

## Children take steps toward cyclic and non-cyclic diachronic changes

Selection of grammar variation by speakers develops across the lifespan, interacting with language changes in progress (Sankoff 2018). Child language acquisition may play a central role in language change (Cournane 2019; van Gelderen 2017), yet the relationship between the two is complex (Cournane & Pérez-Leroux 2020). We examine the role of child language acquisition in systematic, cyclic processes of grammaticalization, as well as non-cyclic changes in progress, proposing that two different processes are involved.

In terms of grammaticalization, we consider data from three domains where it has been suggested that children's error patterns align with the direction of change. Cournane (2014) finds that children's production and lexical selection of modals is compatible with the direction of the modal cycle. Subsequent work (Cournane 2015; Cournane & Perez-Leroux 2020) tested the interpretation of the English modal verb *must* in Toronto English, a dialect where this verb is at an advanced stage of becoming only an epistemic modal. Their results show that children over-generate epistemic readings in ambiguous contexts where adults often choose a root interpretation (e.g., *She must wash her hands*). In another comprehension study, Hall and Pérez-Leroux (2021a) considered sentences containing comitative modifiers (e.g., *The dog with the bone is blue*) and found that many 3- and 4-year-old children interpret the PP headed by *with* as a coordinate, rather than a modifier. This semantic bias is similarly aligned with the path of grammaticalization, as languages with comitative modifiers are said to evolve into languages with comitative coordination (Haspelmath 2007). In these two cases, children's non-adult interpretations can be described in terms of either reanalysis, representing a functional element as higher in the tree, or as relabeling (Roberts & Rousseau 1999; Whitman & Paul 2005). A third case worth discussing involves definite articles, in which child learners of languages such as Dutch (Baauw 2000) and English (Pérez-Leroux et al. 2004a, 2004b) are willing to interpret specific definite articles as non-specific, pleonastic definites, as in the Romance languages (Dayal 2006); here the structural correlates of interpretation would run in the opposite direction.

The other cases of interest involve non-cyclic changes, in which the distribution of two variants changes as the use of one form becomes more restricted and the other more general. Overgeneralization is a well-known process in child acquisition of natural languages, and has been attested in artificial language learning with cases of unpredictable variation in the input (Hudson Kam & Newport 2005, 2009). In studies of /u/-fronting, a widespread phonological change in North American English, Hall & Maddeaux (2020) find that young children are more advanced in the change than their parents and other adults in their community. While adults restrict fronting to phonetically favorable coronal contexts (e.g., *do, suit*), 4- to 6-year-old children extend it to non-coronal environments (e.g., *moon, goose*), advancing vowel fronting to its final stage. One non-cyclic morphosyntactic change in progress is the alternation between *of* and *-s* possessives, in which *-s* is gradually becoming more frequent over time in many dialects of English (e.g., Jankowski & Tagliamonte 2014; Rosenbach 2014). Children follow adult-like lexical semantic constraints, preferring *-s* with animate possessors and *of* with inanimates (Hall & Pérez-Leroux 2021b). However, 4- to 6-year-olds use *-s* more frequently, showing over-generalization that aligns with the direction of historical change. In both studies of non-cyclic change, the results also show a later, pre-adolescent incrementation stage, in which 10- to 12-year-old children also produce more /u/-fronting and possessive *-s*.

Based on these five cases, we propose that two different processes underlie children's contributions to cyclic and non-cyclic change: in early childhood processes related to grammatical category formation, children may fail to capture some of the finer selectional properties of a category (overgeneralization), or systematically assign alternative structural representations during a transitory stage which allows for different mappings (reanalysis/relabeling).

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