

The Role of the Child's Previous Inventory in Verb Overgeneralization in Spanish Child Language: A Case Study

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Abstract : The study of overgeneralization in inflectional morphology provides evidence for understanding how a child's mind works when applying linguistic patterns in a novel way. High-frequency inflectional forms in the input cause inappropriate use in contexts related to lower-frequency forms. Children learn verbs as lexical items and new forms develop only gradually, around their second year: most of the utterances that children produce are closely related to what they have previously produced. Spanish has a complex verbal system that inflects for person, mood, and tense. Approximately 200 verbs are irregular, and bare roots always require an inflected form, which represents a challenge for the memory. The aim of this research is to investigate i) what kinds of overgeneralization errors children make in verb production, ii) to what extent these errors are related to verb forms previously produced, and iii) whether the overgeneralized verb components are also frequent in children's linguistic inventory. It consists of a high-density longitudinal study of a middle-class girl (1;11,24-2;02,24) from Mexico City, whose utterances were recorded almost daily for three months to compile a unique corpus in the Spanish language. Of the 358 types of inflected verbs produced by the child, 9.11% are overgeneralizations. Not only are inflected forms (verbal and pronominal clitics) overgeneralized, but also verbal roots. Each of the forms can be traced to previous utterances, and they show that the child is detecting morphological patterns. Neither verbal roots nor inflected forms are associated with high frequency patterns in her own speech. For example, the child alternates the bare roots of an irregular verb, *cáye-te** and *caiga-te** ("fall down"), to express the imperative of the verb *cá-e-te* (fall down.IMPERATIVE-PRONOMINAL.CLITIC), although *cay-ó* (PAST.PERF.3SG) is the most frequent form of her previous complete inventory, and the combined frequency of *caer* (INF), *cae* (PRES.INDICATIVE.3SG), and *caes* (PRES.INDICATIVE.2SG) is the same as that of *caiga* (PRES.SUBJ.1SG and 3SG). These results provide evidence that a) two forms of the same verb compete in the child's memory, and b) although the child uses her own inventory to create new forms, these forms are not necessarily frequent in her memory storage, which means that her mind is more sensitive to external stimuli. Language acquisition is a developing process, given the sensitivity of the human mind to linguistic interaction with the outside world.

Keywords : inflection, morphology, child language acquisition, Spanish

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