

A Child's Early Use of the Imperative to Express Agentivity in Spanish

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1. Introduction

Most early syntactic verb studies, including those of developing Spanish, have not utilized child language data prior to the two-word stage (Gili Gaya, 1972; González, 1980; Hernández-Piña, 1984; Pierce, 1992). Reasons for this vary, in some cases perhaps having to do with the inadequacy of the databases utilized, but even more importantly, the little syntactic importance often attributed to the data characteristic of this early time period since the consensus about Merge is that it requires more than one constituent to take place, and the one-word stage would be therefore irrelevant. However, as will be seen ahead, an argument is made for other important early trends which are discernible at the one-word stage such as verb type and morphological form which may in fact help shed additional light on the genesis and development of argument structure.

The purpose of this study is to track the early emergence and progressive use of various verb-argument configurations in the developing language of a healthy monolingual child learning Spanish over a period of approximately thirteen months, specifically, between the ages of 0;11 months and 1;11;30 years. This age-range begins well before what the research suggests is the approximate time of a child's first words (typically around the age of 1;0 or so), continuing through the two-word stage (typically between the ages of 1;6 and 2;0 or so). To do this, specific attention was paid to three areas of emergence: 1) argument-specific verb types, such as unaccusatives, unergatives, transitives, and others, as they were produced by the child of this study; 2) various morphological forms of the verb used by the child, particularly tensed and non-tensed forms such as imperatives and hortative infinitive expressions; and 3) the position of overt arguments that were produced by the child.

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- a) What do the first language data of this study reveal about the emergence of the following argument-specific verb types with regard to argument structure: 1) single-argument configurations with T(heme), including unaccusatives, and ergatives in their anticausative form; 2) single-argument configurations with either E(xperiencer) or A(gent) as the only argument; and 3) transitives with either E or A? Taken together, what might the emergence of these constructions imply for a particular path of acquisition for the internal structure of the VP, namely the vP shell, or argument structure?
- b) To what extent does the morphological form of the verb in the early child language data correlate with verb and argument type produced and how might this change over time? What might these correlations suggest about the early role of verbal morphology in the developing structure of the verb phrase?
- c) What indicators, if any, exist in the data that the early placement of overt arguments correlates with the acquisition of argument structure and/or the split projection of the VP?

2. Methodology

The database chosen for this study is the "Irene" corpus (Ojea, 1997) from CHILDES (Child Language Data Exchange System) (MacWhinney, 2000), the most comprehensive of four longitudinal, Peninsular Spanish language corpora available at the time of this study.

An inventory of verb-argument configurations studied here include: 1) single argument (intransitive) configurations, such as: a) Theme-only configurations (**T**) such as anticausative

structures of ergative predicates (e.g., ‘fall’ (*caer*), ‘open’ (*abrir*), etc.) as well as unaccusatives (e.g., ‘go’ (*ir*), ‘come’ (*venir*), etc.); b) Agent-only configurations (A) such as ergatives as ‘sleep’ (*dormir*), etc.), ergative structures with an overt Agent argument only (e.g., *mamá, abre* ‘mommy, open’); and transitive verbs with an overt Agent argument only (e.g., *mamá, toma* ‘mommy, take’); and c) Experiencer-only configurations (E) including sentient verbs (e.g., *A ver* ‘Let’s see’) and psychological verbs (e.g., *pensar, entender* ‘think, understand,’ etc.); and 2) dual argument (transitive) configurations, such as: a) Agent-plus-Theme configurations (A+T) including standard agentive transitives (e.g., ‘make’ (*hacer*), etc.), agentive transitives from ergatives (e.g., ‘take’ (*coger*), etc., and causatives (e.g., ‘sleep’ (*dormir* in ‘dormir al niño’); and b) Experiencer-plus Theme configurations (E+ T)—verbs that appear with both experiencer and theme arguments. These include sentient verbs (e.g., *Vamos a ver el video* ‘Let’s see the video’) and psychological verbs (e.g., think (*pensar*), etc.).

3. Data

The following three sections present the data of this study.

