

Erica Thrift

Object Drop in the L1 Acquisition of Dutch

This dissertation sets out to investigate direct object drop in adult and child Dutch. The rates, distribution and developmental patterns associated with object drop in Dutch-speaking children between the ages of 20 and 37 months old are investigated. This phenomenon is approached from two, not necessarily competing, perspectives on language development: syntactic development and cognitive development.

Initially, the role of object drop in adult Dutch is addressed, in the hopes of better understanding the child's target grammar. Children acquiring Dutch require a full syntactic tree as well as the cognitive ability to differentiate discourse-linked and non-discourse-linked arguments, in order to produce adult-like object drop.

Object drop is shown to be a crosslinguistically consistent phenomenon in child language, contrary to assumptions often made in the generative literature. Proposed analyses of object drop in child language form the basis of the current research study. However, results of the study illustrate that patterns associated with object drop in child Dutch cannot support these theories. Telicity, finiteness and object drop appear to be closely related in child Dutch. A theoretical explanation, the Aspect Phrase hypothesis, accounts for the formal licensing of object drop in child Dutch, while the identification of null arguments is linked to cognitive development in young children. As one of the few extensive studies on object drop in child language, this thesis raises several questions regarding the relationship between the aspectual properties of predicates, null arguments and cognitive development.

This study is of interest to researchers concerned with the relationship between syntactic theory and first language acquisition, Dutch syntax and the interface between syntax and pragmatics.

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