

Early Root Infinitives in a Null-Subject Language: A Longitudinal Case Study of a Spanish Child¹

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1. Introduction

The literature on the root infinitive stage, a period of acquisition during which the child produces root infinitives in finite contexts, have been based on two premises. The first one is that the child uses root infinitives when she is already aware of the inflectional properties of the target grammar. The second one is that children whose target grammar is an INFL licensing null-subject language do not pass through an optional infinitive stage. This generalization, known as the null-subject optional infinitive stage generalization (NS/OI henceforth), is stated in (1)

- (1) Children pass through an optional infinitive stage iff the target grammar is an INFL-licensing null-subject language (INSL henceforth)

(Adapted from Wexler, 1998)

It is this second premise that I want to challenge in this paper. I report the results of a longitudinal case study of a Spanish child, Inés (1; 08-2; 06) who uses root infinitives in volitional contexts.

The generalization in (1) has been currently put into question by studies such as Grinstead (1995), Grinstead (2004) where the claim is made that children use a higher number of root non-agreeing (being it infinitival or non-agreeing third person singular forms) in matrix contexts. Grinstead, in a longitudinal study of three Spanish speaking children, showed that 3rd person singular forms was so frequent in their speech that they might reflect a grammatical property of the Spanish child grammar.

The goal of this paper is twofold. First, I will investigate the grammatical properties of the root non-agreeing forms in Early Child Spanish. In doing so, I will also provide evidence for an approach of root infinitives which supports a volitional approach to this phenomenon. The main questions addressed are the following:

1. Do children speaking Spanish use root non-agreeing forms?
2. What is the grammatical competence of the child with respect to subject verb agreement at this stage?
3. Are the contexts in which these forms appear modal or finite?

In the next section I will briefly summarized some representative approaches to root infinitives that will be tested with the data.

2. The Root infinitive stage: Inflectional and volitional approaches

Since the earliest longitudinal studies of language acquisition in English, it was noticed that children at around the age of two use root non-finite forms, such as the one in (1), in a systematic way:

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- (2) John eat a cookie.

Even though it was first considered that those forms were the result of a grammar that lacks a functional categories (see Guilfoyle, Noonan (1988), Lebeaux (1988), Platzack (1990) and Radford (1990)), it was soon noticed that this view was too simplistic. Thus, Déprez and Pierce (1992) for French, Poeppel and Wexler for German (1993) for German, Guasti (1994) for Italian and many others, show that children by the age of two do have a command of the functional projections of their target grammars. Nevertheless, it was also found that in languages such as German (Poeppel and Wexler (1993)) French (Pierce (1992)) and Dutch, children uses root infinitives in matrix contexts frequently at least until they are older than two years and a half. In Romance languages, on the other hand, children used optional infinitives less frequently and abandon this period earlier (roughly by the age of two). Thus, the optional infinitive stage raised two questions: 1) why are children producing root non-finite forms in matrix contexts? And 2) why is there cross-linguistic variation with respect to the optional infinitive forms?

There are two general approaches in the acquisition literature that attempt to answer these questions. The first line of approaches, which I will label as “inflectional”, claims that children might optionally lack some of the functional projections available in the adult grammar (see Rizzi 1993-94, Schütze and Wexler (1996), Schütze (1997), and Wexler (1998)). The second line of approaches, labeled here as “modality approaches”, claims that children has a deficit in the expression of modality. I will proceed to briefly review the first kind of approaches.

A common property shared by the “inflectional approaches” is that children know the whole set of functional categories available in the adult grammar but they might omit them because some areas of their grammar needs to undergo a process of maturation. Rizzi’s truncation hypothesis derive the optional infinitive stage by assuming that children’s grammar has not yet developed the principle in (3):

- (3) CP = root

The motivation for (3) is that language users always use full propositions to express their ideas. (3) Implies that the endpoint of the derivation of a proposition in the adult grammar is a CP. Rizzi suggests that the principle in (4) is not operative in early child grammar and children can optionally choose to use another points of the tree as endpoints for their syntactic derivation. The lack of optional infinitives in Italian and Spanish was accounted for by considering that infinitives in those languages need to check strong un-interpretable features against AGRs⁰, and, therefore a language particular property of these languages forces children to include all the functional projections available in the adult grammar.

