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Saturday, March 7th: 12:00-12:30

Verb-Particle Constructions and Stress Adjacency Locations:
An Analysis into Developmental Patterns in Children

English verb-particle constructions come in two main types. The first has the order Verb-Object-Particle (VOP), and the second has the order Verb-Particle-Object (VPO):

(1) (Particles are italicized.)

a. Pick the book *up*. – VOP construction

b. Pick *up* the book. – VPO construction

Children learning English as their native language acquire these two types of verb-particle constructions in a consistent order: The VOP construction always develops either prior to, or concurrently with, the VPO construction (Brown & Hanlon 1970; Hyams, Schaeffer & Johnson 1993; Snyder & Stromswold 1997). Thus, children never acquire the VPO construction significantly earlier than the VOP construction. The question is why. So far, no explanation has received general acceptance.

My proposal is that the ordering effect is basically phonological, and is due to a difference in the stress patterns that are typically found in VOP versus VPO constructions. Consider again the examples from (1), this time with the dominant stresses indicated:

(2) a. / / / /
 Pick the [book *up*]. – VOP construction

b. / / / /
 [Pick *up*] the book. – VPO construction

Notice that the VOP construction (2a) has adjacent stresses (book *up*) only in the utterance-final position. The VPO construction (2b), in contrast, has a pair of adjacent stresses (Pick *up*) in a non-final position. I propose that the child initially resists putting adjacent stresses in non-final position. Until she overcomes this resistance, verb-particle constructions will consistently exhibit VOP order.

An immediate prediction is that even outside of verb-particle constructions, a child will initially avoid utterances with adjacent stresses in non-final position. Moreover, this pattern of avoidance is predicted to disappear at the point when a given child begins producing the VPO construction. To test these predictions I analyzed the longitudinal corpora of spontaneous speech from two children (Naomi, Sarah) in the CHILDES database. Specifically, for each child I located transcripts in which (i) the child was producing VOP but not yet producing VPO, or (ii) had just begun producing VPO (as well as VOP). From these transcripts I eliminated utterances that contained a verb-particle construction (so as not to bias the data), and then hand-searched all the remaining utterances for those containing adjacent stresses. For each child, there was a dramatic effect: For Naomi, adjacent stresses were predominantly final (81 final:46 non-final) before the first use of VPO, and predominantly non-final (59:94) after the first use of VPO. Sarah went from 120:64 before the first VPO, to 80:108 immediately after the first VPO. These findings provide considerable support for an account based on stress patterns.