This paper concerns a particular problem raised by Mandarin Chinese pronouns, viz. they appear to obey a linear precedence constraint unlike English (e.g., Huang (1982)). This calls into question the nature of UG and how it can account for these cross-linguistic differences.

In this paper, experimental analyses of children’s (null and lexical) pronoun interpretation in Chinese and English argue for universal ‘structure dependence’ (including ‘command’) in the Initial State and against either a universal or a language-specific role of ‘linear precedence’ alone. A linear precedence effect is developmentally achieved only in Chinese.

The acquisition results provoke a revised theoretical analysis of the grammar of pronouns in Chinese and a strong form of UG. We argue that it is not necessary to propose a language-specific definition of ‘command’ in Chinese in order to explain the apparent linearity effects on Chinese pronouns, and it is not necessary to propose a linear precedence rule in UG. Rather, consideration of an articulated structure of Chinese NP, which is motivated by the acquisition data, explains essential differences between lexical ta pronominals and null pronominals in Chinese and accounts for linearity effects in the adult language. We propose that ta pronominals are not themselves in argument position and are not N₀ heads. They are not equivalent to null pronominals.

Together the experimental and theoretical results support a ‘strong continuity’ theory of UG in which universal “principles and parameters” of UG continuously constrain the child’s mapping from UG to a specific-language grammar. Language development, and the Chinese precedence effect for pronouns, lies in pragmatic/semantic features connected with the lexical realization of the specifier of a pronominal NP, not in the development of UG.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we present the results of a set of comparative studies which were designed to investigate children’s acquisition of the grammar of pronominals in Mandarin Chinese and English. In the course of this investigation we are led to new insights regarding the grammar of Chinese pronominals and its relation to Universal Grammar (UG). This paper represents one component of a cross-linguistic project in which first language acquisition of English and several other languages are compared in order to investigate the nature of principles and parameters in UG. We assume the theory of UG (as summarized in (1)) to provide a model of the “Initial State” for language development (cf. Lust (to appear, in preparation)).

Theory of Universal Grammar:
“... UG provides an innate ‘precondition for experience’ which appears to be the critical factor in determining the course and result of language learning” (Chomsky (1988: 78)). “… so we may say that a specific theory of UG is descriptively adequate if it gives a correct account of the initial state … a descriptively adequate theory of UG provides an explanation for the fact that under the boundary conditions of experience the child comes to know that the facts are as characterized by descriptively adequate grammar” (Chomsky (1981: 36)).

On the basis of the experimental results from the current study, and those from previous studies, several points concerning children’s development of knowledge of the grammar of pronouns will be argued:

First, in spite of the ostensible differences between Chinese grammar and English grammar, children acquiring Chinese and those acquiring English share an initial hypothesis regarding the “local” domain in which pronouns are free. Language-specific differences in locality, specifically in type of ‘command’ – which had been proposed in order to explain apparent language-specific linearity effects in Chinese (e.g., Huang (1982)) – are not supported in the Initial State; neither is a linear precedence rule.

Second, on the surface, Chinese children appear to differ from Chinese adults in some of their hypotheses about pronouns. Chinese child language reflects the essence of UG, rather than the Chinese adult model.

Third, in accordance with UG principles, for both Chinese- and English-acquiring children, the domain in which pronouns are free is based on the structure or configuration of the sentences rather than on surface linearity alone. A uniform definition of locality can account for the data.

Fourth, in accordance with UG, both English- and Chinese-acquiring children consult a configurational parameter concerning their specific language (i.e., CP “head direction” or “principle branching direction”) in order to establish a grammatical theory about pronoun domain. It is because of this that Chinese-speaking children differ from English-speaking children in the way they exhibit a linearity (or a directionality/precedence) effect on their early pronoun interpretations.

Fifth, the relation between lexical and null pronominals in Chinese adult grammar is developmentally achieved through a process of lexical learning which involves the acquisition of the features of the third person *ta* and its relation to a null NP head. Our acquisition results lead us to a new theory of pronouns in Chinese. We suggest that *ta* itself is not in an argument position (i.e., A position) but in Spec of NP. This new proposal obviates