Another representative of the “inflectional” approaches is Wexler (1998), whose work relies heavily in Schütze and Wexler (1996) and Schütze (1997). In this work, the optional infinitive stage was derived by assuming that the grammar of the child is constrained by the Unique Checking Constraint (UCC henceforth), which is stated below:

- (4) **The Unique Checking Constraint**

The D feature of a DP can only check against one functional category.

(Wexler: 98, p.53)

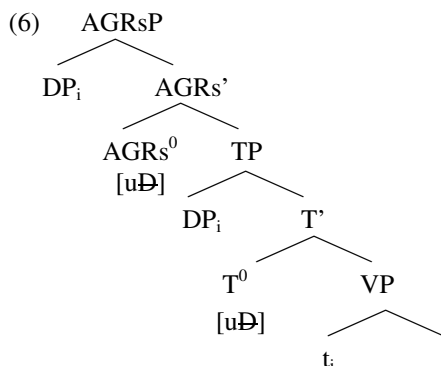
The effect of the UCC is that the child will be unable to check the un-interpretable D-feature of more than one functional category with the same DP. The second factor is that the D-feature of AGRs⁰ is parameterized as being un-interpretable or interpretable. This parameter can be stated in the following way:

- (5) **The AGRs⁰ D-feature parameter**

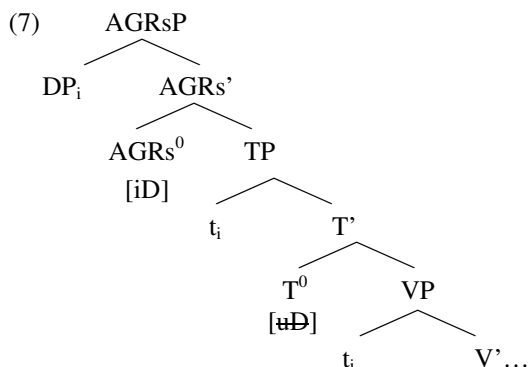
The D⁰ feature of AGRs⁰ is {interpretable, un-interpretable}

Only languages that have the parameter set in the un-interpretable way will have an optional infinitive stage. This is so because the child will have to check the un-interpretable D features of T⁰ and AGRs⁰ with the same DP subject in order for the derivation to converge. Given that the UCC is active, the

child may not be able to produce a clause with a fully specified set of functional projections. Therefore, one of the functional projections (either AGRsP or TP) will be omitted or un-specified in order to meet the UCC. This case is illustrated below:



The second language type is that one in which the D-feature is interpretable. The DP subject will be generated in Spec VP and it will only have to check the un-interpretable feature against T^0 in order for the derivation to converge. The tree is shown in (8):



Since the child will only have to check one un-interpretable feature in (6), the UCC will not be at stake and the child is predicted to use the correct verbal morphology as long as he knows the correct parameter setting for the D-feature in her target grammar.

Wexler considers the interpretability of the D-feature in $AGRs^0$ will license null-subjects. Thus, if a language has the D-feature set as interpretable, then that language will be an INFL null-subject licensing language. If the D-feature is set as uninterpretable, then that language will not be able to license null-subjects by the richness of INFL, deriving the NS/OI generalization.

The “modality approaches” are represented by the work of Hoekstra and Hyams (1998). Their main claim is that optional infinitives are a result of a deficiency in the expression of modality. This claim is based on the fact that matrix infinitives are restricted to contexts in which the infinitive has a volitional interpretation in many languages (see Hoekstra and Hyams 1998 and references therein). Examples are given below:

- (8)
- a. **Deontic context**
 Eerst kaartje kopen! (Dutch)
 First ticket buy
 ‘We must first buy a ticket’
- b. **Boulemic context**
 Niekje buiten spelen (Dutch)
 Nick (=speaker) to buy outside
 ‘Nick wants to play outside’

They claim that root infinitives are found in those languages where the infinitive has a non-realized feature that allows that morphological form to express modality. In more recent work, Salustri and Hyams (2005) considered that a stage in which root non-agreeing forms are bleeding modality is also found in null subject languages; albeit in those languages the root non-agreeing forms that the child has available are the imperatives and not the infinitives².

