

Patterns of Cree preverb usage in early child language: A longitudinal case study

Burak Oney

This study offers a preliminary investigation into the acquisition of preverbs in Northern East (NE) Cree, for one child code-named “Daisy”.

The first study on preverb acquisition in NE Cree was conducted by Brittain & Rose (2021), in which they examined a younger child code-named Ani (2;01 to 4;03). They argue that Ani’s pattern of development suggests a learning path which is driven by grammatical complexity, as Ani’s preverb inventory consists only of what they refer to as “phonologically” and “positionally” stable forms. Ani uses preverbs with the potentially more complex conjunct order seven months later than with the independent. Also, she does not combine preverbs even though it is quite common in the language, and she used each preverb in her inventory with one inflection type only, even where a choice of inflections was available. My research revolves around these findings, and in addition to this, in order to see a sample of preverb usage in child-directed speech (CDS), one session of the adult input was considered.

Findings show Daisy using even the supposedly more challenging forms from the earliest session (at age 3;08). Moreover, based on the research questions examined in this study, no pattern of acquisitional development emerged in Daisy’s usage of preverbs, contrasting with findings for Ani. Crucially, Daisy’s pattern of preverb production resembles more closely that of the adult as represented by the CDS: both speakers pair preverbs more frequently with the conjunct than with the independent; both frequently use combinations of two and sometimes three preverbs; and, where a given preverb allows combining with more than one type of inflection, both Daisy and the adult use varieties of inflection. Brittain & Rose found that Ani never uses initial change with preverbs, while Daisy and the adult both do, but with relatively few preverb types.

References:

Brittain, J., & Rose, Y. (2021). The development of preverbs in Northern East Cree: A longitudinal case study. *First Language, Special Issue: The Acquisition of Complex Predicates*, 1–30.