Introduction

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This thematic issue contains 11 papers first presented at a conference on 'The Structure of the Simple Clause in Language Acquisition', held at the Max Planck Institute in Nijmegen from November 9–13, 1987. The issue concentrates on first-language acquisition. Papers on developmental dysphasia, creolization, and adult language acquisition were also presented at the conference and are being published elsewhere.

As its title indicates, the emphasis of the conference was on the simple (independent, matrix) clause, and in particular on three interrelated aspects of its organization that are not well understood from a developmental point of view: word classes, word order, and verb–argument structure. The papers presented in this volume rather faithfully reflect this emphasis. Such a definition of subject matter is somewhat arbitrary, but it has the advantage of focusing the analysis: problems of syntactic subordination or of context dependency, for example, are considered only insofar as they impinge on the organization of the simple clause.

A broad range of languages is represented. Empirical acquisitional evidence is presented in some detail from Chinese, Dutch, English, German, Hebrew, Hungarian, K'iche', and Polish, with occasional forays into other languages.

The papers presented here contribute to one or both of the original aims of the conference. The first was to identify shared or divergent developmental patterns across learners and languages with respect to those aspects of clause structure mentioned above. The second was to evaluate how well certain explanatory principles proposed in contemporary acquisitional or linguistic research account for the observed developmental patterns. Critical attention is paid to explanations based on the organizing principles of universal grammar (Berman, Pye, Randall, Jordens), on various meaning–form correspondences that children could use to 'bootstrap' into phrase-structure rules or word classes (Bowerman, Pye, Weist, Maratsos, Pléh), and on the construction of discourse as a determining factor for clause organization (Berman, Hickmann and Liang, Clark, Budwig).

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Although the emphasis of the conference was on the simple clause, clause structure is clearly affected by the immediate situation of utterance, including both its deictic correlates and the preceding discouse. A first group of papers consequently examines the context-dependent phenomena of deixis, anaphora, ellipsis, and, more generally, speaker perspective. Berman, in her analysis of subjectless clauses in children's Hebrew, takes into consideration four types of context which allow null subjects: syntactic intraclause and interclause, discourse, and situational. Her examination of the distribution of implicit subjects in the production of Hebrew-speaking children over time suggests that a strong version of the parameter-setting view of acquisition probably does not represent the child's learning problem accurately.

Both Berman's paper and the three that follow it demonstrate that the organization of the clause within connected discourse is a major acquisition problem. Hickmann and Liang discuss the influence of the old versus new status of information in discourse as a determinant of clause structure in Chinese, in comparison with English, French, and German. They find that Chinese children are slow in learning to mark the given/new distinction consistently; in this they diverge strikingly from the adult model, which makes maximally consistent use of intraclausal devices. Clark poses the problem of how children learn that specific choices in their language incorporate speaker perspective as part of the meaning being expressed. This problem is examined in detail by Budwig in relation to English-speaking children's use of *be* and *get* passives; she finds support for the claim that children use passives in contexts where a nonagentive perspective is appropriate.

The next group of papers concentrates on intraclause phenomena, taking up the specific question of what underlying knowledge has to be attributed to the child at the outset of language acquisition. Bowerman presents evidence from English that weighs against the hypothesis that the child has a priori knowledge of universal 'linking rules' that map between the semantic or thematic roles of a verb's noun arguments and the syntactic functions of subject, object, and oblique object. It appears rather that children LEARN the semantic/syntactic associations that are characteristic of their language.

Both Weist's analysis of the acquisition of Polish and Pye's analysis of the acquisition of K'iche' and other ergative languages also bear on the 'linking rules' hypothesis; both authors find that the relation between syntactic and semantic choices is more complex than a simple coalition. Weist maintains that children have a concept of subject which is independent of semantic role in intransitive sentences, but not in transitive sentences. Pye argues that acquirers of morphologically ergative lan-

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guages use a distributional learning procedure to distinguish between subjects of two-argument verbs on the one hand, and objects of two-arguments verbs and subjects of one-argument verbs on the other. Syntactic ergativity is, however, unlearnable as such; Pye concludes that the acquisition of syntactically ergative constructions is best viewed as the analysis of exceptions to an otherwise accusative syntax.

Maratsos argues that the basic word-class split in the world's languages is between 'noun' and 'other', and that this split reflects different entry procedures for the child: it is via the relation between word and referent — that is, 'concrete object' — that children acquire the word class 'noun', whereas formal combinatorial properties provide the child with a more reliable characterization of other word classes.

Randall's paper is a discussion of a particular learning mechanism — the 'catapult' — which allows the child to retreat from overgeneralizations without having to rely on negative evidence. This mechanism is held to operate within the domain of the rule the child is working on, a restriction which keeps the child from overcompensating for the initial abusive generalization.

In the final two papers, complex and perhaps unexpected interrelations are found between word order and semantic constraints. Jordens reexamines the acquisition of verb fronting in Dutch and German, presenting evidence that a purely morphosyntactic correlation between the acquisition of the verb–subject agreement paradigm and verb fronting is not sufficient to explain the child's development, as had been previously supposed. Rather, verb placement is linked to the establishment and analysis by the child of semantically characterized subclasses of verbs, including modals. Pléh examines the comprehension of Hungarian, a language with free word order, and brings to light an unsuspected reliance by the child on a supplementary word-order strategy — subject is first, which increases as perceptual difficulties with case marking blur the grammatical relationship of arguments to their verbs.

What emerges overall from the empirical studies is that the development of clause structure involves a close interplay of formal, semantic, discourse, and situational constraints governing the internal organization of the clause. This interplay varies across languages, domain of investigation, and acquisitional stage. It follows from the cross-linguistic evidence presented in this issue that global explanatory principles for development sometimes have to be adapted to local linguistic conditions. As Berman puts it, children 'early on become attuned to what is preferred, or natural, or right for their own mother tongue — however unlikely this might seem in terms of the grammar of some abstract archetypal L'.

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