One prediction made by this account is that children will use the imperative in contexts where they want to express their own wishes without requesting the help of an adult. An illustration of this is given below, where the child is using an imperative in order to express her own wish to draw a picture:

- (9) Pinta un cuadro
 Draw-Imp a picture
 'I want to draw a picture'

The different predictions that these theories are making with respect to the root non-agreeing forms in Spanish are summarized in the table below:

(10)

	Modality Approach	Inflectional Approach
Morphological Shape	<i>Imperatives</i>	<i>Infinitives</i>
Contexts of appearance	<i>Modal</i>	<i>Modal and non-modal</i>

In the next section I will report the existence of a root infinitive stage in Spanish and I will attempt to determine the correctness of each of these theories with respect to the reported data. Additionally, I will evaluate the validity of the NS/OI generalization.

3. Experiment: methodology and results

In order to evaluate the existence of root non-agreeing forms in a pro-drop language such as Spanish, I made a longitudinal case study based on video taped sessions from a Spanish speaking child living in Madrid, Spain. The child, Inés, was recorded from 1; 08 to 2; 06 twice every month during sessions of forty minutes. The data was available at the University of Connecticut language acquisition laboratory. There were two reasons to choose this system for the study. The first one is that, contrary to an investigation through computerized files, the identification of specific contexts in which the root non-agreeing forms are used is straightforward when the visual context is available. The second reason is that Spanish is a Null-Subject language and in order to determine the grammatical competence of the child with respect to possible non-agreeing forms, it is necessary to know the reference of the null subject of the sentence. The video-taped sessions will make the contexts of the utterances transparent for the identification of the correctness of these null-subjects. This is necessary especially when, as noted above, (Grinstead: 1995 and Radford, Ploennig and Rodríguez-Pacheco: 1995) have questioned the grammatical competence of the child speaking Spanish. In the study, sentences which were unclear and that were instances of imitations were not considered.

In the first experiment, it was determined the level of grammatical competence of Inés with respect to subject verb agreement. Table (1) offers the number of non-agreeing finite forms that were included in the analysis. We see that, except for 36 forms from a total of 767 finite verbs, Inés uses all of them correctly. Non-agreeing forms are those in which there is no agreement between the subject and the finite verb, being it a finite form or a root infinitive.

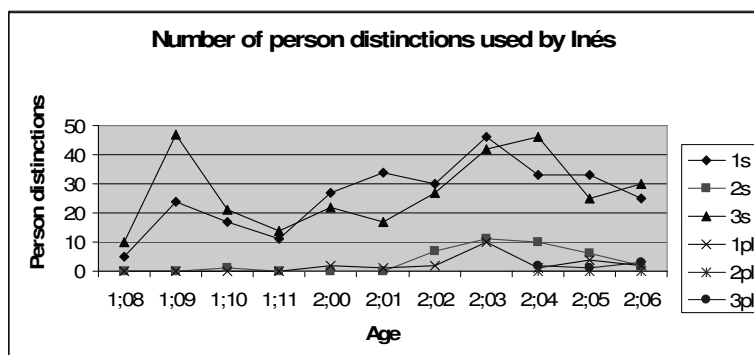
² Salustri and Hyams claim that this morphological property follows from economy considerations. They claim that an infinitive can check the irrealis feature of C⁰ without movement, while the imperative will need to undergo overt movement. Given that, economy considerations will prefer the use of the infinitive over the imperative. However, in null-subject languages, the infinitive will have to check a strong feature in AGRs⁰ that will disallow the infinitive in root contexts.

Table 1. Number and percentages of non-agreeing forms vs. correct agreement forms for Inés (1; 8-2; 06).

