

## Comments on Peters

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Ann Peters' interesting paper raises a number of questions in my mind. One of these arises from 'the assumption that at any given point in development, children either do or do not 'have' the functional categories that underlie syntax.' This dichotomy may be too simplistic. A number of researchers have argued over the past few years that during the *Optional Infinitives/OI* stage of Wexler (1994) children may 'have' UNDERSPECIFIED functional categories. For example, Schütze & Wexler (1996) and Schütze (1997) argue that the category INFL at the OI stage may be underspecified in respect of its tense/agreement features: so, for example, in *He cries*, INFL is specified for both tense and agreement (with agreement triggering nominative case-marking of the subject *he*); in *He cry* (e.g. in reply to a question like 'What did the baby do?') INFL is specified for agreement but not tense; and in *Him cried*, INFL is specified for tense but not agreement. Given Chomsky's (1995) view that categories are sets of features, it follows that an underspecified child INFL constituent cannot in principle represent THE SAME CONSTITUENT as an adult INFL fully specified for tense and agreement (and perhaps mood/finiteness as well), but rather is a *proto-INFL*. This in turn suggests that children have to learn to build up feature complexes associated with functional categories 'one feature at a time' – and that the OI stage represents a period when certain features of INFL are taken to be optional. In other words, it may be that Peters' observation that 'children must construct their grammatical categories on the basis of gradual learning' is as true of functional categories as it is of substantive categories. On this view, functional categories MATURE. Indeed, this conclusion seems to be a matter of virtual conceptual necessity if we follow Chomsky (1999) in positing that learners have to ASSEMBLE lexical items from sets of features provided by the Language Faculty, and if we assume that feature-assembly is not instantaneous.

A second question which Peters' papers leads me to ask is whether the use of the term FILLERS runs the risk of underestimating the level of lexical knowledge which the child has achieved at a given stage. Leaving aside the possibility of children producing purely phonologically conditioned fillers (e.g. inserting an epenthetic vowel to break up a complex consonant cluster), it seems to me that a term such as REDUCED/COMPRESSED LEXICAL ITEM is arguably more appropriate. The seeming 'unglossability' of many fillers may simply reflect the fact that a variety of child lexical items can have the same

compressed phonological form in production: e.g. *want*, *gon* (= going), *can*, *can't* and *don't* may all have the compressed form  $[n]$ , so leading to indeterminacy in how to gloss a sequence like  $\eta$  *go*. It may therefore be hasty to conclude that children who produce such fillers have not acquired the relevant lexical items: on the contrary, they may have a reasonable understanding of the syntactic and semantic properties of such items, but have a reduced phonological representation of them; or indeed, they may alternatively have a relatively full phonological representation of them, but reduce them in production via the kind of phonological operations embodied in Smith's (1973) INCOMPETENCE RULES (e.g. *going* might be reduced to *gən* via vowel reduction, *gn* via vowel loss, and *n* via cluster simplification or  $\eta$  via fusion).

By the same token, in using words like FILLER we may also run the risk of seriously underestimating the level of syntactic knowledge which a child has: for example, since a variety of items can be reduced to schwa in rapid colloquial speech in adult English (including unstressed forms of *I* and *are*), it may be that the schwa which Bloom (1970, pp. 46–7) reports Kathryn producing at 1;9 in utterances such as ə *pull* represents a reduced nominative *I* subject, and likewise that the schwa in də *dirty* represents a reduced form of *are* (as in *They're dirty*): if so, it would follow that Kathryn has already acquired (at least part of) the case/agreement system of English. The problem posed by reduced forms like schwa is compounded by the possibility that many more items may be reduced to schwa in child grammars than in adult grammars: to cite further data from Bloom (1970, passim) when Eric at 1;10 says ə *made* ə *fit*, it may be that the first schwa represents *I* and the second *it*; when he says *This* ə *fit*, the schwa may represent *one* (or perhaps *will*); when he says ə *man* *sit*, it may be that schwa represents a reduced form of *the*; likewise, when Kathryn at 1;9 says ə *more* *milk*, it may be that schwa represents *have* (or *want*) – and so on. The issue of whether (e.g.) children have distinct phonological representations for items such as *a* and *the* or *can* and *will* may ultimately only be resolvable on the basis of carefully designed experimental studies.

In much the same way, using a term like AMALGAM to denote expressions like *unna* (for 'I wanna') may once again seriously underestimate a child's syntactic competence. After all *unna* might (as in adult English) simply represent a contracted form of *I want to*, with *I* reduced to schwa (= here spelled as *u*), *want* reduced to *n* (here spelled as *nn*), and *to* reduced to schwa (here spelled as *a*); alternatively, *unna* may represent a contracted form of  $\phi$  *want to*, where  $\phi$  is the kind of null subject which Rizzi (1994) terms a *null* constant. If *unna* does indeed represent (*I*) *want to*, we would expect to find that the verb following *unna* is always in the bare infinitive form (so that we find *Unna go home* but not \**Unna to go home* or \**Unna going home*). Analysing forms like *unna* as 'rote-memorized and unsegmented' items poses serious

problems relating to how *unna* can be mapped (in a principled fashion) into a corresponding LF/Logical Form representation (if LF requires a representation containing *inter alia* a subject, a predicate and a present-tense operator). The amalgam analysis also raises serious learnability issues about how the child UNLEARNS amalgams.

A further question which we need to ask is whether fillers do indeed represent ‘functor-like units’ or whether they simply represent REDUCED LEXICAL ITEMS (where the term LEXICAL ITEM subsumes items belonging to both substantive and functional categories). If (as suggested earlier) a filler like *n* can represent a verb like *want* or an auxiliary like *can*, it is clear (if we take the classic view that *want* is a verb and *can* an auxiliary/INFL constituent) that such fillers simply represent reduced forms of lexical items, some of which are substantive in nature (e.g. *want*) and others of which are functional in nature (e.g. *can*). It should be noted, however, that there are complex theoretical issues here: for example, Chomsky (1999) argues that TENSE (i.e. the category which corresponds to INFL in earlier work and whose members include tensed auxiliaries and possibly infinitival *to*) may be a substantive rather than a functional category; if so, this strengthens the case for analysing fillers as REDUCED LEXICAL ITEMS rather than REDUCED FUNCTORS.

## REFERENCES

- (that asterisked is included in Peters’ article)
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