Copy raising and evidentiality: A view from child language

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There have been several recent studies of the acquisition of evidentiality as it is encoded in morphemes like aspect markers ([6], [8], [1]), tense markers ([7]) and embedding verbs ([4]). Because evidentiality is not the sole or primary semantic component of these morphemes, it is hard to isolate in these languages. In English, evidentiality is syntactically encoded in copy-raising constructions: Copy-raising constructions with raised subjects (CRCs) (1) can only be felicitously uttered by a speaker with direct evidence for the proposition, while non-raised CRCs (NCRCs) (2) are consistent with the speaker having either direct or indirect evidence.

In this talk, we examine the acquisition of evidentiality in English-speaking children ages 2 to 6 through their spontaneous production of (N)CRCs. Our study is based on an exhaustive examination of 45 corpora in the Childes database [5]. We show that children as young as two are adult-like in their ability to correlate the syntax of these constructions with the type of evidence they have. Additionally, we present the results of an adult experiment and adult Childes study that provide a framework for evaluating the child data.

Our adult (n=90) experiment tested the acceptability of raised and expletive CRCs in different evidential scenarios, exemplified in (3). Statistical analysis revealed significant main effects of syntax and evidence (p < .001), and a significant interaction effect (p < .001) (Figure 1). Thus, subjects showed a preference for (N)CRCs in every condition and a preference for direct scenarios over indirect. Importantly, there is a direct correlation between the syntax and the type of evidence available to the speaker: CRCs are only compatible with direct evidence while NCRCs are compatible with both direct and indirect evidence. These results are contrary to the predictions in [3] but consistent with the predictions and analysis in [2].

In our acquisition study we pulled all instances of copy raising with the predicates seem/look/sound like. We found 70 cases of which 54 could be coded for Evidence (direct/indirect) and Syntax (raised/unraised). Like the adults in our experiment (and childes study), the children favored NCRCs over CRCs and direct over indirect evidentials. Our central finding is that the children showed an adult-like distribution of copy raising sentences: while NCRCs were uttered in both direct (n=19) and indirect evidential contexts (n=14; see (4)), CRCs were uttered exclusively in direct evidence scenarios (n=21; see (5)). Table 1 presents the overall findings.

These results align and contrast in interesting ways with studies that have focused on the development of morphologically-encoded evidentiality. Our findings are consistent with the conclusions in [6], and [7] that suggest a somewhat later production of indirect evidentials, possibly for non-linguistic, conceptual reasons. However, the fact that English-speaking children follow the same time-line in their production of evidentials as children acquiring “evidential languages” like Turkish and Korean argues against the (neo-Whorfian) language > concept idea [1], viz. early attention to evidential source – and hence acquisition of the semantics of evidentiality – do not depend on having a language with obligatory, grammaticized evidentiality. Additionally we find that children produce the perceptual verbs earlier than seem, possibly supporting the claim [2] that copy-raising seem involves syntactic raising while the perceptual copy-raising verbs do not, but is more likely a frequency effect.

Examples
1. John looks like he is sick.
   a. speaker sees John; he looks tired and feverish
   b. #speaker sees John’s doctor’s note

\[\text{CRC} \quad \text{direct} \quad \text{indirect}\]
2. It looks like John is sick.
   a. speaker sees John; he looks tired and feverish
   b. speaker sees John’s doctor’s note

3. Direct auditory condition:
   Fola is sitting in her office, which is next to the Pierre’s office. Fola overhears John go into Pierre’s office and address him in a foreign language. Fola knows Pierre only speaks French, so she says:
   a. John seems/looks/sounds like he can speak French.
   b. It seems/looks/sounds like John can speak French.

4. a. Well it looks like I got all the Rabbits (Abe 47b1) NCRC – direct
   b. (building a puzzle) Looks like there’s another piece. (alltp1) NCRC – indirect

5. Dat clay doesn’t look like it’s sticky (.) but it is!! (Adam 52) CRC- direct

Figure 1: Adult means by evidence type and syntax.

Table 1. CRCs with evidentials in English-speaking children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidence</th>
<th>Syntax</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CRC</td>
<td>NCRC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Direct</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect</td>
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References
Cognition, 103: 253–299.