	Correct forms	Non-agreeing forms	Total
Total number of verbs	731	36	767
Percentages	95.1%	4.9%	100

At age 1; 08, Inés has a perfect command of the agreement morphology and, although she does not have all of the verbal agreement forms available from the beginning, she uses them almost always right. In figure (2) it is shown we can see the development of the agreement forms for Inés. The forms for the first and third person that are available until age 2; 00 are, mostly, of the first and the third person singular. By age 2; 02 the rest of the forms of the paradigm are available.

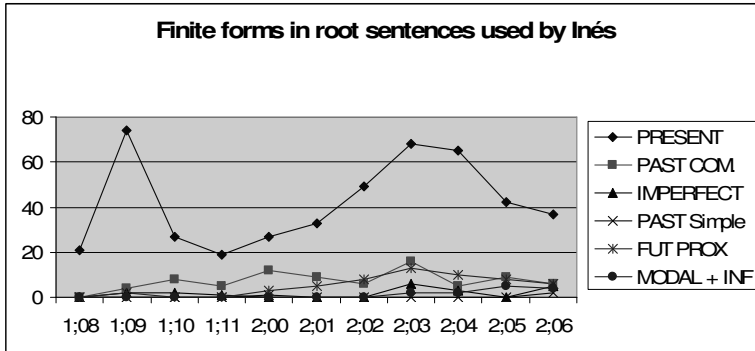
Figure 1: person distinctions used by Inés during the study.



Further, as shown in figure 2 Inés uses a variety of finite forms in Spanish. Forms of the present tense begin to arise from very early, by 1; 08, and uses of the perfective past in Spanish (formed by the verb *haber* (=to have) + past participle) arise by 1; 09. Inés is also able to express future meanings with the Spanish equivalent of the *going to + infinitive* construction (*ir a + infinitive*) by 2; 00. Examples of these forms are provided below, and figure 3 shows the beginning of each of these forms from 1; 08 to 2; 06:

- (11) a. no puedo, mami
No can-pres.1sg mother
I can't mother
- b. este no tiene
this no have-pres.3sg
this doesn't have it (1; 08)
- (12) a. ese es verde
This is green
- b. aqui estaba
here was-impf-3sg
it was here
- c. ha caido
have-pres.3sg fallen
- d. voy a beber agua
go-pres.1sg to drink-inf water
I am going to drink water (1; 09)

Figure 2: Number of finite forms in root contexts used by Inés (1;08-2;06)



This data provides evidence that Inés does have the grammatical competence to distinguish the morphological properties of the Spanish verbal system quite reliably by the age of 2;00. However, Inés produced a small number of non-finite forms whose morphological and semantic properties were investigated. In doing so, special attention was paid to the position of the stress in the root verb. The reason was that Inés, like many other children of her age, has troubles in pronouncing the phoneme /r/ at the end of the syllable. Given this fact, the only way to distinguish the infinitive from the imperative and the 3rd person singular present is by the position of the stress in the verb. The following paradigm illustrates the situation:

Table 2. Spanish paradigm of infinitives, imperatives and 3rd person singular present.

	Infinitive	Imperative	3 rd person singular present
1 st Conjugation	/ablár/ (=to speak)	/ábla/ (= speak!)	/ábla/ (= he speaks)
2 nd Conjugation	/komér/ (=to eat)	/kóme/ (= eat!)	/kóme/ (=he eats)
3 rd Conjugation	/abrir/ (=to open)	/ábre/ (= open!)	/ábre/ (=he opens)

The results were as follows. Of the 37 non-agreeing forms a very small number of them were mistakes of agreement. An exhaustive list of these forms is given below:

- (13) a. cae
 fall-3sg pres
 'I fall'
 [Inés is falling down] (Inés 1;8).
- b. El reloj yo pone
 The watch I put-3sg
 'I'll put the watch on' (Inés 1;9)
- c. ha caído
 have-3rd Sg fallen
 'She has fallen'
 [Inés falls down] (1;10)
- d. No se va los juguetes
 Neg Refl go-3sg the toys
 The toys doesn't go (1;11)
- e. ha comido todos los caramelos.
 Has-3sg eaten all the candys
 'She has eaten all the candies'
 [Inés has eaten all the candies] (2;00)

We see that most of these forms are mistakes in which the child uses the third person singular forms when she should be using the first person singular forms.