3.1. Emergence of argument-specific verb type

The first item for analysis was the order in which different argument-specific verb types, both transitive and intransitive as enumerated in the previous section, emerged over the time period studied. Figure 1 illustrates the general distribution of argument-specific verb types throughout the time period studied.

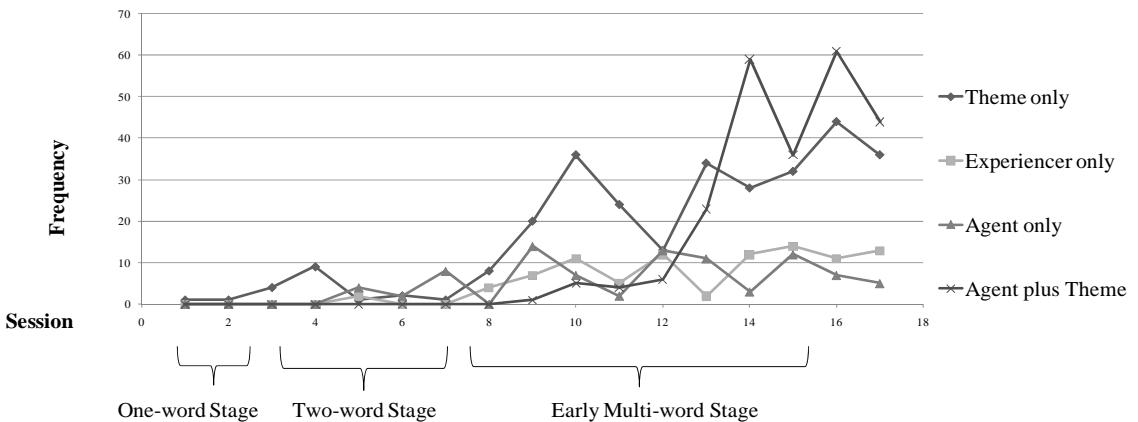


Figure 1. General Emergence and Distribution of Argument-specific Verb Types Across All Three Periods: (0;11;01 through 1;11;30)

Figure 1’s overall snapshot shows that initially, intransitives, or single-argument verb types, were the first produced by the child in these data. Of these single-argument types, Theme verbs (such as unaccusatives and anticausatives) were the very first to appear in the corpus. Soon after, however, Theme-only verbs became outnumbered by another kind of intransitive verb, Agent-only verbs. In both cases, single argument verbs were the norm. Table 1 takes a closer look at the first seven months of Irene’s transcripts, corresponding to both one-word and two-word stages.

Table 1.
Emergence of Verb Types (One- and Two-word Stages)

	Verb	Gloss	First appearance	Verb type
One-word stage	<i>ir</i>	'go'	1;1.28	Unaccusative
	<i>venir</i>	'come'	1;4.16	Unaccusative
Two-word stage	<i>acabar</i>	'end'	1;5.01	Anticausative
	<i>caer</i>	'fall'	1;5.01	
	<i>abrir</i> ¹	'open'	1;5.01	Agent (only)
	<i>mirar</i>	'look'	1;5.01	
	<i>oir</i>	'listen/hear'	1;5.01	
	<i>quitar</i> ¹	'take away'	1;6.01	

According to Table 1, during the one-word period and into the onset of the two-word period, Irene's first verbs appear at 1;1;28 and are strictly unaccusative. Her first two verb constructions were single-word, tensed versions of the unaccusative verb *ir*, 'to go.' At 1;1;28, Irene produced *va, va, va* (as a repetition, and therefore counted only once) which corresponds to the conventional third person singular present tense form of the verb *ir*. The second occasion, only seven days later on 1;2;05, Irene produced the form *vo*, a past tense innovation. At 1;5;01, the onset of the two-word stage, is when Irene begins to significantly expand her verb-argument structure production ability. I refer to this milestone as Irene's **initial verb spurt** where she expands to anticausative forms of ergative verbs such as *abó* (*acabó* = adult form) 'it finished' or *ayó* (*cayó* = adult form) 'It fell.' At this time, Irene also started to use verbs with only Agents such as *abe* (*abre* = adult form) 'Open!' and *!Mía!* (*!Mira!* = adult form) 'Look!' Important to note at this stage is Irene's earliest use of anticausatives exclusively in 3rd person singular past tensed form and verbs with Agent subjects exclusively in the imperative, both patterns that will take on more importance as Irene's verb system continues to develop and will be discussed separately in the following section. During this period, Irene's verb repertoire does not exceed eight verbs in all and only in single-word utterances. Table 2 shows Irene's verb production at 1;6;16, the end of her two-word period, in which verbs begin to appear in two-word utterances.

