved the prepositional phrase or introduced a possessive pronoun into the construction. An example of one of these constructions is shown in (26).

Data

As discussed in the previous chapter, the second pretest item, a simple possessive such as “the cow’s lemon,” was presented to the child. Child participants correctly formed this construction 33% of the time. Participants formed it incorrectly 28% of the time, split between the incorrect location for the possessive /s/ and a doubling of the /s/ morpheme. Responses did not use the /s/ morpheme whatsoever 39% of the time. Of these, 11% restructured the possessive in order to not use the morpheme. This is displayed in figure D.

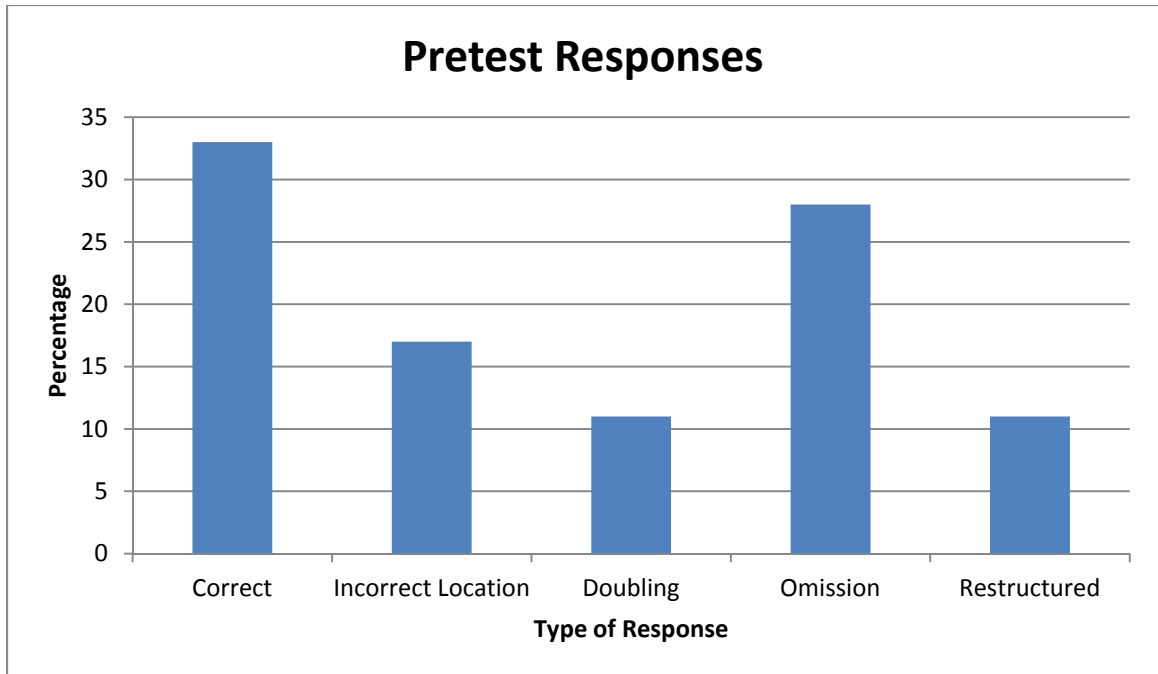


Figure D – Pretest Responses by Pattern

Over the course of four test items showing complex possessive structures, only one acceptable answer was given in the form elicited. This one response accounts for only 1% of the data collected.

The rest of the results fell into one of the four categories of mistakes mentioned earlier. I make note of responses for different tests in case one test item elicited a significantly different percentage of incorrect responses. Incorrect location responses accounted for 47% of the responses with 49% for test item 1, 47% for test item 2, 63% for test item 3, and 47% for test item four. Doubling was the least common mistake with 9% overall. Individually, test item 1 had no doubling responses, test item 2 presented 16% doubling responses, and test items 3 and 4 were each 5% doubling responses. Test item 1 had 27% of responses with the /s/ morpheme omitted while test items 2, 3, and 4 each had 16% in this category. Overall, this mistake was 23% of the total number of responses

given in the study. Finally, restructured results made up 22% of the responses and represented 18% in test item 1, 21% in test item 2, 16% in test item 3, and 32% in test item 4. These values are represented in figures E and F.

| | Correct | Incorrect Location | Doubling | Omission | Restructured |
|------------|---------|--------------------|----------|----------|--------------|
| Percentage | 1 | 47 | 6 | 23 | 22 |

