The Role of Non-finite Verb Forms in Early Hebrew Grammar
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The paper examines the gradual development of morphological specification in early acquisition of Hebrew, as reflected in young children’s use of non-finite verb forms. Non-finite verbs, in the sense of forms not explicitly marked for Tense and/or Aspect, have been shown to figure widely in children’s early verb usage in different languages (e.g., Blom & Wijnen, 2000 – in Dutch, Hyams, 1986 – in English, and Rizzi, 1993/1994 – in Italian).

Different explanations have been offered for children’s use of uninflected verbs in matrix clauses: as reflecting reliance on Root or Optional Infinitives in generative analyses (e.g., Haegeman, 1995; Hoover, Storkel, & Rice, 2012; Hyams, 2012; Wexler, 1993), or as demonstrating the generally stepwise path of acquisition in developmentally oriented approaches in a range of languages (e.g., Dressler & Karpf, 1995; Dressler, Kilani-Schoch, & Klampfer, 2003; Gathercole, Sebastián & Soto, 2002, Pizzuto & Caselli, 1994; Theakston & Lieven, 2008; Wittek & Tomasello, 2002).

Hebrew is an interesting case for this issues, since it lacks a single unequivocal “base” form of verbs (unlike English talk, sleep), and its infinitival form is marked by a non-stressed prefix, making it a less obvious candidate for initial verb production. Hebrew-acquiring children's early verbs have been shown to typically take the form of “bare stems” (Adam & Bat-El, 2008; Armon-Lotem & Berman, 2003; Berman & Armon-Lotem, 1996; Lustigman, 2012). These include non-affixed Past or Present Tense forms (e.g., haláx ‘went’ or boxé ‘is-crying’) as well as truncated forms that can be interpreted either as Infinitives (e.g., šon, tóax – corresponding to the Infinitivals lišón ‘to-sleep’, liftóax ‘to-open’, respectively), or are ambiguous between various target forms (e.g., tapés can stand for letapés ‘to-climb’, metapés 'climbs' yetapés 'will-climb' and other inflected forms in the paradigm).

The present study analyzes early verb forms from longitudinal samples of three Hebrew-acquiring children (mean age-range 1;4 – 2;2) in relation to the level of productivity of verb-affixation. Analysis revealed two main developmental phases: Initially, before they begin to master verb inflections productively, instead of using infinitival forms, Hebrew-acquiring children rely, for several months, on non-affixed “bare stems”. At the next phase, prefix-marked “full” infinitives occur – typically in well-formed syntactic contexts – along with productive use of affixed Present-tense (benoni) participial forms. Hebrew-acquiring children thus appear to make selective use of different types of non-finite forms (initial bare stems followed by Infinitives and benoni), each representing different levels of inflectional
knowledge. The analysis further shows that children shift from syntagmatic reliance on non-finite forms in combining elements of simple clauses to paradigmatically constrained environments by use of inflectional alternations. To account for these findings, it is argued that non-finiteness in early child language is itself a developmental concept that can be characterized in terms of several sub-phases, each of which demonstrates a particular level of linguistic knowledge, determined largely by typological features of the ambient language.

References


