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## The acquisition of "optional" movement

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# The Acquisition of “Optional” Movement

Shalom Zuckerman



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## The Acquisition of "Optional" Movement

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One of the most remarkable facts of language acquisition is that perfect results are achieved based on examples alone. Children receive no frontal lectures and no one explains them how to talk, they are simply presented – unintentionally – with correct forms of the language they will acquire.

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## Preface

The school of Generative Grammar associated with the work of Noam Chomsky, asserts that natural language is represented in the human brains in the form of a set of rules. This set of rules, which is said to be innate and common to all human beings, enables us to generate an infinite number of different sentences – all stemming from a finite database of single words. Each sentence generated by this rules is said to be a grammatical sentence and to be interpretable. This relation between grammatical sentences and their interpretation is the essence of human language from the Generative Grammar point of view.

Within this framework the task of language acquisition takes a specific form. The child, exposed to input sentences, has to establish the relation between grammatical sentences and interpretation in his native language.

This dissertation takes issue with a specific situation in the acquisition process: what happens when two grammatical sentences with different word orders seem to lead to the same interpretation. Is this a problem for the child? And if yes, how does he overcome it?

This situation of two grammatical word orders that point to one interpretation is referred to as *optionality*. Optionality seems to be a peripheral phenomenon in some languages. In others, however, it seems to be more common and leads to a feeling that there are many forms to each sentence (so called 'free word order' languages). Moreover as we shall see in this dissertation, apparent optionality can arise in language acquisition, in cases where the child fails to distinguish input structures that are supposed to carry different interpretations.

In order to investigate the way children cope with such cases of optionality, this dissertation reviews five such cases as they are manifested in child language, as well as in the adult language.

Two central claims are made in this dissertation: the first is that true optionality does not exist and that sentences that seem to be identical in interpretation are in fact distinct (therefore "optionality" with quotation marks). The second is that when such "optionality" appears in the input to children, they will not accommodate both options in their grammar but rather prefer one of them over the other. It is further predicted that as a tool for selection between these competitive options, children use the principles of economy which play a central role in the computational process in current linguistic theory.

The research consists of an experimental investigation of child and adult language, aiming to show that with respect to the mentioned cases of "optionality", they are distinct from each other.

The dissertation is divided into two parts. In Part I the theoretical notions of optionality and economy are discussed and predictions are made with respect to children's production of "optional" structures. In Part II these predictions are tested through a series of experiments and conclusions are drawn. A summary in Dutch appears at the end.