

## **Learning English Yes-No Questions: Variation Shapes Acquisition**

Researchers studying the acquisition of English yes-no questions have focused exclusively on canonical, inverted forms (e.g. 'do you like ice cream?'). Although most non-canonical questions (those where no inversion is present) have been ignored, they play an important role in learning. In fact, adults produce many such questions in their speech to children: auxiliary-less or subjectless elliptical questions ('you help mumma last night?', 'don't like cereal?'); uninverted assertive questions ('she said no?'), and predicateless fragmentary questions ('a lamb?'). Excluding these from studies of acquisition misrepresents the target language and underestimates the degree of correctness of children's productions. This compromises the generality and usefulness of previous results. Children don't simply ignore non-canonical interrogatives to "trigger" inversion from canonical ones: in fact, they pay attention to the former and produce them earlier than the latter. When the whole range of relevant data is considered, new developmental paths of plausible generality come to light. Data from two case studies show that children's production of yes-no questions over time follows a U-shaped curve determined by the early emergence of non-canonical forms, a subsequent trough during which the system reorganizes, and the later emergence of canonical forms. This developmental path is explained by an acquisition process where early production of non-canonical forms makes canonical ones more accessible to the child. For example, a child who produces 'you like coffee?' is only a step away from 'do you like coffee?' This questions the reality of a learnability problem associated with inversion (as is claimed in generative acquisition theory) and has implications for studies of wh-questions, yes-no questions in second language acquisition, cross-linguistic studies (e.g., variation and acquisition in French questions), dialectal and creole studies (e.g. inversion in AAVE), and determinants of variation in adult English.