Figure E – Total Responses by Pattern

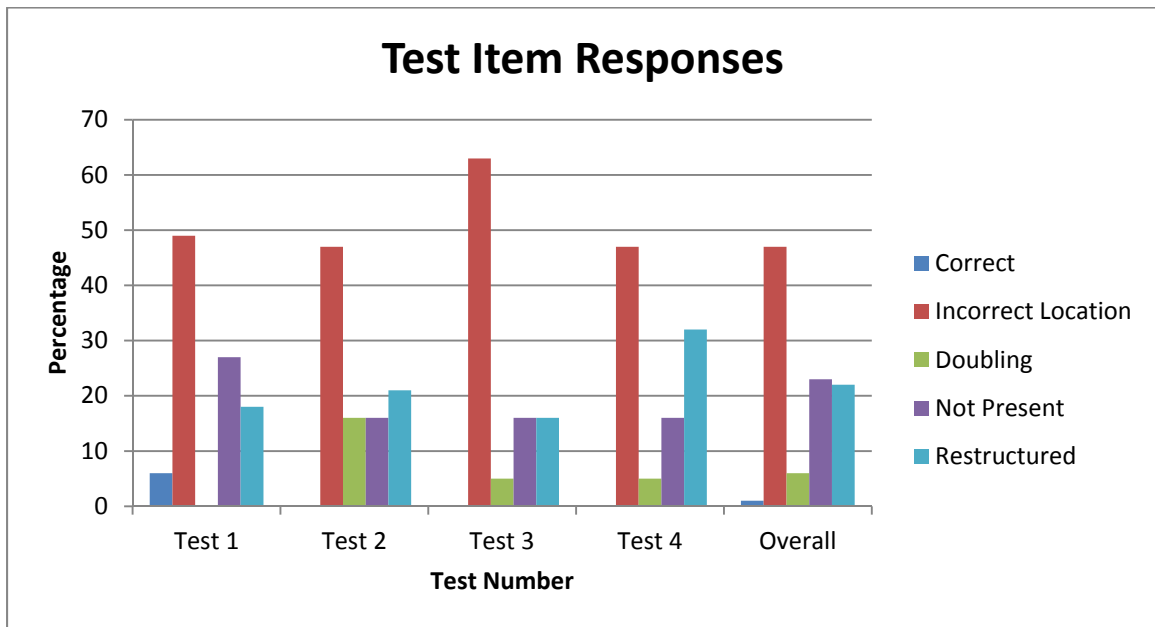


Figure F – Test Item Responses by Pattern

Control Group Responses

As previously discussed, the adult control group was presented with the same scripted puppet show as the children. When presented with the pretest question, every adult correctly formed the possessive construction. This was not the case, however, with the test questions.

The majority of responses were the form considered correct in Standard American English. This form accounted for 75% of the total responses. Test item 1 responses were 80% correct, those of test item 2 were 75% correct, test item 3 responses were 65%, and test item 4 responses were 80% correct.

The patterns in the adult group, however, were much more limited. Within the remaining 25% of the data, the only patterns represented were doubling and incorrect location. Incorrect location was the more common pattern with 21% of the overall data. 15% of test item 1 responses were of this pattern. Test item 2 had 20%, test item 3 had 30%, and test item 4 had 15% in this pattern. Only three responses followed a doubling pattern, making up 4% of the data. These responses were made by three different subjects. One response following this pattern occurred in test items 1, 2, and 3. These results are demonstrated in Figure G.

