

Mimetics and Onomatopoeia as Japanese Root Infinitive Analogues

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Root Infinitives (RIs) are default non-finite verb forms which young children use in root clauses, while they are basically not possible in the target adult grammar. They have been found in the early speech of one- to two-year old children learning a number of different languages, both pro-drop and non-pro-drop languages, and their basic properties have been extensively documented elsewhere (Wexler 1994; Rizzi 1994, among others). We argue in this paper that the mimetics and onomatopoeia are extensively used by Japanese-speaking children are Root Infinitive Analogues (RIAs) based on a corpus analysis and a longitudinal study with a Japanese-speaking child.

First, we present the assumptions and basic theoretical concepts that underlie the proposal. There are two distinct stages in the development of so-called RIAs. The first stage begins at around the age of one: Tense Phrase is truncated (a la Rizzi (2004)) and children consistently use a single form (imperative). The second stage is found at around the age of two: there is Tense Phrase but the features in T are underspecified and hence, children optionally use “erroneous” non-nominative subjects and infinitive verb forms in a root clause. Then, we show that Japanese-speaking children, at around age one, produce Verb-*ta* forms and onomatopoeia/mimetics (sometimes associated with *ta*) as typical RIAs. We argue that these forms are found at the first stage of RIAs, and they exhibit the Modal Reference Effects (Hoekstra and Hyams 1999:241) and the Eventivity Constraint (Hoekstra and Hyams 1999:242) just like typical RIs observed in European languages.

The fact that care-takers do not use such mimetics and onomatopoeia as RIAs would naturally suggest that children do not merely keep track of the frequencies of a given word that occurs in the input. Rather, very young Japanese-speaking children make use of mimetics and onomatopoeia as possible lexical items to phonetically realize their knowledge of grammar, and to acquire the syntactic categories of their target language.