Overt subject in a null subject language

The occurrence of null subjects in non-null subject languages has been studied in children (Hyams & Wexler, 1993; Rizzi, 2000), but what is relatively unexplored is the acquisition of overt subjects in null subject languages, and their distribution w.r.t. different verb classes.

This paper looks at the acquisition of null and overt subjects in Bengali, a null subject language.

Goals: to establish whether
- there are differences in the occurrence of null and overt subjects
- differences in null and overt subject correlates with differences in verb class, and if so, why.

Bengali - some facts
- unmarked SOV word order; OVS, SVO, VS possible
- nominative and non-nominative subjects
- animate and inanimate vs. non-animate and inanimate
- overt subjects become necessary when the discourse interpretation and the intended interpretation do not match
- pronouns are used to change topics and for focus

The study
- Diary study
- Speech corpora of one Bengali child (Mamoon)
- 1/6 – 3;1 years
- MLU 1.05 to 3.3

Analysis:
Realization and distribution of subjects with different classes of verbs: unaccusative, unergative, transitive, ditransitive

Tests of unergative/unaccusative distinction
Bhatt (2003): impersonal passive and reduced relative

Data coded for:
- omission of subject
- overt subject in different verb classes
- preverbal and postverbal subject
- animacy of preverbal and postverbal subject
- nominative and non-nominative subject

Corpus:
Total number of utterances : 685
Number analyzed : 316

Exclusions:
- Noun-only utterances (184)
- imperatives (94)
- formulaic expressions, imitation, repetitions (91)

Results

Emergence of overt subject

Overall distribution (1.6 – 3.1):
- Null subjects : 67.3 %
- Overt subject : 32.7 %

Subjectless sentences are not because Mamoon is at the ‘one-word’ stage.

First clear use of overt subject at 1.09:

1. *mamma jaa* mamma go-imperative
   To mean: ‘Mummy is going’ [Mamoon, 1:09]

Before (1), she does not produce subjects with inflected verbs. Subject + complement (cf. (2a)) and verb + complement/predicate (cf. (2b)) combinations are attested.

2. a. *bhalo teddy* good teddy
   ‘The teddy is good/ It is a good teddy’ [Mamoon, 1:08]

   b. *bali dao* book give-imperative
   ‘Give the book [to me]’ [Mamoon, 1:07]

[At an earlier stage as noted for Spanish children (Grinstead, 1998) Mamoon uses nouns as intended subjects without verbs.]

The use of overt subject increases with MLU

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>MLU</th>
<th>Overt subject</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.6 to 2.0</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>17.1 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 to 2.7</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>44.9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.8 to 3.1</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>48.6 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Distribution of overt subject w.r.t. verb class

Verb types:
- unaccusative (9)
- unergative (12)
- transitive (15)
- ditransitive (5)

Animacy of overt subject position

In unaccusative verbs, both animate and inanimate subjects occur preverbally but only inanimate subjects occur postverbally.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overt subject position</th>
<th>animate</th>
<th>inanimate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preverbal subject</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postverbal subject</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary

- null subject twice as many as overt subject
- increase in subject use as a function of MLU
- expression of overt subjects influenced by the class of the verb
- unaccusative verbs have the least number of null subjects
- unaccusative verbs only inanimate subject in postverbal position

Conclusion

The preliminary study sheds light on a few trends:
- verbs with the same argument structures treated uniformly and distinguished from verbs with different argument structures.
- children produce unaccusative verbs from an early stage and use the SV order with them: questions Borer & Wexler’s (1987, 1992) argument that children have no access to the operation of A-movement of the internal argument to Spec IP
- tendency to move animate Themes out of the VP internal position, and keep the inanimate Themes in the base-generated position in null subject languages.

Object drop, well attested in adult Bengali, is relatively rare in the child data.

References

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