The purpose of this paper is to argue for a maturational schedule in language development involving the gradual reformulation of UG-determined biunique relations. We investigate an early stage (about 2;0) in child Italian which shows object agreement with a participle for lexical objects, a phenomenon not attested in standard adult Italian. We provide an analysis for participle agreement in adult Italian, based on Spec-Head agreement. We then argue that the child analyzes participle phrases with direct objects as APs, rather than as transitive VPs, resulting in an extension of Spec-Head agreement to the relations between the participle and its object. This error on the part of the child, we argue, derives from the existence in the child's grammar of the maturationally-determined Unique External Argument Proto Principle (UEAPP), requiring every predicative element to have its own unique subject. Independent evidence for UEAPP is provided by the confirmed prediction that children in the object agreement stage do not use unergative verbs in the passato prossimo. Additional evidence from early Polish further confirms our analysis, and we further show that the null subject stage in child language follows from UEAPP. We conclude by outlining the maturational schedule we propose.

0. Maturation and Explanation in Language Acquisition

Ever since the early days of generative grammar, linguists have in principle considered linguistic theory responsible for an explanation of language acquisition. For quite a while now, linguists have dealt in concrete terms with the question of how it is possible for the child to construct her grammar – the question of learnability. More recently, linguistic theory has reached a level of specificity where it has become possible to also begin dealing with the question of the course of linguistic development. It has become apparent that this question, of the course of development, interacts in a mutually revealing way with the study of learnability and, in fact, with the study of the nature of UG itself.

In an attempt to explain the course of linguistic development and the learnability properties of language, the question of the maturation of linguistic abilities has been raised in a new form. We have argued (Borer and Wexler 1987) that many theoretical and empirical considerations converge to suggest that specific elements of UG mature. In particular, there

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seems to be no way to explain the precise timing of the development of richly structured linguistic abilities as the result of learning. The known results concerning the timing of the appearance of linguistic abilities, on a learning account, would lead to the necessity for extrinsic ordering in UG, with all of the well-known undesirable consequences. On the other hand, an assumption of maturation can explain the delay of particular abilities. The postulation of the maturational basis of linguistic abilities also casts the study of Universal Grammar solidly within a biological framework, where maturation is central to development.

In this paper we investigate some remarkable phenomena in early child language. The phenomena were reported over 10 years ago and have so far defied convincing explanation. However, a maturational theory appears to provide a natural explanation for these phenomena, and to furthermore predict a number of apparently quite diverse phenomena occurring at the same age (around two years old). Such a prediction is a crucial ingredient in the support for a maturational theory in biology or psychology.

The organization of this paper is as follows. In the next section we will present the central language acquisition puzzle we will be concerned with in this study: a case of object agreement in early Italian, which is not attested in adult Italian. We will then show that a prima facie plausible overgeneralization solution to the problem is not feasible (Section 2). In Section 3 we will offer a syntactic analysis for the adult construction, showing it to follow squarely from UG principles. In Section 4 we will offer an analysis for the early grammar, showing it to obey UG principles as well. In Section 5 we will discuss and dismiss a right-dislocation analysis for the early grammar data. The difference between the early grammar and the mature grammar will be discussed in Section 6, where it will be proposed that the early grammar represents a proto-UG, related to the adult UG in a principled fashion. The consequences of a proposed proto-principle of UG will be explored. Some additional verified predictions of the proposed proto-principle will be discussed in Section 7. By way of conclusion, Section 8 will propose a general maturational schedule, tying the maturational step proposed in this study to one previously proposed in Borer and Wexler (1987), and outlining a theory of Proto-UG.

1. Object Agreement in Early Child Italian

The central problem that we will deal with concerns the well known phenomena of participle agreement in the present perfect in Italian (passato prossimo). In that language, the past participle of an unaccusative/ergative verb (verbs taking the essere auxiliary, see Burzio, (1986) for