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Fillers: how much do they generalize?*

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Fillers appear during the early grammaticalization process, roughly between the one- or two-word phase and the earliest grammar, in a variety of languages. Peters accurately points out there have been theoretical and methodological difficulties when trying to integrate the filler phenomenon in language acquisition theory, probably because fillers do not fit neatly into linguistic categories, nor a structure of 'modules'. Her note is a major contribution to the solution of those problems. She gives us a rich review that can guide any reader – specialised or naive – to deep, critical insights and to the relevant research literature. In addition to this valuable contribution, she points the way to future work. The very richness makes it difficult to add any interesting comments. So these remarks will be limited to complementary concepts and data.

In her Note, Peters reminds us that filler data present many exceptions; so that some children have been found not to produce fillers at all, and also, some languages could trigger the filler-track to grammar more readily than others. We shall deal with one more of those 'exceptions', intrasubject data on the non-generality of filler production. Perhaps this non-generality can contribute to insights on the meaning of fillers during the early grammaticalization process. Most authors have commented that filler-producing children are inconsistent at it. To take an example, which typically reflects the reported literature: a child of 1;8, María, who produces fillers in her pre-Noun Phrases (pre-NP) will do so inconsistently, that is: at the same time the child will sometimes produce a pre-NP utterance with a filler in the position to be occupied by the Determiner, and sometimes a more primitive one-word pre-Noun with no trace of a filler. The point is that although this inconsistency has been commonly observed, it has rarely been explored for its own sake. One exploration, though, could be mentioned here. This was a longitudinal study on early partial grammatical knowledge. It analysed all the pre-NPs ($N = 697$) of a Spanish learning girl, María (López-Ornat, Fernandez, Gallo & Mariscal, 1994). It found that this child, across ages 1;7 to 2;1, used for her pre-NPs 2 or 3 different 'representational' types,

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which differed in their grammatical complexity (López-Ornat, 1997). In other words: the pre-NPs she produced at the same moment could be accounted for by two or three different underlying 'representations', one of them including fillers. Those different representations were scaled in their grammatical complexity. Two key outcomes can be underlined: one is that this child during 7 months (1;7 to 2;1) was never consistent in the form she gave to her NPs (+filler/−filler). The other is that there was a clear developmental growth of the inconsistency as such. At first, her production combined fillerless with fillerful pre-NPs. After 1;9 her production combined fillerful pre-NPs with fully grammatical NPs (a Determiner plus a Noun, agreeing in gender).

Data of this kind might provide a clearer picture of the developmental 'sense' of the filler phenomenon. This is confirmed by data from recent experimental research (López-Ornat, 1999) on the pre-NP productions of 23 Spanish children between 1;4 and 1;10. These results confirm María's developmental pattern: here, the least language-developed children (in MLU) were consistent, primitive one-word pre-NP producers. The children who were slightly more developed, were inconsistent regarding the form they gave to their pre-NPs (−filler/+filler/proper NP). Amongst the inconsistent children there was a clear developmental growth of the inconsistency pattern, as had been found for María.

The suggestion is that fillers probably exist in the context of a competitive grammar-learning process; in this process, the child's grammar-learning system will take a long time before it generalizes the best of its available 'representational' solutions: the fully grammatical one. The other available solutions being: (1) a primitive one-word preNoun and (2) a transitional filler+preNoun.

A basic characteristic of this developmental pattern is that fillers do not generalize to all the relevant exemplars a child produces, within, e.g., the pre-NP tokens. Fillers are added to some of them, so that in this period the +filler 'representation' coexists with other solutions to the same problem: the primitive solution 'one-word-with-no-fillers' and the advanced solution Det+N.

The exploration of these dynamics demands analysing intrasubject variation in pre-NP (or other) production, both at the token and the type levels. The inconsistency of the +filler 'representation', and its developmental meaning cannot be detected unless we analyse the child's overall production for one particular precategory (like the NP) both at the type and at the token levels, and all of it over a developmental time-span.

Before accepting the adequacy of a stage-like model of filler evolution, like the 'premorphemes→protomorphemes→full-morphemes' reviewed by Peters, our research should start separating type and token analyses in order to test whether the 'filler-track' generalizes to all tokens which belong to the

same to-be category (e.g. the NP) or not. Otherwise we risk falling again into a new version of a 'modules' problem the author so accurately pointed out.

The above constructivist and tentative account raises a constellation of questions, because we do not know what variables lead the learner's systems to group together X particular tokens under a certain representational format or another. Is this a function of certain tokens' frequency in each child's linguistic experience, or of certain tokens' linguistic structure, or of certain tokens' functional properties, or all of these?

In her Note, Peters calls attention to other types of 'exceptions' in this filler phenomenon. She reports some children do not produce fillers. This obviously raises an even more important set of questions: if abstraction into grammar does not progress through a transitional and inconsistent '+filler' representation, how do these non-filler producers, 'jump' from primitive one-word blocks to full NPs?

We can only suggest a specification to this question, based on the above mentioned experimental data. Two children, out of the total 23, both aged 1;9, were found to be using the primitive one-word type with the grammatical NP, and gave no evidence of using transitional +filler 'representations'. Despite not producing fillers they were still classified as 'transitional' because they were type-inconsistent subjects. So how do the 'representational' redescriptions (Karmiloff-Smith, 1986) of these 'transitional' children change?

To our knowledge there are no specific data on this issue. Perhaps we should first make sure that non-filler children really are such. That they never produce any filler in any of all their pregrammatical utterances, across all to-be linguistic structures. We should then microanalyse their longitudinal data in search for hints of different processing mechanisms underlying their 'bridging' into earliest grammar. In the meantime Peters' Note provides enough fascinating tasks and questions to keep us all occupied.

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