

Strict Syntax/Semantic Interfaces and Ellipsis: an explanatory role for acquisition theory

Tom Roeper, U Massachusetts Amherst

It has often been said that linguistic theory should account for acquisition. This claim has been implicitly extended to the stronger claim that it acquisition path itself. I argue that the acquisition path for ellipsis reveals a shift from an Open Interface (argued for by Jackendoff and Culicover) to a Strict Syntax/semantic Interface which involves a perfect correspondence of syntax and semantics:

Strict Interface Hypothesis:

The acquisition device assumes that there should be an isomorphic connection between LF-semantics, syntax, and phonology.

This is based upon an acquisition principle:

Minimization Goal:

Minimize pragmatic inference and maximize the information determined by explicit grammar.

This perspective is more stringent than a claim that interfaces involve "Third Factor" effects (Chomsky (2005)). A big challenge is to develop a notation that makes the connection transparent and simple.

The empirical basis of this argument works with evidence about VP ellipsis, NP-ellipsis, and Partitive interpretation. A case in point is Kennedy's claim (SISI)

Semantic Identity Strict Interface:

A recovered syntactic representation generates an LF form with variables that allow sloppy readings.

Thus children will overgenerate possible reconstructions beyond sloppy identity and then must somehow retreat. eg. John patted his dog and so did his grandfather where John pats his own dog and his grandfather pats an uncle's dog.

Evidence on early VP-ellipsis from Santos, Hulk and Schleeman on NP-ellipsis and partitives, and Perez et al on empty objects support this account.

The literature on ellipsis has shown an ongoing debate about how much is recovered in syntactic representations, given various deviations known as "mismatches". The acquisition perspective claims:

Children will step by step replace a pronominal representation with an explicit syntactic representation and a fixed link to semantic representations.

The acquisition account makes the observations by Merchant (2015) and Craenenburg (2014) about places where the system assumes pronominal forms (or just do that) have a natural explanation.