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# The developmental advantage of restructuring verbs: a Growing Trees perspective

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**Abstract**

**THE ISSUE:** The acquisition of clausal complements has received considerable attention in the literature over the past decades ([10]; [6], a.o.). A fairly stable empirical result is that these structures appear quite late, possibly given their structural and computational complexity. Nonetheless, [2] noticed that complements emerge even before the age of 2 but exclusively with *want, get, have,* and *go* (an advantage also observed in language-impaired children; [4]). The question is why some infinitival complements seem easier than others, and why some control verbs would appear earlier than others.

**THE SYNTACTIC HYPOTHESIS:** These verbs belong to the class of restructuring verbs ([8],[11]). In an influential proposal, [3] proposed that restructuring verbs are functional heads, akin to modals and auxiliaries, assuming the monoclausal behavior of restructuring verbs directly following from the fact that they do not constitute a case of complementation at all.

1. $[_{TP}$ John [... $[_{FP}$ started [ ... to $[_{VP}$ run]]]]]

**THE DEVELOPMENTAL HYPOTHESIS:** Under the Growing Trees Hypothesis ([5]), syntactic development proceeds bottom-up via the subsequent availability of three distinct syntactic zones (Fig.1). If restructuring verbs are all functional heads we expect them to be acquired early, already within the first stage of development before finite and control complements are acquired (at the 3$^{rd}$ stage, i.e. once the highest ForceP layer is available).

**STUDY**: We collected CHILDES data from 11 Italian children from the Antelmi, Calambrone, D'Odorico, and Tonelli corpora (Fig. 3) targeting the occurrences of non-finite complements (excluding root infinitives such as imperatives), aiming at the restructuring/control distinction and comparing it with other structures relevant to the left periphery (e.g., topic, wh-questions).

**RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS:** Most infinitive-taking verbs were restructuring verbs, constituting the major case of sentential "complementation" also compared with finite embedding (Fig.2, Fig.4). Our result is fully expected under the hypotheses adopted above. Considering extensive research highlighting the developmental challenges posed by defective structures (structures with intermediate layers missing: [1] for reduced relative clauses; [7], [9], on ECM structures) this result would be hardly explained under the competing biclausal approach to restructuring.