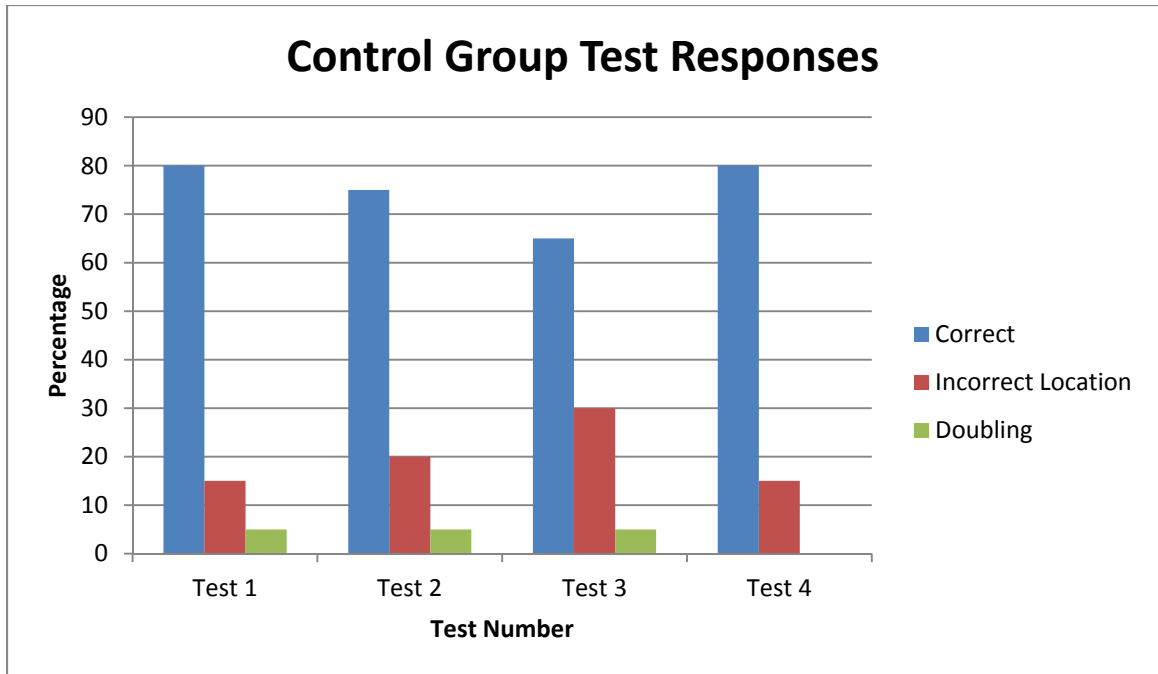


Figure G – Control Group Test Responses by Pattern

Statistical Analysis

The presented results show quite plainly that there is an interfering factor in the data. Considering that the most common response to test items is predicted by the literature to never occur, the percentages for this pattern are very high. A student's t-test was performed on the data to confirm this observation. The results of this test are as follows: $[t(39) = 9.75, p < .01]$. This shows that the probability of these two populations consistently giving the same responses is extremely low. The children's responses unequivocally suggest some type of interference in the responses; 1% correct cannot easily be attributed to chance. Furthermore, the control group responses also appear to have another contributing factor in the utterances, as 25% of responses not following the acceptable pattern for Standard English are also a little high. There must be an

interfering factor in this particular construction that causes difficulty in the application of Universal Grammar rules. Two possibilities will be discussed in the next section.

CHAPTER SIX

Analysis

As previously noted, the results obtained by the studies are not what was predicted by UG on the basis of Standard American English. According to UG, none of the incorrect location responses should have been produced because they break a phrase. Only 1% of the children's responses were formed in what is deemed "correct" by Standard American English. Although some of these deviations seem to be due to the child not having acquired the possessive structure at all, many responses indicate that there is something else going on in the data. In the following sections, we will try to understand this puzzling data.

Types of Responses

The types of patterns mentioned in the previous section provide some questions to begin the discussion. The first pattern of note is the rephrased responses. In these situations, the child chose to give his or her own response even though two options had already been given. This suggests either that they did not understand the task or they were unsure of which answer was correct. As to the first option, all children included in the data chose a presented option for the other test questions in the experiment, suggesting they did understand the task. The children who rephrased their response also frequently had a moment of hesitation before their response, suggesting they were uncomfortable with the options given.

The second interesting response was that of doubling. This response occurred in both the test and control group data. As previously stated, these responses contained two /s/ morphemes, one in the spot for a plural and one in the spot for a possessive. Although a small percentage of the data, it does present the question why some subjects were okay with using the morpheme in both locations.

The primary response of the children, incorrect location, was also interesting. In this construction, the /s/ morpheme was used word final instead of phrase final. In this way, the utterance was initially constructed as a plural. Even overlooking the fact that the end of the phrase was ungrammatical, the semantics of the phrase would not match what the toys in the story represented. Furthermore, attempting to place a possessive morpheme in that location breaks the phrase in half, an occurrence prohibited by Universal Grammar and supported by the structure dependency study by Crain and Nakayama (1987). With these considerations, two situations are possible. Either the children did not recognize the phrase or they did not recognize the nature of the morpheme.

Proposal 1: Not Recognizing the Phrase

The first possibility is that children do not recognize this phrase. Within this situation, there could be several explanations for why they do not process the internal structure of the utterance. The first could be that the current hypothesized structure for this construction presented by Abney (1987) is incorrect. In this case, the child could be recognizing a different phrase and working off that understanding. Investigating this possibility, however, is an issue for another paper.

