

## Variability in Production is the Rule, Not the Exception, at the Onset of Multi-Word Speech

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To cite this article: Virginia Valian (2024) Variability in Production is the Rule, Not the Exception, at the Onset of Multi-Word Speech, *Language Learning and Development*, 20:1, 76-78, DOI: [10.1080/15475441.2023.2239804](https://doi.org/10.1080/15475441.2023.2239804)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15475441.2023.2239804>



Published online: 06 Feb 2024.



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# Variability in Production is the Rule, Not the Exception, at the Onset of Multi-Word Speech

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## ABSTRACT

The first stage of combinatorial speech is better described as variable than uniform. Talk of variants obscures two different aspects of language (knowledge and use) and two different aspects of language development – acquisition of the grammar (competence) and deployment of the grammar in speaking and listening (performance). Null subjects and Determiners are examples in English of early variability. The limited data in other languages make it impossible to make sweeping claims about early acquisition.

How does (multi-word) language acquisition begin? Shin and Miller (2022) suggest that children begin acquisition with productions that fail to exploit the variability that exists in the adult language. They claim, for example, that children at the beginning of Spanish acquisition uniformly fail to include (pronominal) subjects (Grinstead et al., 2013). I suggest that the hypothesized first stage – absence of variation – does not exist. Rather, children are variable right from the beginning of combinatorial speech.

## “Variants”

Shin and Miller (2022) use the term “variant” to discuss a wide range of phenomena, merging together two phenomena – those that are, arguably, grammatically organized and those that are, again, arguably, pragmatically or conceptually organized. As one example, Shin and Miller give examples of complement clauses in English where the complementizer is optional – “I think (that) Gabriel is nice.” Grimshaw (1997), however, notes the nonuniformity of *that* complements, as in the contrast below. The unacceptability of a. relative to b. is related to the structure of the CP and the IP. By talking simply about variants, Shin and Miller obscure the difference between pragmatic and syntactic phenomena and do not consider the possibility that children’s performance is sensitive to such a difference. By looking only at *that* complements, they also obscure the syntactic similarities and differences among different types of complement clauses, again distinctions that children might be sensitive to.

- (a) \*She swore/insisted/thought(,) most of the time(,) they accepted this solution.
- (b) She swore/insisted/thought that(,) most of the time(,) they accepted this solution.

## Uniform null subject languages

The difference between grammar and pragmatics arises pointedly in a variety of structures. Consider two different children acquiring Spanish. A has adult knowledge of the syntax of subjects in Spanish but does not know what the felicity conditions are for using the first person singular pronoun (1ps),

and hence does not produce pronominal subjects. B, on the other hand, lacks some syntactic knowledge, perhaps about what a subject is, or that both lexical and pronominal subjects can be overt, or that subject inversion is possible, or the possible syntactic positions of subjects. Merging felicity conditions with grammatical status makes it impossible to distinguish between A and B and impossible to understand the underlying mechanisms that produce the observed behavior.

When Shin and Miller discuss subject use in child Spanish, they sometimes speak about subjects and sometimes about pronominal subjects; the data they present are limited to pronouns. Even if they think that lexical subjects are produced for pragmatic reasons – to clarify who or what is being talked about – they need to say whether they would expect the child to produce lexical subjects never, variably, or consistently, and they need to say what relation they are assuming between lexical and pronominal subjects.

### **Non-null subject languages**

Shin and Miller do not consider production of (pronominal) subjects in English, perhaps because they take non-null subject languages as invariant. The English input does, however, display variability. Parents in the Manchester corpus (Theakston et al., 2001) produce subjects on average about 80% of the time (Chen et al., 2016). Shin and Miller should predict that English-speaking children would therefore produce subjects 100% of the time, because the null subject variant occurs relatively infrequently. Children in non-null subject languages do not, however, produce subjects at the adult rate, let alone at greater than the adult rate. Valian (1991) presented quantitative data from 5 children with Mean Lengths of Utterance (MLUs) below 2.0, who produced subjects about 70% of the time.

### **Competence and performance**

Let's assume for the moment that<sup>1</sup> very young Spanish learners initially do not produce pronominal subjects. Why would that be? When Shin and Miller claim that children initially only produce one variant of those that are available, they rely partly on frequency as an explanation. Overt pronominal subjects are relatively uncommon in adult Spanish, so a child could regularize the input by never producing a pronominal subject. Such an explanation, however, would only hold for what the child says, without implications for what the child knows. Lack of production does not entail lack of knowledge.

To expand on that point: when a child does not produce a grammatical element, whether it is a closed-class word like a Determiner, or a complementizer, or a tense or agreement or plural marker, researchers have no way of knowing what the basis for that lack of production is without further exploration. Determiners, for example, are variably expressed in English, and the conditions under which a Determiner is obligatory are hard to state. Children produce some Determiners from the onset of combinatorial speech. Production and comprehension studies suggest that even very young children treat Determiners as an equivalence class (Melançon & Shi, 2015; Valian, 2013, 2016; Valian et al., 2009). Rather than showing that children produce only a single form, early productions in English show production of multiple forms.

When we talk about acquisition, we can be talking about the development of the child's knowledge in different domains, or we can be talking about children's ability to apply their knowledge on specific occasions, or we can be talking simply about what the child produces when. It is not clear from Shin and Miller's discussion exactly what kind of development they are talking about.

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<sup>1</sup>Notice that this complementizer is syntactically obligatory, because of the placement of the adjunct *for the moment*.

### Methodological points

As Shin and Miller note, the fact that a child's productions show variability at one age does not mean that her productions show variability at an earlier age. Their claim is lack of variability at the earliest productive points. Among her one-word utterances and utterances consisting of a single word repeated several times, Naima (Providence corpus) at 13 months produced "the camera there" and at 14 months produced "truckie went by." It is hard to get earlier than that to show variability in the use of Determiners. Children like Naima might, however, be precocious, and utterances like "a ball" and "a shoe" might actually be "uh ball" and "uh shoe." A few examples of variability do not make the case, but nor do Shin and Miller, who consistently make sweeping claims on the basis of one or two children's data, make their case. Other researchers have concluded that subjects are present very early on, with similarly little data (Bel, 2003, with Spanish and Catalan; Ezeizabarrena, 2013, with Basque).

None of these data are convincing, whether for or against the claim that children are not variable in their first productions. The first stage that Shin and Miller argue for cannot be substantiated by their data, and the contradictory claim vis-à-vis pronominal subjects in null subject languages cannot be substantiated by existing data, either. Where data are more plentiful, as in English, variability seems to be the rule rather than the exception, contrary to Shin and Miller's claims.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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