

Many Paths Toward One Complex System: The Acquisition of Continuous and Discontinuous Constructions in the Yucatec Mayan Deictic System

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Yucatec Mayan, an understudied language spoken in southeastern Mexico, has a highly complex deictic system, consisting of four bases (*je'*, *le*, *te*, *bey*) and four enclitics (*a'*, *o'*, *ti'*, *e'*) that combine continuously, with the insertion of an epenthesis between elements, e.g., *lela'* ("this one"), and discontinuously, with a noun or noun phrase between elements, e.g., *le paal a'* ("this child"). The possible combinations of bases and enclitics form unique expressions. The aim of this study is to analyze the route children follow in combining bases and enclitics in early language acquisition. It is a corpus-based study of the speech of four monolingual children (1;01;12-3;05,24) and the input directed to the oldest child; two of the databases analyzed are longitudinal and one is cross-sectional. We find that the acquisition of this deictic system is the outcome of a process in which elements are added gradually, consistent with a constructivist approach (Lieven et al., 2003, 2009). In the first phase of development (1;01,12-1;07), the child produced either the beginning or the end of a continuous construction, e.g., goal = *lela'*, child production = *le* or *la'*. In the second phase (2;03-2;07), children used either a base with a noun, e.g., *le (x)ch'u(pal)* ("the girl"), or a noun with an enclitic, e.g., *ba'axel- a'* ("toy here"). In the last phase we found adult-like discontinuous constructions as noun phrases inserted in more complex sentences. Our data shows (1) that continuous and discontinuous constructions follow different routes, in which continuous constructions precede discontinuous ones in children's first use of deictics; and (2) that children are not initially learning a specific lexical schema, such as *le X-a'*, (equivalent to "he's X-ing") in the development of the discontinuous construction, but seem to trace two simultaneous but different paths guided by input clues: one in which they first identify that a base precedes an NP and another in which they identify that enclitics occur after an NP. Since what seems to remain constant in development is the NP, attached both to the initial base and the final enclitic, we hypothesize that the analogy with the NP is what allows children to put the pieces together. Further research is required to prove this hypothesis. In general, our observations fit a constructivist approach to language learning that provides new insights into language acquisition in a non-European language.

References

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