The complexity of the structure could also be causing problems in the processing of the phrase, thereby leading to the child missing the internal structure. As previously mentioned, I tried to control for this as much as possible by using prepositional phrases instead of relative clauses, but a certain amount of complexity is necessary in order to distinguish where the child is placing the possessive morpheme. This phenomena was also attested to in Crain and Nakayama (1987) where the constructions with modals gave children more problems than those with simpler auxiliary verbs.

Tracing through how a child would process the phrase as it is presented sheds some light on this possibility. I will use figures (27) and (28) as the variations on the example phrase.

(27) the frog on the stage's cupcake

(28) *the frogs on the stage cupcake

When parsing through (28), the more common response, the child would start out without any problems. "The" easily falls into the locations and function of a determiner. The next word – "frogs" – would start out fine; it is in the correct location for a noun. At this point, it is ambiguously marked as a plural or a possessive. "The frogs" can denote multiple frogs being discussed or a single frog owning something, only one of which matches the situation in the story told by the researcher. This difficulty is resolved, however, as the child works through the following prepositional phrase. "The frogs on the stage" is grammatically correct, but does not semantically match the situation presented. The only acceptable meaning of this phrase is discussing multiple frogs sitting on a stage. The final word, however, only adds to the difficulty for the child. "The frogs

on the stage” should not be followed by a noun, but it is. “The frogs on the stage cupcake” is, at this point, not only semantically off, but also syntactically incorrect.

This tracing causes problems for the processing analysis. At the end of the process, the child would be left with a semantically incorrect and syntactically complicated phrase under the most generous analysis. Although not completely conclusive, it does not add to the credibility of the possibility that children do not recognize the phrase.

Proposal 2: Not Recognizing the Nature of the Morpheme

The other possibility is that children do not realize the morpheme is phrasal. This possibility looks at the homophony between the possessive and plural morpheme in English and their different nature of attachment, phrase final versus word final. In many situations, the morphemes sound exactly the same due to the end of the phrase and the end of the word being in the same place. This phenomenon invokes the differentiation between token and type frequency discussed in Nicoladis and Marchak (2011).

As previously mentioned, token and type frequency are two measures of frequency in the input. Token frequency is the number of times the child hears a particular form, especially a particular form of a different word. With enough repetition, the child knows that word exists from hearing it enough in the input. Type frequency, however, plays on the repetition of a certain rule in the input. For example, if a child hears a past tense verb formed with an –ed enough times, he or she will learn that rule and generalize it to other verbs. Type frequency contributes to a child not having to learn the language word by word, but rule by rule.

These two types of frequency, however, potentially come into conflict when learning the possessive and plural morphemes in English. They should be classified in the child's mind as two different types with many different tokens within each category. As a result of this, two rules should be formed; one rule should exist for plurals and one for possessives. There is, however, another possibility that might occur. Because of the homophony between the two sounds, children could originally parse what should be two types into one set of rules. In other words, the child combines the plural and possessive morphemes into a single construction with a single set of rules. Simple plurals and simple possessives are much more common than the complex ones used in this study. The simple structures sound the same whether plural or possessive; in order to separate out the two constructions, the child would need enough data with clear semantics and differentiation between the structures to form the two separate rules. This could be delayed, however, due to the infrequency in the input. The instances where a child would produce these structures would be even less frequent, leading to adults not realizing the confusion, but using their knowledge of the semantics of the situation to choose which meaning the child intends when a simple structure is used.

Another question would be whether these two proposals could coexist together. With the previous analysis, I do not see any reason why they could not. If the child did not realize that the utterance was a phrase or that the possessive morpheme was phrasal, they would probably still revert to where they had most often heard the /s/ sound. This would lead them to place it on the end of the noun like a plural. Even though I see no reason to discount this idea, I also do not see any data specifically supporting this analysis either.

Adult Responses

Another surprising aspect to the study was the percentage of mistakes in the adult control group. This too can be explained with the same logic as children merging the rules for possessives and plurals. As previously mentioned, in order to differentiate between the characteristics of the two constructions, a child would need enough input with clear semantics and distinctiveness in the structure to form clearly the two rules. If this never occurs, the two rules might never completely separate. As the child learns more about the language, he or she does realize that there are two distinct situations for each morpheme, but the particulars of each construction are never clarified. It usually is not an issue due to the infrequency of the structure and ease of replacing it with another one that is semantically equivalent.

