

Exploring the power of pragmatics in acquiring complex syntax: The case of V1-conditionals in child Dutch

Background. Language uses different syntactic configurations to express conditionality. Although using a complementizer like *if* in English or *als* in Dutch is a common choice, it is never the only option. As is shown in (1a), conditionality in Dutch can also be expressed without *als* ‘if’.

- (1) a. *Zorg jij voor de kinderen , dan was ik af.*
 care you for the kids then clean I op
 ‘If you take care of the kids, I’ll wash the dishes.’
 b. *Zorg jij voor de kinderen ?*
 care you for the kids
 ‘Do/will you take care of the kids?’

Constructions like (1a) is known as V1-conditionals [1-2], of which the conditional clause in fact exhibit the same verb-initial syntax as polar questions in Dutch (see (1b)). This syntactic similarity moreover seems to explain the diachronic emergence of V1-conditionals, which are argued to originate from dialogues between two participants containing a question-answer pair, subsequently developed into a so-called fictive discourse pattern containing a pseudo question (Figure 1) [3].

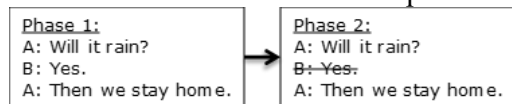


Figure 1 Diachronic development of V1-conditionals

Curiosity questions. What has been introduced so far raises intriguing questions that capture the interest of any acquisitionist. Do children confuse V1-conditionals with polar questions due to the shared syntax? Do children need to acquire V1-conditionals as they can always use the conditional complementizer? How do children acquire V1-conditionals, and at what age? What kind of knowledge facilitate or hinder the acquisition? Do they make errors, and what kind of errors? All such questions haven’t yet been addressed in the literature, since the acquisition of V1-conditionals remains unexplored. The current study thus aims to take an initial step in this direction.

Hypotheses. Since dialogues containing question-answer pairs like in Phase 1 in Figure 1 represent a frequent discourse pattern between the child and the caregiver already at a young age, the current study hypothesizes that **the acquisition of indicative V1-conditionals mirrors their diachronic emergence** as argued in [3]. This means that Dutch children may possibly acquire V1-conditionals in stages as presented in Figure 2, given their cognitive, linguistic and pragmatic knowledge and ability at different ages. In Stage 1, the child is only able to provide a YES-response to a polar question in a question-answer pair. When growing older, s/he can also initiate a polar question like in Stage 2, or provide both a YES-response and a consequence THEN-clause to the caregiver’s question like in Stage 3. In stage 4, the child further expands his/her role in the mini dialogue until Stage 5 is reached where a fictive discourse pattern containing a pseudo question is established.

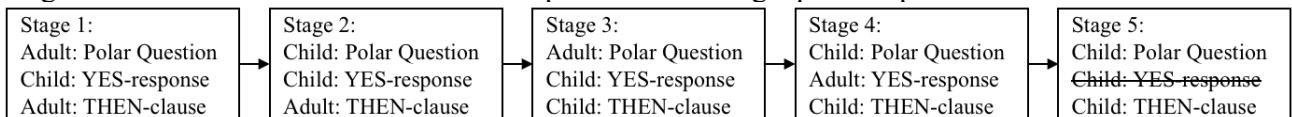


Figure 2 A hypothesized development in the acquisition of V1-conditionals

Method. A corpus study analyzing spontaneous speech data of 10 monolingual Dutch children (1;05-6;00) was conducted in the CHILDES database [4]. A total of 402 transcripts, containing 122,196 child utterances and 240,014 child-directed utterances in two Dutch corpora [5-6] were investigated.

Findings. Results of the current qualitative analysis illustrates a clear picture of the emergence of V1-conditionals in child Dutch. Children’s existing syntactic knowledge on verb-initial in polar questions forms the primary drive in the acquisition process, which is furthermore powered by their pragmatic skills such as active participation and taking turns in discourse.

References.

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