

Are Creoles Exceptional? Insights from Early Null Subjects

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While the acquisition of ‘Standard’ languages is vastly studied, the acquisition of creole languages remains a domain that has not been extensively investigated (apart from Adone 1994 and 2012, Adone & Vainikka 1999; Pratas & Hyams 2009). Various linguists have argued for or against the proposal that creoles constitute “exceptional” languages, more directly mirroring UG-driven properties (Bickerton 1984, 1999; DeGraff 2003; Mufwene 2000, among others), but little research has explored this prediction in terms of acquisition. We aim to contribute to repairing this lacuna by presenting findings of the first longitudinal study of a creole language, Jamaican Creole (JC). In particular, we intend to address the issue of the “target inconsistencies” (discrepancies w.r.t. the target grammar) typically found in language development: would the acquisition of a creole language also manifest such target inconsistencies? Or would the developmental pattern more directly converge to the target grammar? We have recorded the spontaneous speech of 6 JC children starting at age 18 - 23 months for a period of 18 months. This age range corresponds to the period in which syntax emerges in most children, and where target-inconsistent forms and structures have been documented in other languages (Guasti, 2004; Radford 1990; Rizzi & Friedemann 2000, etc). The corpus has been extensively analyzed for syntactic emergence and developments. The current talk focuses on target-inconsistency: the option of dropping the subject in the acquisition of a non-null subject language.

JC is a non-null subject language, but learners of JC clearly go through a stage where they omit subjects, as exemplified in (1) below:

- 1) $\frac{\quad}{\emptyset}$ *bai i*
 \emptyset buy it
 “(Mommy) bought it”

This stage is robustly attested, much as in the acquisition of non-creole non-null subject languages. We observed a slow, gradual decline in the production of sentences with null subjects; only after 35 months does the production drop under 10%. The truncation hypothesis (Rizzi 1993/94) predicts that null subjects in the acquisition of a non-null subject language, should only be possible when the subject is the specifier of the root. In view of testing this hypothesis in JC, we compared the occurrences of early null subjects in declaratives and in questions with overt (non-subject) wh-elements during the period where the production of null subjects is still significant, i.e. up to 35 months. Table (1) shows the production of overt wh elements over a 14 month period: only 6 cases were noted where the subject was dropped following an overt wh-element over a total of 2538 questions (0.2%). In sharp contrast, table (2) shows that null subjects are very frequent in declaratives over the same period (1571/5194, or 30%). In keeping with predictions of the truncation hypothesis, we observe that while subject omission is quite evident in early JC, it is virtually absent post overt wh-elements. This structural restriction has been observed in the development of other non-null subject languages: English (Valian 1991), French (Crisma 1992, Levow 1995), Dutch (Haegeman 1995, 1996), German (Clahsen, Kursawe and Penke 1995). The study of subjects following left-peripheral focus and other clause initial elements also confirms the root character of early null subjects in JC.

Our study shows that JC children go through a target-inconsistent root null subject phase. From the viewpoint of this target-inconsistency, the development of JC closely mirrors the development of well-studied non-creole languages, thus not lending support to the “exceptionality” thesis.

Figures and Tables

PARTICIPANT'S AGE (IN MONTHS)	OVERT NON-SUBJECT WH ELEMENT	WH ELEMENT WITH NULL SUBJECT
22	20	
23	25	
24	75	
25	81	
26	147	2
27	130	
28	159	2
29	194	1
30	188	1
31	369	
32	293	
33	400	
34	258	
35	199	
TOTAL	2538	6

Table 1: Production of overt wh questions and null subject

PARTICIPANT'S AGE (IN MONTHS)	TOTAL DECLARATIVES	DECLARATIVES WITH NULL SUBJECTS
22	35	32
23	149	106
24	170	113
25	239	169
26	288	161
27	442	243
28	274	141
29	412	149
30	374	109
31	478	100
32	583	73
33	576	64
34	481	62
35	693	49
TOTAL	5194	1571

Table 2: Production of declaratives and null subject

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