The other thirty two forms are more interesting. They were all cases of root infinitives. Those cases were interesting since there was a contingency relationship between volitional modality and the root infinitives (see table 3). Volitional modality was taken to be those actions which the child wanted to carry out but they were either not terminated or were part of the child desires. Examples of these types of uses are provided below:

- (14) a. zapatos quitar
shoes to take off
'I want to take off my shoes'
[Inés wants to take off her shoes] (Inés 1;8)
- b. la pegatina quitar
the sticker take off
'I want to take the sticker off'
[Inés wants to take a sticker off] (Inés 1;9)
- c. pintar
to draw
'I want to draw'
[Inés want to do some drawing. She has the pen in her hand and she is looking for a piece of paper] (Inés 1;10)

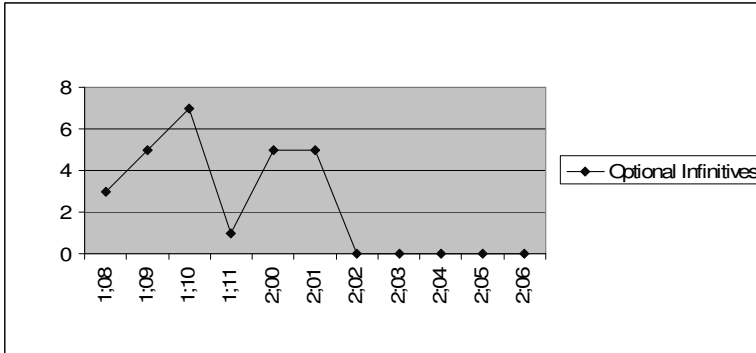
Table 3. Contingency table between RI and volitional modality for Inés (1;08-2;01)

	Infinitives	Finite verbs
Volitional contexts	26	3
Non-volitional contexts	6	251

The strong contingency between modality and root infinitive suggest that the child has a deficit in the expression of volitional modality. These results support a view according to which root infinitives are used to express volitional modality and it also shows that there is some evidence for a root infinitive stage in a Null-Subject language.

Before talking about the implications of these results, I would like to point out a possible caveat. One might argue that the number of root infinitives is so small that they can be taken to be marginal forms that do not tell us anything about the grammatical competence of the child. However, the very fact that there is such a strong correlation between modality and the root infinitives suggests that these forms are the only ones available for the child to express volitional modality. Further, since these root infinitives disappear from the performance of the child (see figure 2) when she is older than two years and one month also argues for the fact that these forms disappear once the child has acquired a specific grammatical property. In addition to that figure 1. shows that the child has very good competence of the adult morphological forms, but nevertheless, the root infinitive appear whenever the child wants to express volitional modality. These three facts are typical of a root infinitive stage.

Figure 3. Number of optional infinitives for Inés as a function of age



Let us now move on to the specific predictions made by the two approaches under consideration.

The root infinitives do not receive a past interpretation. Under the inflectional approach, the child is subject to the UCC which prevents him to check more than one un-interpretable D-feature with the same DP. Given the UCC, the child will have to either eliminate AGRsP or TP from the derivation in order to converge. In those cases in which TP is eliminated from the derivation, the child could eliminate either those T^0 with present or past or modal features under their terminal nodes. Since there are no cases in the above data that shows that the child is using the root infinitives to express past actions, it suggests that the “inflectional approach” is incorrect. Under Rizzi’s truncation hypothesis, the child is expected to produce omit the functional layers TP or AGRsP irrespectively of the modality of the sentence.

Note that Inés does have the ability to refer to the past at the root infinitive stage. The following table summarizes the results of the type of interpretations that Inés show during this period.

Table 4. Interpretation of Inés finite forms during her root infinitive stage (AL=Adult like, NAL = non adult like).

	AL interpretation	NAL interpretation	Total
Present	200	1	201
Near Future	8	0	8
Past perfect	38	0	38
Past Imperfect	5	0	5
Past simple	1	0	1

Another important negative result from this research is that there are no cases of imperatives used in a non-adult way. Recall that according S&H the imperatives are used in pro-drop languages as an analogue of the infinitive in overt subject languages. If this is the case, then one should expect to find cases of imperatives used when the child is talking about her own wishes. I did not find any such cases in the data that I examined. Thus, the results do not support the IAH results either.