Table 2.
Irene's Verb Use Toward the End of Her Two-word Stage (1;6;16)

Type	Child's Form	Gloss
Unaccusative (Theme)	<i>Va villio.</i>	Go (3rd. Pers. Sing. Present) video.
	<i>Vayó toto.</i>	Went (3rd Pers. Sing Past) silly (Nom. Masc. Sing.).
	<i>Vayó tota.</i>	Went (3rd Pers. Sing Past) silly (Nom. Fem. Sing.).
	<i>Vayó.</i>	Went (3rd Pers. Sing Past).
	<i>!Ve toto!</i>	Come (Imp. Sing.) silly (Nom. Sing.)!
	<i>!Ve toto!</i>	Come (Imp. Sing.) silly (Nom. Sing.)!
Anticausative (Theme)	<i>Ababó</i>	Finished (3rd Pers. Sing. Past).
	<i>Ababó eito.</i>	Finished (3rd Pers. Sing. Past) this (Dem. Pron. Sing. Neuter).
	<i>Ababó.</i>	Finished (3rd Pers. Sing. Past).
	<i>Ababó villio.</i>	Finished (3rd Pers. Sing. Past) video (Nom. Masc. Sing.).
Agent-only	<i>!Mia!</i> (n = 17)	Look (Imp.Sing.)!
	<i>!Oye!</i>	Listen (Imp. Sing.)!

Third period: Early multi-word stage (1;7;05 through 1;11;30)

Based on the data, the approximate five-month period spanning 1;7;05 through 1;11;30 corresponds to Irene's early multi-word stage. This period represents the most productive of all three acquisition stages of this study. In terms of emergence of new verb-argument types, it is during this period that transitive verbs made their first appearance with their object arguments, and, their frequency, as well as type-token ratio, will rapidly increase. Likewise, for the first time in Irene's language, clitics in both pre- and post-verbal positions began to appear and steadily increase over time. Finally, toward the end of this initial multi-word period, a second verb "spurt" took place whereby Irene's type-token ratio of verbs, especially for transitive verbs, also significantly increased.

At around 1;7;22, Irene begins to use verbs transitively and this use will increase steadily over time with additional developments such as another verbal spurt at around 1;9;28. After this time Irene's usage of transitive verbs jumps dramatically, and continues to do so. Production of Experiencer-only verbs continues at about the same pace throughout the entire multiword period while those with Agent subjects decline. Both unaccusative and anticausative structures appear to stabilize by the end of this early multi-word period.

3.2. Emergence of morphological form of the verb

The occurrence of certain verb morphology, particularly root infinitives (Hoekstra & Hyams, 1998) or the imperative in Romance languages (Salustri & Hyams, 2006), have been suggested to play an important role in early grammars. In discussions of the data thus far, no observations have been made regarding the morphological form that verb-argument types take as they emerge in the data. This section presents the data of this study according to the emergence of morphological form of the verb, namely, whether it appears in tensed, imperative, or infinitival form.

As demonstrated in the previous section, Irene's only verb constructions during her one-word stage were single-word versions of the unaccusative verb *ir*, 'to go.' In all cases these were tensed. Although sparse (only one occurrence per session on two occasions), the first occasion was at 1;1;28, when Irene produced *va*, *va*, *va* (as a repetition, counted only once) which corresponds to the conventional third person singular present tense form of the verb *ir*. The second occasion, only seven days later on 1;2;05, Irene produced the form *vo*, a past tense innovation that applies the standard 3rd

person singular past tense morphology¹, *-ó*, to the regular present tense form *va* that was produced in the previous transcript. The initial use of the tensed verb form is important because as Figures 2 through 5 will suggest, even at these earliest points in Irene’s verbal development, morphological form is quickly becoming associated with verb type. Figures 2 and 3 show an overwhelming preference for tensed forms by Theme-oriented verb types such as unaccusatives and anticausatives.

