

The Acquisition of the Go-Verb Construction in English

1. Introduction

The acquisition of verbal inflection constitutes one of the central issues in the study of child language. In the acquisition of English, it has been observed at least since Brown (1973) that children in the early stages of development often show *errors of omission*: They incorrectly omit inflectional morphemes such as the third-person singular morpheme *-s* and the past-tense morpheme *-ed*. In light of this background, this study attempts to shed new light on the acquisition of inflection in English by investigating children's knowledge of the **Go-Verb Construction**. Our results from the acquisition of this construction demonstrate that English-speaking children do not exhibit *errors of omission*, in that they do not produce an inflected form of a verb in the context where only an uninflected, bare form of a verb is permitted.

2. Go-Verb Construction in English

As Zwicky (1969), Shopen (1971) and others observe, (American) English permits a construction in which a motion verb (*come* or *go*) is immediately followed by a second verb (see (1)). The most striking property of this **Go-Verb Construction** is that neither *come/go* nor the verb immediately following them may appear in any inflected form (see (4) and (5)): The *come/go* + V sequence is acceptable only where it is not associated with an overt inflectional affix – for example, in imperative mood (1), after a modal (2), and in present-tense declarative except when the subject is third-person singular (3).

- (1) Go pick apples in the yard. / Come sit with us on the bench.
- (2) John will come eat with us next Sunday.
- (3) I / you / we / they go get the paper every morning.
- (4) * He / She goes gets the paper every morning. (also *go gets / *goes get)
- (5) * The delivery person came left the package on the doorstep.
(also *came leave / *come left)

Major syntactic analyses of this construction (e.g. Jaeggli & Hyams 1993, Ishihara & Noguchi 2000, Bjorkman 2009) share the view that this morphological restriction on the Go-Verb Construction directly reflects properties of UG. For example, Jaeggli & Hyams (1993) argue that the only information that children must 'learn' from the input to acquire this inflectional constraint is that *come/go* assigns a secondary θ -role to the subject DP. Following Pollock (1989), Jaeggli & Hyams assume that in English, θ -assigning predicates cannot undergo verb-raising to INFL: In order for these predicates to assign θ -roles to their arguments, they must stay in their base position. However, 'morphologically visible' (i.e. phonologically overt) affixes such as *-s* and *-ed* under the INFL node require *come/go* to raise to their position, in order to satisfy their affixation requirement. Since the θ -role assignment by *come/go* and the affixation process for overt inflectional morphemes pose contradictory requirements, the *come/go* + V sequence is possible only when inflection has no overt morphological realization.

3. Go-Verb Construction in Child English

If children need not learn much in order to acquire the inflectional restriction on the Go-Verb Construction as the theory claims, we predict that English-speaking children have the knowledge of this constraint from very early. In order to evaluate the validity

of this prediction, we analyzed seven longitudinal corpora for American English from the CHILDES database (MacWhinney 2000), which provided a total sample of more than 181,000 lines of child speech. The CLAN program Combo, together with a file of all the possible forms of *come/go*, was used to identify potentially relevant child utterances, which were then searched by hand and checked against the original transcripts to exclude imitations, repetitions, and formulaic routines.

The results were as follows. All the seven children used the Go-Verb Construction reasonably frequently in their spontaneous speech. The ages of acquisition (the first clear use, followed soon after by additional uses; Stromswold 1996) are summarized in Table 1. Crucially, however, these children produced extremely few *come/go* + V sequences in which one (or both) of these verbs is inflected, as shown in Table 2. Our results strongly suggest that English-speaking children around the age of two already have knowledge about the inflectional restriction on the Go-Verb Construction.

Child	Age of Acquisition
Adam	2;06.17
Abe	2;05.07
Eve	1;09
Naomi	1;11.02
Nina	2;01.22
Peter	2;02.13
Sarah	2;07.12
MEAN	2;02

Child	Uninflected		Inflected	
	GO+V	COME+V	GO+V	COME+V
Abe	135	10	0	1
Adam	38	1	1	0
Eve	150	2	0	0
Naomi	17	6	0	0
Nina	53	2	0	0
Peter	45	5	0	0
Sarah	47	1	1	0
TOTAL	485	27	2	1

Table 1:
Ages of Acquisition

Table 2:
The Number of Go-Verb Construction in Children's Speech

4. Conclusion

The results of this study not only demonstrate that the inflectional restriction on the Go-Verb Construction is already in the grammar of English-speaking two-year-olds, but also provide a new piece of evidence that inflectional errors in child English take the form of omission but never the form of commission. This finding lends further support to the Grammatical Conservatism proposed by Snyder (2007), which claims that children do not begin using a new construction until they have both determined that the construction is permitted in the adult language, and identified the adults' grammatical basis for it.

Selected References

- Jaeggli, Osvaldo, and Nina Hyams. 1993. On the independence and interdependence of syntactic and morphological properties: English aspectual COME and GO. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 11:313-346.
- Snyder, William. 2007. *Child Language: The Parametric Approach*. New York: Oxford University Press.