Before moving on to the next section, a word of caution with respect to the examination of non adult imperatives is in order. Imperatives are verbal forms that express commands of the speaker to another person. Since the command itself is expressing the speaker’s will of something to happen, sometimes it is not easy to tease apart both interpretations. I will try to spell out what I mean with a specific example. In a sentence like (16):

- (15) haz un cuadro
Paint-Imp a square

According to S&H, this sentence uttered by the child can mean that the child wants to do the action of the painting by herself or that she wants another participant of the conversation to do it for her or to help her in doing the action. Thus, we need to pay attention to the context in which the imperative is uttered in order to know whether it is used in an adult or non-adult way. During the research, my criteria was to consider imperatives used in a non-adult way those in which the child clearly wants to make the action by herself without requesting the help of an adult.

This result has consequences for the two theories of optional infinitives considered. For the “inflectional approach” there is a bidirectional correlation between the Null-Subject parameter and the optional infinitive stage, expressed in terms of the interpretability or un-interpretability of the D-feature of AGRs⁰. Thus Wexler predicts that in null-subject languages, the child should have a perfect morphology, while in non-null subject languages there will be an optional infinitive stage until the UCC is inactive. The results clearly go against this prediction. For the “modality approach”, there is a correlation between a language being a null subject one and the morphological form that the child will use to express modality. Thus if a language is Null-subject, then the child will use an imperative, while if it is non-Null-subject, the child will use an infinitive. It is obvious that this is not true for Inés since she is using the infinitives for expressing modality.

4. The Null Subject/Optional Infinitive generalization

In the last section I have shown that there are reasons to believe that Inés is in a root infinitive stage. This fact in itself challenges the NS/OI generalization of (1), but it does not show that it is not true. In this section, I will test the validity of the NS/OI generalization. I will do that by positing the following research hypothesis:

- (16) H₁: The child produces root infinitives until she is two years and two months because she is speaking a non-null-subject language.

Given that the child will have to learn whether her language has the positive or the negative value for the Null-subject parameter, hypothesis (17) is a logical possibility. Note also that (17) is what the NS/OI leads us to expect. Interestingly, hypothesis (17) makes a testable acquisitional prediction, namely that the child will not be able to license post-verbal subjects until she is out of the optional infinitive stage³. In the next section, I give the necessary syntactic background to understand this prediction.

4.1. The Null-Subject/Post-verbal Subject correlation

One of the generalizations of the current syntactic literature is that there is a correlation between a language being Null-Subject and the availability of post-verbal subjects. Thus in languages which allow dropping the subject by the richness of inflection, it is possible to have a definite post-verbal subject licensed in all types of finite clauses. Thus, Catalan, Greek, Italian, Spanish which allow dropping the subject can license post-verbal definite subjects with any type of verb and in any type of finite clause. On the contrary, English, German, Icelandic do not allow definite post-verbal subjects show a definiteness restriction in the licensing of post-verbal subject and they are further limited to more restricted environments (see Alexiadou and Anagnostopoulou (1998) for a review of relevant literature):

- (17) compró un libro Juan
Bought a book Juan
'Juan bought a book'
- (18) Llegó tarde a casa Juan
Arrived early to his house Juan
'Juan arrived early to his house'

³ The experiment developed in this section was suggested to me by William Snyder.

- (19) Corre todos los días Juan
Run everyday Juan
'Juan runs everyday'

This contrasts with English, where post-verbal subjects cannot be definite and they are only allowed with un-accusative verbs, as the following examples show:

- (20) **Definiteness restriction**
a. *There arrived every girl to the beach
b. There arrived a girl to the beach
- (21) **Unaccusative Restriction**
a. *There bought a man books in the library
b. *There run a man everyday
c. There is a man in the garden

The specific way on how to account for this correlation is the subject of much syntactic debate (see Rizzi (1982), Alexiadou and Anagnostopoulou (1998)). For our purposes what is important is the assumption, descriptively correct, that in order for a language to license a post-verbal subject then that language must be able to license null-subjects. From an acquisitional perspective this correlation implies that in order for the child to license the post-verbal subject construction in Spanish, she must first know whether or not her target grammar allows Null-subjects. The prediction that the NS/OI makes should be clear now. The child will be able to license a post-verbal subject once she is out of the optional infinitive stage and, conversely, the child will not be able to license a post-verbal subject when she is in the optional infinitive stage.

