Carrots eat rabbits: Child language use from a Dynamic Syntax perspective

In this paper I argue that Dynamic Syntax (DS) is uniquely well-placed as a grammar that can account for the idiosyncratic nature of child language acquisition, and child language use, for several reasons, and attempt to analyse some evidence from child language acquisition studies using DS.

Firstly, DS is a lexicalised formalism, with 'lexical items' able to represent different levels and amounts of information, including single words or chunks of words, which are dynamically created or modified through interactions. In adult language, chunks of macros can be built through routinisation (Gargett, 2011), but the evidence from child language acquisition suggests that this works both ways with children's early utterances consisting of multifunctional single word utterances, which can also be composed of several 'words' which later get decomposed.

Second, in DS, notions of interaction and context are key. Despite the obviousness of the observation that a child's language use is constrained by what they want to achieve and with whom, many studies on the asymmetries between language production and comprehension simply fail to take this into account (Hendriks and Koster, 2010).

Thirdly, although comprehension and production in DS use precisely the same mechanisms, I argue that the lexical search and goal tree subsumption requirement for production mean that the comprehension/production asymmetry should be expected – not just in child language, but for all language users. This asymmetry, which typically (but not always) means children understand more than they produce, should also be viewed in the context of linguistic utterances as actions. What a child needs to comprehend from an utterance does not include its syntactic categories or roles, but rather what is an appropriate response i.e. what are the utterance's affordances within this interaction. While Eshghi et al 2013 show that a DS grammar can be induced from child-directed speech, this presupposes more structure (in the form of a complete TTR record) than the child may have (or need to have for the purposes of the interaction) at this point in time.

Finally, DS does not require a level of abstract understanding that very young, successfully interactive children do not possess– as anyone who has ever had a conversation with a two-year-old will attest, contra Tomasello's (2007) claim that the "acquisition of most cultural skills, including skills of linguistic communication, depend on a species-unique form of social learning involving intention-reading".

Eshghi, A. and Hough, J. and Purver, M. (2013) Incremental grammar induction from child-directed dialogue utterances, *Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Workshop on Cognitive Modeling and Computational Linguistics (CMCL)*, 94-103.

Gargett, A. (2011) Incrementality and the Dynamics of Routines in Dialogue, Dialogue & Discourse 2(1) 171-197.

Hendriks, P. and Koster, C. (2010) Production/comprehension asymmetries in language acquisition, *Lingua* 120(8), 1887-1897.

Tomasello, M. (2007) Construction grammar for kids, *Constructions*