

Inherent variability in first language acquisition and beyond

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Variability is a striking characteristic of child first language acquisition. In phonological development, all changes in the system pass through a period of variability between the old and the new pronunciations (to which a third pronunciation is sometimes added before the second pronunciation stabilizes). In morphological development (e.g. past-tense forms and pronouns, which also have a syntactic component), there is most often variability from the beginning, and the correct form varies with several types of errors. I take an Optimality Theory approach to language acquisition, in which the differences between adult and child outputs derive from differences in the ranking of constraints. If a child produces two or more variants, each variant is the result of a different constraint ranking. One approach is to presuppose that the child has multiple grammars (each of which produces one variant) and switches between the grammars; but given the amount of variability in different aspects of the system, this approach leads to a large number of minimally different grammars, in a way that is problematic. It is preferable to assume that the ranking of a given constraint is variable. When the ranking distributions of two crucially interacting constraints overlap, Constraint A is ranked over Constraint B in some tokens (leading to one variant output) but below Constraint B in other tokens (leading a different variant output). To ensure stability of output, changes in rankings are made in small steps; the developmental reversal of order of two constraints always passes through a period in which the distributions overlap. I argue that some remnant variability remains in adult speech to produce variants that are usually classed as (ungrammatical) errors, and will discuss how to distinguish this from variability in which all the variants are grammatical.