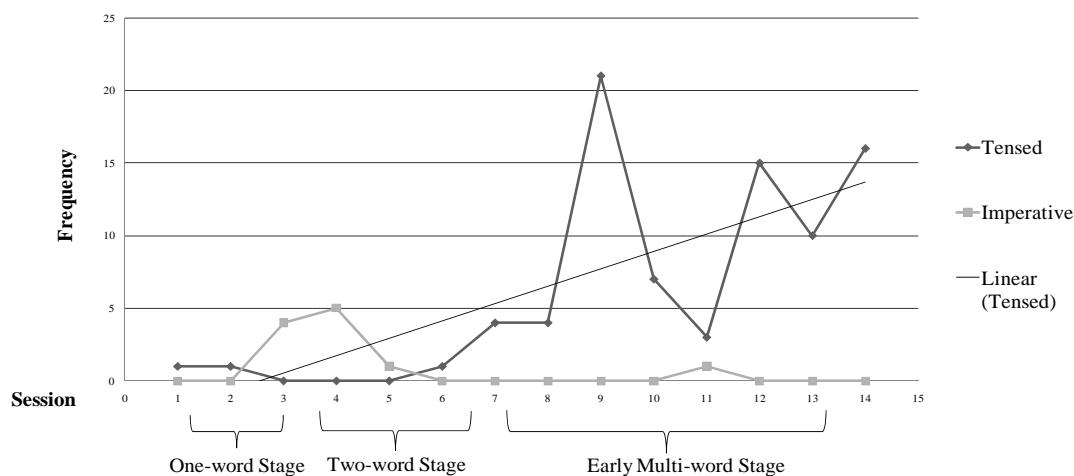


Figure 2. Distribution of the Morphological Form of Unaccusatives (1;1;28 through 1;11;30)

From 1;4;16 to 1;6;01, Irene’s verb production starts to expand significantly to include verbs other than *ir*, in fact she stops using *ir* in favor of another unaccusative verb *venir* ‘to come’ exclusively in the imperative, which is also the first time she ever uses this mood.²

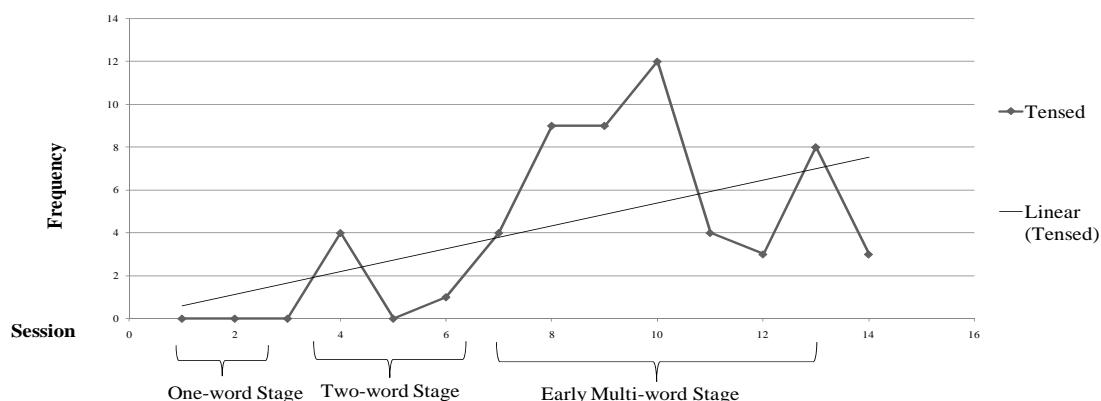


Figure 3. Distribution of the Morphological Form of Anticausatives (1;1;28 through 1;11;30)

¹ Although “*vo*” does not correspond to any adult verb form, evidence that it should be considered a regularized past-tensed equivalent of “*va*” was corroborated by Irene’s mother’s immediate interpretation of “*vo*” in the utterance immediately following as the semantically similar “*marchó*” or ‘it went away.’

