

Loss of Specifiers in Slavic Reflexives: Acquisitional Structure Reanalysis and Diachronic Change

This paper aims to show that certain errors attested in the acquisition of the reflexive clitics *się* (SE-reflexive) in Polish can be attributed to the pressures imposed by Labeling Algorithm (LA) (Chomsky 2013, 2015) on syntactic structure, which are also responsible for many attested diachronic changes. I argue, therefore, that (i) acquisitional errors offer us a valuable insight into the syntactic settings of Universal Grammar and structural pressures operating wherein; and (ii) there is an important link between language change and language acquisition, which allows us to explain many diachronic processes from the perspective of language acquisition, e.g. as a result of diachronic reanalysis (as in Roberts 2007), and thus reduce the former to the latter. This paper shows that reflexive clitics in Slavic, both in the attested diachronic changes as well as acquisitional facts, give us an opportunity to see the postulated connection between language change and its acquisition (as e.g. in Yang 2000).

Polish children acquire SE-marked structures quite early; by age 3 their use of SE-reflexives is mostly adult-like (see also Rivero & Gołędzinowska 2002). However, close investigation of the corpora collected in CHILDES (MacWhinney 2002)) reveals some common errors, e.g. the omission of SE-clitics in contexts where they are obligatory in adult Polish. A small sample of children's utterances in (1) illustrates that children produce these SE-omissions in various contexts of the use of *się* in Slavic, such as anti-causatives (1a), body-grooming (1b), or inherently marked/reflexiva tantum (1c):

- (1)a. Zepsuła *(się) lampa b. Co *(się) kąpie c. pogniewała *(się)
 broke SE lamp which SE bathes got-angry SE
 Int: 'The lamp broke' Int: 'The one who is bathing' Int: 'She got angry'

(Basia 2;0;Szuman; *bas200*) (Kasia 1;10, Szuman corp, *kas110*) (Wawrzon 2;6, Weist-Jarosz *waw09*)

I will show that these errors can be explained by the pressures imposed on grammar by the labeling requirements, more specifically, by the preference for the head-phrase configuration {X,YP} and dispreference for a merger of two phrases {XP,YP}, as well as two heads {X,Y}. Taking the analysis of SE-reflexives as in Kayne (1975), Marantz (1984), or McGinnis (2004), where these elements are generated as the external argument, with the lower arguments raising to subject position, the omission of *się* in child language is in fact the instance of avoiding creation of the specifier (here, specifier of vP), and thus avoiding the dispreferred configuration of {XP,YP}. I will show that there is ample evidence for analyzing *się* as indeed generated in the subject position. SE-reflexives in Polish are attested in up to twelve different constructions, all of which necessarily involve θ -position for the external argument (with bare unaccusatives barring the use of this reflexive marking (2a), the only possible unaccusatives with SE being derived from the transitive counterparts (2b)).

- (2)a. Jan utonął (*się) w jeziorze. b. Jan utopił {wrogów/się} w jeziorze.
 Jan drowned SE in lake Jan drowned {enemies/SE} in lake
 'Jan drowned in the lake.' 'Jan drowned (his enemies) in the lake.'

The errors attested in the acquisition, when seen through the lenses of an appropriate theoretical basis, offer us a valuable glimpse into the early syntactic structure, revealing important information about the development of language and, as I show later, its diachrony. Here is how labeling theory can account for the facts discussed here.

Chomsky (2013, 2015) assumes that syntactic merger must be labeled at interfaces to be interpreted. In a head-phrase {X,YP} configuration, the Labeling Algorithm (LA) selects the closest head as the label for this Syntactic Object. In a phrase-phrase {XP,YP} merger, on the other hand, it is not obvious which one should serve as the label and something additional has to happen: either movement (3b-c), or feature-sharing between XP and YP, with the shared feature labeling the structure (3d-e).

- (3) a. {XP,YP} Phrase-Phrase Merger
 b. XP...{?{t_{XP},YP}} Minimal search of LA: ambiguous result (X or Y) & movement
 c. XP... {Y {t_{XP},YP}} Label → Head Y after XP has moved
 d. {?{XP_[F],YP<sub>[F]}} Minimal search of LA: ambiguous result (X or Y)
 e. {F {XP_[F],YP_{[F]}} Feature-sharing; Label → a prominent feature F}</sub>

Despite Chomsky presenting labeling of {X,YP} and {XP,YP} as instances of mechanical execution of LA at the point of Transfer, I argue that labeling in these two configurations is not equal. While in {X,YP} the labeling is done immediately, in case of {XP,YP} label determination has to resort to additional operations. This makes labeling of {XP,YP} merger more costly and therefore dispreferred by grammar.