Milligan (2004) encountered a similar situation in her study of coordinated possessive phrases. Because adults were rarely forced to use the structure coordinating a joint possessive using a 1st person pronoun, they did not have a good understanding of the rule that those structures should follow. As a result, few were able to form what is considered the correct structure in Standard American English. Most attributed their choice of structure to “something they learned in school,” but these structures often did not even follow the structure the speaker understood for a joint possessive structure when two nouns were used. An unfamiliar structure led to problems in production, which could also be the case for this study.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

In this study, I investigated children's – and subsequently adults' – understanding of complex possessive structures in English. The results showing that children overwhelmingly put the /s/ morpheme in the wrong place in this complex possessive structure raises important questions about structure dependency in child language acquisition. At first glance, this study suggests children are breaking the phrase, which is something Universal Grammar states they should never do.

Over the course of this study, I investigated the underlying structure of English possessives and several studies that have addressed issues pertinent to the structure. I also designed an experiment to collect data on children's production of possessive structures. The data was not what was predicted by UG, but I also looked at several possible explanations for this data.

After looking more closely, however, another possibility presents itself – the children could possibly not recognize the possessive morpheme as a clitic. Under this explanation, a rule has not yet correctly been formed in the children's minds instead of a violation of a hypothesized principle in Universal Grammar. Although further research into the possibility of children splitting the noun phrase should not be ruled out, there is another possible explanation.

In fact, several aspects of this study call for further research. The tree structure of possessives themselves should be further investigated. I have used Abney's (1987) proposed structure for possessive, but there are several other perspectives on the syntactic

nature of the structure. Very few of these, however, have any empirical research to back them up – Abney included. An investigation into the structure of the possessive would be very beneficial to this conversation.

The semantics of these complex possessives also could use further study. In the data I collected, most children marked the phrases as we expect a plural to be marked. What if the situation were plural? Would children then want to provide a phrase with the /s/ in a different spot? Earlier, I mentioned doubling. How does that play into the child’s understanding of what is occurring in the story? Would these children produce something different if two frogs on a stage owned a cupcake?

I also think the adult responses would be something interesting to investigate further. Although 75% correct was sufficient for my control group purposes, why were 25% of the answers incorrect? Why were some people’s native intuitions so distorted that they answered incorrectly for every question; some people even answered correctly at first and then “realized” they had the “wrong” answers and changed them for the final two questions.

In addition to these other areas of investigation, there were also a few elements I would change if attempting to conduct the study again. First, I think I would use a wider age range of children. My oldest participant was the one child that got one right answer. It would be interesting to see if other children of the same age and slightly older began to start answering with more responses that are correct. I also think a better method of keeping the child on track would be needed. I had several children whose data might have been different if they better followed the script and were better attuned to the situation at hand.

Overall, the possessive structure presents an interesting question for further linguistic research. It raises questions about structure dependency, acquisition of rules, and the role of homophony in Universal Grammar. Further research will help to shed more light on these issues.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

Experimental Script

Narrator: Hi! This is Albert the alligator

Albert: Hi! What's your name?

Narrator: I'm going to tell you two some stories. Albert is going to try to answer some questions about the stories. But, sometimes he says some funny things.

Albert: Yeah, that's right. Sometimes I do say funny things.

Narrator: So, you might need to help him out a little if he isn't sure what the right answer is.

Albert: Can you please help me?

Narrator: Thanks so much! You ready to hear the stories? Ok, let's get started.

Pretest

Item One:

Narrator: Once, there was a dragon that loved to play all day

Dragon: I love to run races, play hide and seek with my friends and see how high I can jump!

Narrator: But, after a whole day of playing, the dragon is very tired and is ready to go to bed.

Dragon: I'm so tired! I've had a really fun day, but I'm ready to go to bed.

Narrator: Albert, what is this?

Albert: Um, I really wasn't paying very much attention, but is it a dragon? Or, is it a crocodile?

Narrator: Ok, but which one is it?

Albert: (to child) Do you know? Is it a dragon or a crocodile?

(Child answers)

Albert: Thank you so much!

Item Two:

Narrator: Once there was a cow who loved to eat his favorite food.

Cow: I could eat my favorite food all day! Most cows like to eat grass, but lemons are my favorite. This is my lemon and I can't wait to eat it!

Narrator: Albert, what is this?