² Irene’s initial use of the imperative *!Ven!* or *!Vin!* ‘Come!’ with an accusative verb most likely occurs as a routine response to her mother’s prompts, especially in cases like the following adjacency pair: MOT: *dile “Pedrín ven!”* ‘Tell him, “Pedrin, come!’ to which the child responds, CHI: *Pedrín, !vin!* ‘Pedrin, come!’ Here, Irene’s mother utters the adult phrase that she’d like Irene to imitate word-for-word.

As Figure 3 illustrates, shortly thereafter, by 1;5;01, Irene expands her verbal repertoire further to include verbs that are associated with constructions other than the unaccusative, namely, past-tensed anticausative forms of ergative verbs such as *abó* (*acabó* = adult form) ‘it finished’ or *ayó* (*cayó* = adult form) ‘It fell.’ This tensed pattern continues for Theme-only verbs throughout the remainder of the period studied.

Unlike unaccusative and anticausative ergative constructions, which as seen in the preceding section almost always manifest themselves in the 3rd person singular past tense form, Agent-only verbs and to some extent, (as we shall see further ahead) dual argument verbs (transitives) with Agent subjects during this period, have the tendency to appear in the imperative (or at times in a nonfinite form, such as the infinitival hortative form-- e.g., *a dormir* ‘Time for bed’ (literally, ‘To sleep!’) or the gerundive form—e.g., *bailando* ‘dancing.’ Most importantly, these constructions almost never appear in a tensed form, at least initially, and when they do they only occur with certain verbs such as *volar*, ‘to fly’ or *llorar* ‘to cry.’ In fact, if we were to disregard these two “special” cases we would see a radically slow, yet still-upward, trend in the use of the tensed form. Figure 4 shows the morphology of Agent-only predicates in the data.

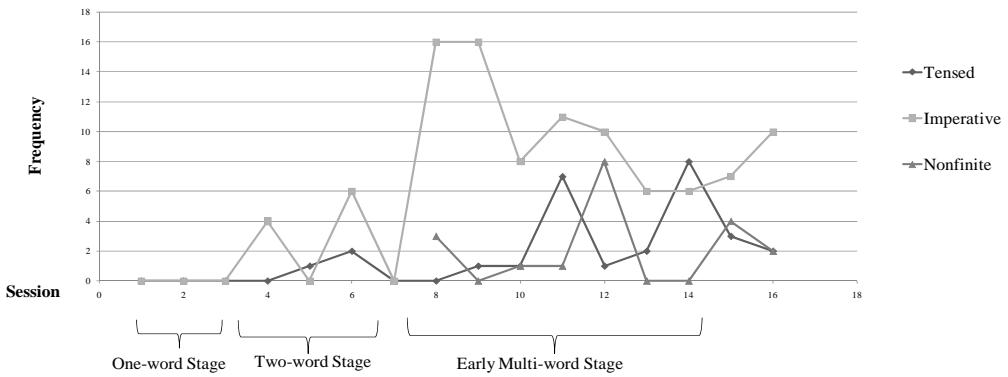


Figure 4. Distribution of the Morphological Form of Agent-only Predicates (1;1;28 through 1;11;30)

At about the same time Irene started to use anticausative forms in the past tense, she also began to use Agent-only (unergative) verbs such as *abe* (*abre* = adult form) ‘Open!’ and *!Mía!* (*!Mira!* = adult form) ‘Look!’ One striking observation despite the overall downward trend over time of imperative use for Agent-only verbs, it is still preferred over both tensed and nonfinite forms for this verb type. As Figure 5 will show, a somewhat different pattern was found for Irene’s use of the imperative with Dual-argument predicates.

