

## The emergence of syntactic structure through the lens of interaction

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### Abstract

In this talk, we introduce an account of syntactic acquisition that challenges the idea that syntactic development begins at the subclausal level (VP; Radford, 1990) and gradually matures, or grows, from the bottom up (Borer & Wexler, 1987; Friedman et al., 2021). Based on evidence from early vocatives and invariant tags, we propose that syntactic growth is inward, rather than upward. Interactional language situated at the top of the tree combines with words at the bottom at the earliest stages of verbal interaction, suggesting that syntax mediates turn-taking and early words. This contradicts traditional accounts of syntactic acquisition. The exchanges in (1-2) exemplify the interactional nature of one-word utterances and 'telegraphic speech' as they are used to request a response (rather than merely describing the world) and, in case of (2), combine this request with a quasi-propositional thought.

- (1) Naima: Mommy? (1;01 - Providence Corpus (Demuth et al., 2006))  
 Mother: Yes.
- (2) Chuck: Out ball, huh? (1;08 - Bates Corpus (Bates et al., 1988))  
 Mother: Ball out!

Based on two corpus-studies from early talkers in the CHILDES database we explore the acquisition of vocatives and *huh*. We propose that children use language to bridge two domain-general capacities (social interaction and classification) at the very outset of the acquisition process. Early interactional language, such as (1-2), present us with a window into how even morphologically invariant units of language gradually grow in complexity - in parallel with the expansion of the syntactic spine. The earliest productions of interactional language do not yet show any evidence for integrating interlocutors' beliefs, and hence the Common Ground management (CG) properties found in adult uses. Our *Inward Growing Spine Hypothesis* captures the observation that this CG management function begins to surface in a second stage, albeit without a distinction of Speaker- and Addressee-oriented beliefs. This distinction is present in a third developmental stage. In a final pruning stage, children arrive at an adult-like grammar with highly specialised CG marking that incorporates all cues of the target language and avoids overgeneralisations attested in early child language output.