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# Commentary on "Syntax at Age Two"

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ACQUISITION ARCHIVES

# Commentary on "Syntax at Age Two"

Diane Lillo-Martin and William Snyder
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For the past twenty years, one of the leading goals in generative research on language acquisition has been to account for a common error-type: children's use of an infinitival or uninflected verb form where the target language requires a finite form.

The questions researchers have asked about these forms are myriad; among them:

- Are the incorrect, nonfinite forms actually grammatical for the child?
- In which syntactic contexts do the nonfinite forms occur?
- Are there systematic differences across languages in the frequency of children's nonfinite utterances?
- Do the nonfinite utterances have a different meaning than their finite counterparts?
- In what way does this error-type eventually disappear from the child's speech?

In English the nonfinite form is simply a bare verb, but in languages with a morphological distinction it usually takes the form of an infinitive. During the relevant stage the child, unlike an adult, sometimes uses an infinitive as the main verb of a root clause. Rizzi (1993/1994) and certain other researchers (e.g., Hoekstra & Hyams 1998) therefore favor the term *root infinitives*. In contrast Wexler (1994 and later) prefers the term *optional infinitive*, highlighting his analysis of these forms as a grammatical option appearing alongside correctly inflected forms. What to call them, and why they appear the way they do, has occupied a great deal of thought, and theories of this phenomenon are still being energetically debated.

Relatively early in the study of children's nonfinite forms, Colin Phillips undertook an intensive review of the available data from a wide range of languages. He developed and argued for the theory that children's apparently nonfinite forms are actually syntactically fully finite, in accord with the target grammar. For children, however, the task of combining the verb root with the appropriate inflectional morphology is not yet overlearned and automatic.

The result, he proposed, is that children's productions sometimes lack this step. In other words, the children's nonfinite forms result from performance factors, and not from a lack of grammatical competence.

Phillips' proposal was published in the MIT Working Papers in Linguistics (Phillips 1995), and a much abbreviated version was published in the 1996 BUCLD proceedings (Phillips 1996). His work, although underpublished, has been very important to researchers examining children's nonfinite verb structures, whether they agree with his approach or (more often) not. We think that both the impressive array of data he surveyed and his theoretical proposal are important enough to the continuing debate on optional/root infinitives (O/RIs) that his work should be accessible to a wider audience. This is what motivated us to publish it in the *Acquisition Archives*.

A quick search yields over 100 articles citing Phillips' (1995) article. We suspect that most of these citations are taking advantage of Phillips' careful cross-linguistic survey of children's production of O/RIs, summarized in 5 figures and 23 tables, along with his clearly stated counting procedures. This portion of his work has been an invaluable contribution to the field.

Fewer researchers have embraced his position that the underlying structure of children's O/RIs is a fully-formed finite root sentence. An influential alternative is that proposed by Wexler (e.g., 1994, 1998), who has consistently argued that children's OIs result from a non-target-like property of their grammar. In his recent work the proposal has been that children (unlike adults) are subject to the *Unique Checking Constraint* (UCC) which, for example, penalizes any derivation in which a single V's formal features are checked against both AGR and TNS. In order to respect the UCC, a child sometimes deletes the features of either AGR or TNS, and therefore produces a non-target utterance.

Some of the evidence for Wexler's approach is discussed by Phillips, along with his counter-analyses, including the difference in position of inflected vs. uninflected verbs in German, and the difference in proportion of uninflected verbs in *wh*-questions vs. declaratives. It remains to be seen, however, whether the analysis that Phillips proposed can account for the full range of data that Wexler has since adduced in support of his grammar-based approach.

Similarly, in a number of works Hyams (e.g., Hoekstra & Hyams 1999; Salustri & Hyams 2003) has specifically argued that the patterns found in children's infinitives, including their distribution in particular interpretive contexts (as in the *Modal Reference Effect*), call for a grammatical explanation. Phillips did not consider the interpretation of children's sentences with finite vs. nonfinite verbs, and it is unclear how his approach would account for such a distinction.

Several other types of data have likewise received much greater attention in the years since Phillips wrote his paper. First, a large body of research by Rice and Wexler (e.g., Rice & Wexler 1996; Rice, Wexler & Hershberger 1998; Wexler, Schütze & Rice 1998) supports the claim that children with Specific Language Impairment exhibit an abnormally long OI stage; Wexler attributes this to a slower decline in the power of the UCC. Second, researchers have begun to examine the presence of O/RIs in second language learners, both adults and children (e.g., Eubank & Beck 1998; Gavruseva 2004; Haznedar & Schwartz 1997). Finally, a few studies (e.g., Schütze & Wexler 2000) have examined young children's comprehension of verbal morphology. It would be interesting to see how well a performance-based theory such as that proposed by Phillips can account for this expanded range of data.

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Relatively few researchers have made concrete, testable proposals in which performance factors, rather than non-target grammars, explain the errors that children produce (but see, e.g., Boster 1997; De Lange, Vasic & Avrutin 2009; Musolino 2009; Trueswell, Sekerina, Hilland & Logrip 1999). Yet psycholinguistic methods for assessing performance limitations have recently expanded (see Mazuka, Jincho & Oishi 2009), and the time is now ripe to combine independent measures of performance with precise ideas about the linguistic effects of performance limitations. We agree with Phillips' conclusion: "Of course, many questions remain concerning the specifics of the performance factors which I have invoked here, and this is a common weakness of theories which appeal to little understood performance factors. But this is no reason to ignore these factors; on the contrary, it makes it all the more important for future research to try to spell-out their details."

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