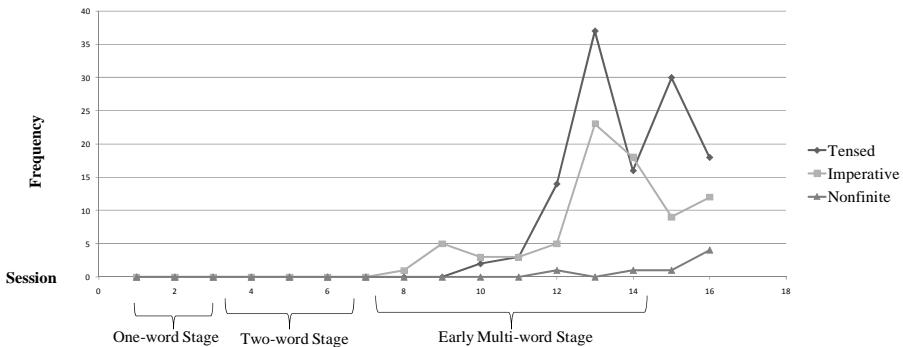


Figure 5. Distribution of the Morphological Form of Dual Argument Verbs (1;7;05 through 1;11;30)

Figure 5 suggests that transitive use of agentive verbs such as *mirar* shows up relatively late (at 1;8;09) and it starts out inconsistently at that, disappearing at 1;8;16, and then showing back up at 1;9;10. However, important to note here is the almost exclusive use during this period of the imperative of the verb *mirar*. The figure also suggests that by 1;9;10, transitive verbs with Agent subjects begin to show up increasingly as tensed forms as opposed to the imperative, although imperative use continues to rise but at a lesser rate than tensed forms do. At this point forward, the preferred morphological form of transitive verbs with Agent subjects will be tensed forms.

This section has found some striking overall patterns as to the unfolding of verb morphology in the Irene corpus. Namely, toward the end of the one-word stage and the beginning of the two-word stage, unaccusative and anticausative verb types, which are the first to emerge, do so as tensed forms, and almost exclusively in the 3rd person, singular preterit form of the verb. Shortly thereafter, however, Agent-only verbs with began to appear, but almost always in the 3rd person singular form of the imperative mood. Experiencer-only verbs also appear and primarily in nonfinite form until the end of the early multi-word period when psychological verbs that are used unergatively favor tensed forms. The multi-word stage is the period when transitive verbs with Agent subjects begin to appear, albeit slowly, and like unergative counterparts, do so, almost always in the imperative mood. Transitive verbs with Experiencers, like their unergative counterparts at first prefer nonfinite form but by the end of the multi-word period begin to take on tensed forms.

3.3. Emergence of overt argument placement

Having reviewed the data in terms of verb-argument type and morphology, this section looks at Irene's overt argument placement. As the structure of the vP shell has been proposed to correlate with both transitivity and agentivity of the verb type, it is maintained that, in addition to the patterns shown to occur in verb type and morphology, any significant trends found to occur in the data in terms of argument placement might also suggest the emergence of vP structure. This study looks at both overall subject placement as well as intransitive single argument placement.

Figure 6 illustrates the general distribution of subject placement of full nominals throughout all three time periods studied.

