

The syntax of fragments and children's spontaneous speech

Kristan Nelson – Saint Mary's University

The goal of this paper is to examine fragmentary utterances (fragments), such as in (1), in order to determine whether they have a full sentential source or if they can be analyzed as smaller pieces of structure.

- (1) You idiot!
Me first.
Him.

In fact, there are three possible analyses: nonsentential, elliptical and a mixed (i.e., some of the utterances would be analyzed as elliptical, while others as nonsentential). According to a nonsentential analysis (e.g., Barton 1991, Stainton 2006) fragments involve a structural level lower than tense phrase. Progovac (2006) argues that this analysis is fully compatible with bare phrase structure (Chomsky 1995). However, as Morgan (1973) discusses it in his seminal work on fragments, we face a non trivial question of what the definition of sentence should be in syntactic terms. An elliptical analysis, on the other hand (e.g., Merchant 2004), assumes that each fragment has a full sentential source and that elements of the sentence have been deleted to produce a fragmentary utterance. In the light of this debate, I focus on fragments in children's spontaneous speech. More precisely, I analyze CHILDES transcripts (Providence corpus) of six English-speaking children (3 boys and 3 girls aged from 1;0 to 3;0). Assuming that children start acquiring sentential structure from small clauses (Radford 1990, Roeper 1999), I examine how children's speech evolves from a nonsentential phase towards a fully sentential one. By looking at auxiliaries and pronouns expressing Tense and Case, respectively, I aim to determine whether children use both elliptical and nonsentential structures in their speech. More generally, the question is to know to what extent elliptical analysis could apply to children's speech.

References

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