

Finiteness and word order in the acquisition of English and Norwegian *wh*-questions

This paper discusses the acquisition of finiteness and inverted word order in *wh*-questions in English and a Norwegian dialect (Tromsø), traditionally argued to be due to the V2 (verb second) parameter in Norwegian and subject-auxiliary inversion in English (residual V2). Previous studies have found a difference between English and (typical) V2 languages with respect to non-finite root clauses in early child language. While such examples are frequent in English *wh*-questions, (1)-(2), *wh*-questions in the other Germanic languages are generally finite, (3). However, Norwegian children do produce non-finite root clauses in other clause types, typically with a modal meaning, (4)-(5). Wexler's (1999) model of Optional Infinitives (OIs) argues that this difference between English and the other Germanic languages is linked to the V2 parameter, which is set very early and only applies to finite verbs. In Rizzi's (1993/94) Truncation model, this difference is due to the fact that, when CP is present, no projection below may be missing.

In a cue-based approach to acquisition, Westergaard (2009) argues that there is no V2 parameter and accounts for the variation across languages by a number of *micro-cues*. V2 is dependent on clause type and subcategory of the elements involved: While Norwegian and English both have verb movement in *wh*-questions, it is restricted to auxiliaries/copula in English, and associated with only some *wh*-elements and new/focused subjects in Norwegian. On this perspective, both languages have (restricted) V2 in *wh*-questions, exactly the environment where they differ with respect to finiteness in early child language.

In this paper, we take the cue-based approach and argue against the claimed correlation between finiteness and V2. Investigating data from 8 English and 3 Norwegian children, we show that *wh*-questions without verb movement (* in English, ok in Norwegian) virtually always appear with finite verbs, (6)-(7). Our data also show that (finite) copula *be* is frequently inverted in English *wh*-questions, and furthermore, that main verbs in (non-auxiliary) subject *wh*-questions are mostly finite. Non-finite *wh*-questions in English lack a verbal element, and we argue that this is due to a problem realizing auxiliaries, cf. Guasti's (2000) Null-Aux hypothesis. A careful investigation of the English child data reveals that this problem especially affects *do/be*, while *have/modals* are less often missing. Crucially, our findings show that the overwhelming majority of English *wh*-questions are contexts requiring *do/be*, exactly those auxiliaries which turn out to be particularly difficult. We then argue that non-finite root clauses in Norwegian are caused by the same difficulty, in declaratives as well as (occasionally) in *wh*-questions, (8)-(9). However, the most problematic auxiliaries in English child language (*do/be*) are irrelevant for Norwegian, and other auxiliary contexts are generally infrequent in early *wh*-questions.

Thus, we argue that the difference between *wh*-questions in English and Norwegian child language is not due to a parameter, but to a difference in the subcategory of verbs that V2 applies to. This supports the model of micro-cues, which may also shed light on why children generally only produce errors of omission in syntax (cf. Snyder 2007).

- (1) what the dolly have? (Eve.12, age 1;11)
- (2) what you doing? (Eve.14, age 2;0)
- (3) *kor har du buksa?* (Ann.10, age 2;3.9)
 where have you pant.DEF/PL
 ‘Where do you have the pants?’
- (4) *tegne den?* (Ina, 2;0.5)
 draw that
 ‘(Can I) draw that?’
- (5) *ikke være sånn.* (Ole, 1;10.0)
 not be such
 ‘(It should) not be like that.’
- (6) why I can keep dem? (Adam.25, age 3;2.21)
- (7) *ka du gjør?* (Ann.10, age 2;3.9)
 what you do.PRES
 ‘What are you doing?’
- (8) *Kor æ legge den hen?* (Ina 2;7.8)
 where I lay.INF it LOC
 ‘Where (should) I put it?’
- (9) *Ka reven gjort?* (Ina 2;8.12)
 what fox.the done.PRT
 ‘What (has) the fox done?’

References

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