

The Emergence of Null Object Constructions in Child Acquisition of English

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In English, null object constructions are identified by optionally or normally transitive verbs that show up without an overt object, often in “recipe” and instruction contexts like the examples below.

- (1) –Mix well and bring to a boil
- (2) -We have to get this car ready for the show tomorrow.
-Okay, you wash and I’ll wax.

Curiously, during the earliest stages of language acquisition, many English-speaking children go through a short period of object dropping that deviates from the adult null object target, producing phrases like “I drinking” to refer to contexts that denote “I am drinking x”. Overall, the rate of object omissability is higher in children than in adults. What do patterns in children’s early dropped objects tell us about how they acquire null object constructions in English? Are they able to learn this construction on the basis of cue frequencies in the input?

The present study examines the above questions by investigating how null object constructions are represented at two different time points in children’s grammars, relative to the frequency with which they appear in the adult input. Three different verbs (drink, eat, and draw) were selected based on their differential levels of optional transitivity in the adult input. The verbs were examined in a corpus study of child speech using the Sachs and Suppes corpora from the CHILDES database. Results indicate a strong correlation between child usage of individual verbs and their frequency in the adult input at the latest stage, which supports a usage-based model of acquisition.