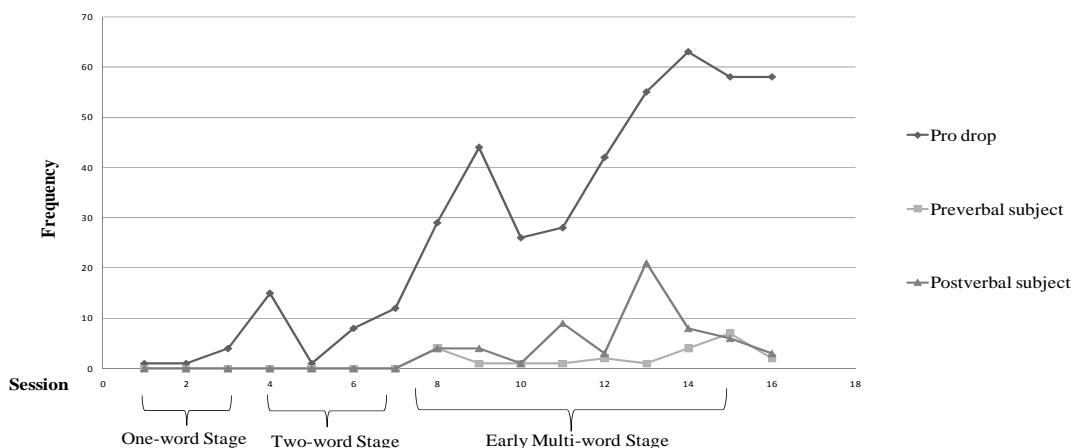


Figure 6. Overt Subject Placement (0;11;01 through 1;11;30)

Irene's preferred subject placement strategy throughout the period studied is that of pro-drop. In fact, according to Figure 6, pro-drop is the only mechanism used by this child until Session 8 (1;7;05) which is when overt placement of subjects begins to appear in the data, at first by post-verbal overt placement, and then pre-verbal overt placement. Also, It appears that overall post-verbal placement of subjects, at least initially, is preferred until Session 15 (1;11;13), when pre-verbal overt subjects finally appear to catch up with those that come after the verb.

Intransitive verbs being the first to appear in the data, it is appropriate to see how these single-argument structures position their overt arguments over time. Figure 7 shows the emergent trend.

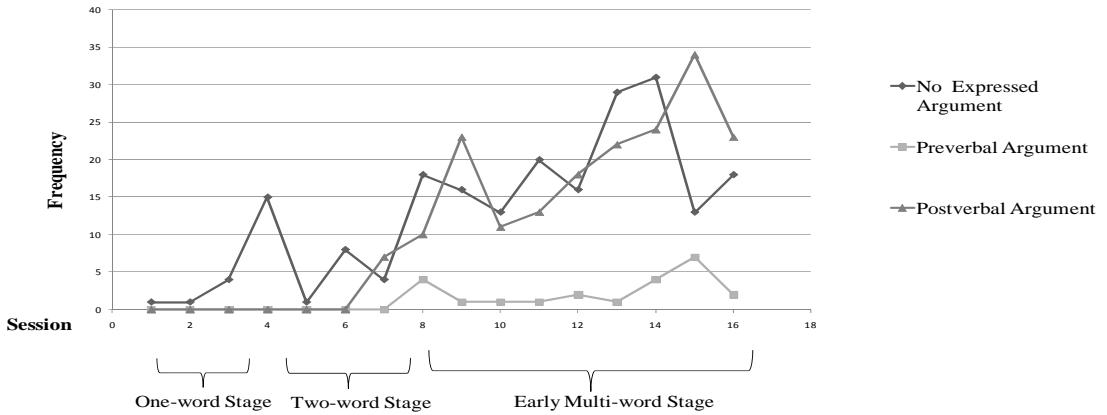


Figure 7. Overt Argument Placement of Intransitives (0;11:01 through 1;11:30)

As already seen, 1;6:16 marked the beginning of the period when Irene used both unaccusative and anticausative verbs for the first time in two-word utterances, i.e., with overt nominal arguments. In fact, Irene's first two-word verbal structures with arguments appear very specifically in the following order: verb first followed by argument (in these cases, Theme), always in second position. Agent only verbs were found to continue to always stand alone at this time. The important implication of this observation is that the earliest overt arguments to appear in the data at this time are exclusively Theme arguments, and not Agent arguments, despite the fact that unergatives with covert Agent subjects are also part of the data.

As Figure 7 demonstrates, intransitive verbs, which include both Theme-oriented and Agent-oriented arguments continue to prefer post verbal placement over pre-verbal position beyond the one and two word stages and well throughout the entire early multi-word period. The preference for post-verbal overt placement of Theme arguments with unaccusatives and anticausative verbs is not surprising since this is the canonical locus for Themes, however, the fact that unergative overt Agents are also preferred in post-verbal position at the beginning of this early multi-word stage is an interesting and unexpected observation of these data since the canonical locus of overt Agent arguments is pre-verbal, and not post-verbal as appears for overt unergative verbs with Agents in these data.

