

The Acquisition of Subject and Object Shift Constructions in Norwegian: Frequency Issues

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This paper considers the acquisition of word order in object shift and so-called 'subject shift' constructions in Norwegian. In the adult grammar, both constructions require weak pronouns to move to a higher position than DP subjects and objects. Corpus data from three children (age 1;9-3;3) show that they initially produce non-target-consistent word order, failing to move pronominal subjects and objects across negation/sentence adverbs:

- (1) har **ikkje han** fota her? (Ina, 2;5.25)
have.PRES not he feet here
'Doesn't he have feet here?' Target: Har han ikkje fota her?
- (2) eg finn **ikkje han**. (Ina, 2;5.25)
I find.PRES not him
'I don't find him.' Target: Eg finn han ikkje.

The developmental data also show that subject shift falls into place around age 2;6-3, while object shift is still non-target-consistent at the end of data collection. Furthermore, subject shift is considerably more frequent in the child data (191 vs. 35 examples). Previous research on Swedish (Josefsson 1996) has suggested that this is due to avoidance, and a similar argument has been used for object clitics in French (Hamann&Belletti 2006). In order to investigate this further, this paper also reports on an experimental study of subject and object shift constructions with somewhat older Norwegian children.

As the placement of pronouns in the higher positions is partly related to information structure, a pragmatic account of the data is considered, in terms of the 'concept of non-shared knowledge' (Schaeffer 2000). However, the non-target-consistent word order is accounted for in terms of an economy principle, according to which children initially move elements only as high in the structure as there is clear evidence for in the input.

Samples of adult input are also investigated and turn out to show a similar distribution of subject and object shift as the child data. The lack of frequency of object shift in the child data is thus argued not to be due to avoidance, but to a conspiracy of factors making contexts for object shift relatively rare. Finally, in accordance with Westergaard & Bentzen (2007), it is suggested that lack of input frequency is not the original cause of non-target word order, but it may affect the persistence of the delay and thus explain the difference between subject and object shift.

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