4.2. *Experiment and results*

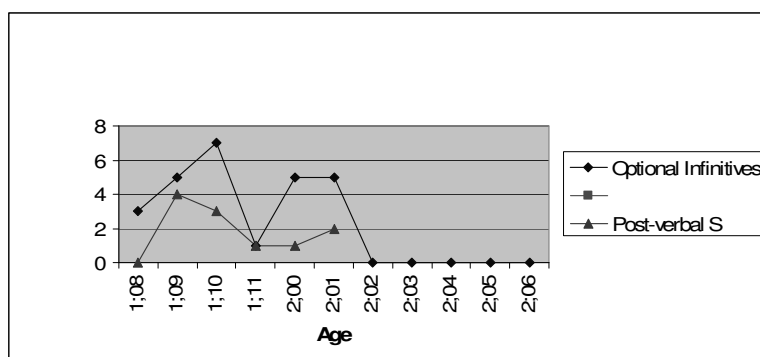
In order to test this prediction, I examined the recordings of Inés looking for the first grammatical and clear utterance of a sentence with a post-verbal subject followed by more utterances of the same construction during a short period of time. The reason to look for more samples of the same construction is that the child could be uttering a post-verbal subject just by chance and not because she already has the parametric option that allows her to make such a construction.

According to these criteria, Inés is using post-verbal subjects when she is already one year and nine months (see (18)). Her first utterance with a post-verbal subject is with the unergative verb "correr". When Inés is one year and ten months, she uttered three more sentences with the locative verb "estar" and one utterance with the unaccusative verb "bañarse". When she is two years and one month she utters a post-verbal subject with the transitive verb "comer". Thus she is able to use the post-verbal subject construction with a variety of verbs of different argument structures.

- (22) Corro yo
run I
'I run' (Age: 1;9)
- (23) a. Aquí está el cuchillo
Here is the knife
'The knife is here'
b. Aquí está el plato
Here is the plate
'The plate is here'
c. Me baño yo
have a bath I
'I have a bath' (Age: 1;10)

- (24) No está la punta
Neg-is the top
'The top is not here' (Age: 1;11)
- (25) Se ha caído el caramelo
reflexive has dropped the candy
'The candy has dropped' (Age: 2;00)
- (26) a. Come el niño esto
Eats the child this
'The child eats this'
b. Se ha caído el mío
reflexive has dropped the mine
'Mine has dropped' (Age: 2;1)

Figure 4. Number of Post-verbal subjects and optional infinitives for Inés.



The conclusion that we can draw from this data is that Inés has acquired the post-verbal construction by the age of 1 year and 9 months. Crucially, Inés is using the post-verbal construction while she is still using the root infinitives in modal contexts. Given that in order to get the post-verbal construction, she needs to have the Null-Subject parameter set in the positive way, I take these results to mean that Inés is already in a Null subject stage while she is producing the optional infinitives.

5. Conclusions

The results of the experiment show that there is a strong contingency relationship between Inés' root infinitives and modality suggests that the child has a deficit in the expression of volitional modality. There are also reasons to believe that Inés is in an optional infinitive stage given that she has mastered the morphology of Spanish. The results also challenged the correlation between the Null-Subject parameter and the optional infinitive generalization, given that the child in the optional infinitive stage is able to license post-verbal subjects, a property that is dependent of a language being Null-Subject. The implications are that the Null-Subject parameter and the optional infinitive are independent from each other and that the modality approach can account for the Spanish data in a more straightforward way. A general methodological point is that a more careful study of the contexts where optional infinitives occur should be carried out in order to clearly determine their contexts of usage.

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