The roots of inherent variability and the Parallel Architecture

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At the end of Jackendoff's paper delivered at SS19, he raised an extremely important question: how are the complex variable structures inherent in speech *learnt*? In this paper I consider this question through the analysis of the speech of 29 preschool children (2;10-4;2) in interaction with their primary caregivers in a small community in north east Scotland. I focus on *do* absence in present negative declaratives in the example below:

I *ø na* want my chicken dipper….I *do na* want it on my hand. (Ellie 3;2)
I don't want my chicken dipper…I don't want it on my hand.

On the surface, this looks like a form arising from the developmental stages in the acquisition of negation. However, Smith (2001) shows that *do* absence is frequent in the adult community grammar, with highly complex constraints on use: 1) grammatical subject plays a major role in governing the variability, where *do* is variable in all subject types except 3rd person singular contexts; 2) the fully variable contexts show an effect of subject type, lexical verb and following complement: *do* absence is favoured with 1st person, the verb *ken* and sentential complements. Analysis of the caregiver data reveal the same rates and linguistic conditioning on use, despite this being a highly circumscribed, non-standard form. More crucially, these constraints – both categorical and variable - are mirrored in the child data.

I discuss the ramifications of these findings for theories of language acquisition in the context of variable community grammars, and more specifically, how such data might be dealt with within the Parallel Architecture.

Selected references

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