Albert: Um, is it the cow's lemon? Or is it the cow lemons?

Narrator: Almost Albert, but how do you say it right?

Albert: Will you help me? Is it the cow's lemon or the cow lemons?

(Child answers)

Albert: That's right! Thank you!

Experimental Stories

Test One:

Narrator: This frog loves to sing songs. He is actually pretty good! Most of all, he loves to sing on a stage.

Frog: Today I am going to sing Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star. Of course, I always have to have my cupcake after I sing. So, here is my cupcake, and no one eat it while I sing!
Twinkle, twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are! Thank you! Now I get to eat my cupcake!

Narrator: Albert, what is this?

Albert: I think it is the frog on the stage's cupcake. Wait, no. I think it is the frog's on the stage cupcake.

Narrator: So close Albert! But how do you say it right?

Albert: Can you help me? Is it the frog on the stage's cupcake, or the frog's on the stage cupcake?

(Child answers)

Albert: Thanks so much! You're great!

Filler One:

Narrator: This is Tom. Today is his birthday. Happy birthday Tom!

Tom: Today is my birthday! My friend sent me a present. I'm going to open it now.

[opens present] Wow! Look at this toy car I got!

Narrator: Albert, what is this?

Albert: Is it Tom's car? Or is it Tom's bike?

Narrator: Almost Albert! But which one is it?

Albert: I think it is Tom's car.

Narrator: That's right! Great job!

Test Two:

Narrator: Look at this dog! Why does he have an apple with him?

Dog: I love to eat apples. They are my favorite thing to eat. And you know where I like to eat them? Right here on this rug. It's so soft and cozy to sit on. See? Here is my apple and I'm going to sit on the rug and eat it.

Narrator: Albert, what is this?

Albert: Oh! I know! It is the dog on the rug's apple. Or, is it the dog's on the rug apple?

Narrator: Pretty close, Albert. But how do you say it right?

Albert: Um, is it the dog on the rug's apple or the dog's on the rug apple? Can you help?

(Child answers)

Albert: Thanks so much! You're great!

Filler Two:

Narrator: This tiger has a really interesting thing that he likes to do. He likes to pick strawberries!

Tiger: I love picking strawberries! Usually I eat more than I actually take home though. See? Here is my strawberry I just picked. I think I'm going to send it to my friend!

Narrator: Albert, what is this?

Albert: Um, is it the tiger's strawberry? Or is it the tiger's cherry?

Narrator: Close Albert! But which one is it?

Albert: Can you help me? Is it the tiger's strawberry or the tiger's cherry?

(Child answers)

Albert: Thank you (insert child's name)!

Test Three:

Narrator: This boy has lots of fun all day. He really likes to play outside.

Boy: I'm so excited about coming to play outside! It's really hot though. I brought a piece of watermelon for after I play. I will leave it here under this tree. I love running, jumping, and doing summersaults! Now I'm really hot. I'm going to go sit under the tree and eat my watermelon.

Narrator: Albert, what is this?

Albert: The boy under the tree's watermelon! Wait, or is it the boy's under the tree watermelon?

Narrator: Almost Albert! But how do you say it right?

Albert: Is it the boy under the tree's watermelon or the boy's under the tree watermelon?

Can you help me?

(Child answers)

Albert: That's right! Thanks so much!

Filler Three:

Narrator: Here is Snow White. She has a dog with her.

Snow White: I have to walk my dog every day. I love doing it, though! We have a lot of fun going on walks together. Sometimes we walk to the park together, but sometimes we just walk around in circles until we get tired!

Narrator: Albert, what is this?

Albert: Is it Snow White's dog? Or is it Snow White's cat?

Narrator: So close Albert! But which one is it?

Albert: Um, I think it is Snow White's dog.

Narrator: That's right!

Test Four:

Narrator: This girl is a gymnast. She practices every day. She always brings her lunch to eat after practice.

Girl: Today I'm going to practice jumping on this block. I brought a hot dog to eat for my lunch after I practice. Here I go! [works to jump on block; finally succeeds] I did it! I think I'm going to eat my hot dog up here on this block.

Narrator: Albert, what is this?

Albert: I think it is the girl on the block's hot dog. Or maybe it is the girl's on the block hot dog.

Narrator: Almost Albert! But how do you say it right?

Albert: Can you help? Is it the girl on the block's hot dog or the girl's on the block hot dog?

(Child answers)

Albert: Thanks for all your help!

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