As seen in the previous sections, Irene first produces only unaccusative, and therefore, Theme-oriented, verbs but with no overt arguments. Shortly thereafter, at around 1;4:16 through 1;5:01, Irene experiences a verbal growth spurt which enables her to increase her use of unaccusative verbs and to place the Theme argument primarily postverbally. At this time she expands her usage to other configurations such as Agent-only verbs but without any overt arguments. At around 1;7:22, Irene begins to use verbs transitively, at first with no overt arguments and then, again, postverbal placement of subject arguments. This use will increase steadily over time with additional developments such as another verbal spurt at around 1;9:28. After this time Irene's usage of transitive verbs jumps dramatically.

The important overall emergent pattern observed in the data for all verb types is: 1) no overt argument; 2) postverbal placement of single arguments; and 3) in the case of dual argument constructions, a preferred postverbal placement of subject arguments. What this may suggest is the initial absence of the specifier position within the child's phrase structure. More will be said about this in the Conclusions.

4. Conclusions

The one-word stage is often overlooked by early verb child language researchers since many have alleged that syntax does not exist before the two-word stage. However, as these data have shown, the predominance of certain types of verbs before others at the one-word stage, namely, Theme-oriented verbs, provide some interesting implications for the early acquisition of verb structure. Theme verbs appear to be the most "natural" in that they are the first produced, and develop earlier than Agent verbs

in all respects. This suggests earlier acquisition of VP than vP, or even V' (just V and NP complement) before VP. Before the child has vP she may have only VP and so only Themes, no Agents. Also suggested here is that Theme verbs and Agent verbs appear to develop along their own trajectories and only later intersect. Arguments appear to be "acquired" in the following order: 1) Theme; 2) Agent; and 3) Experiencer where Theme and Agent arguments are acquired during the one and two word stage and Experiencers do not show up until much later.

In terms of phrase structure, the earliest verbs produced are tensed suggesting early movement from V to T. It is not clear whether the child has a V complement at this point because her earliest verbs appear alone with no complement. Exclusive use of the imperative mood for Agent verbs appears to be a substitute for overt expression of the Agent argument. One possibility proposed here is perception by the child of the expression of the external argument higher in the phrase structure tree in the input, but since she hasn't developed a place for it with Spec of little v at first, s/he raises the verb twice (from V to T to C) to express agentivity.

Shortly after the initial period of tensed, stand alone Theme verbs, the very next developmental phase suggested by the data is postverbal placement of a single argument, namely, Theme. Preverbal Themes are rare and Agent verbs do not show up yet at all. This suggests that the child starts with a bare VP consisting of two constituents: V and NP, with no specifier, hence, no Agent position. NP continues to be primarily positioned after the verb for Theme verbs. When overt Agent arguments finally appear, they too tend to appear post-verbally. This suggests that the postverbal position, usually associated with the Theme argument in Spanish, may be the natural location for any single-argument verb, including Agent-only structures until the canonical locus for Agent arguments, i.e., pre-verbally, is acquired.

To summarize, Theme and Agent verbs are observed to follow separate trajectories of development in these data. The earliest data of this study show that Theme verbs are well under development and are already manifested in both tensed and imperative forms in adult canonical ways. Agent verbs, on the other hand, do not follow this same path. In fact, they function very differently from corresponding adult forms, primarily in regard to morphology, appearing exclusively in the imperative.

If the conclusions here are correct, simple binary structure at all three syntactic levels quite possibly exists from the outset of language learning; however, what seems to be missing from the start, making this proposal a weak version of the Continuity Hypothesis, is further articulation within particular syntactic levels, and in the case of this study, the "little" v level within the vP shell containing the Specifier for an Agent argument. At first overt Agents never appear in the data and the verb forms are always in the imperative. When they finally do appear with time, it might be assumed that the little v level has finally been acquired. It is at this point when general use of the imperative decreases and Agent verbs are tensed, i.e., they no longer raise from T to C.

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