

# Null Subjects and Verbal Agreement in L1 Acquisition

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# Review:

## L1 syntactic errors in English, Ages 2-5

### 1. Null subjects

- Ate meat
- Want more apple.
- Tickles me.

### 2. Impoverished verbal agreement

- This one go here.
- Papa have it.

# Review:

## A connection between these 2 errors

- Cross linguistic pattern: languages that allow null subjects are languages where **all forms in the verbal agreement show over subject agreement, or none of them do**

All forms show agreement			No forms show agreement	
	Italian		Chinese	
	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural.
1 <sup>st</sup>	<i>parl-o</i>	<i>parl-iamo</i>	<i>shuo</i>	<i>shuo</i>
2 <sup>nd</sup>	<i>parl-i</i>	<i>parl-ate</i>	<i>shuo</i>	<i>shuo</i>
3 <sup>rd</sup>	<i>parl-a</i>	<i>parl-ono</i>	<i>shuo</i>	<i>shuo</i>

## Review:

### A connection between these 2 errors

- Nina Hyams's (1992) idea: children make the null subject error in English, **because** they are at a stage where they think the English verbal agreement paradigm has no overt agreement.
- When they learn that the English verbal agreement paradigm is **not** uniformly null (it has 3sg “-s”), then they stop dropping their subjects.

# Typical L1 syntactic errors in English, Ages 2-5

1. Null subjects
2. Impoverished verbal agreement
- 3. Subject case errors**

# Subject Case Errors

- L1 learners of English often use accusative case on the subject instead of nominative (Valian 1991, Rispoli 1994):
  - a. 'Him go'
  - b. 'Me take it'
  - c. 'Him fall down'
  - d. 'Her have a big mouth.' (Nina, 2;2-3)

# Subject Case Errors

- Interestingly, children virtually never make the reverse error, replacing nominative with accusative:
- So, we *don't* see things like:
  - Mary hit he
  - Don't push I
  - You saw we.

# NOM vs. ACC forms in the input

- In the input, ratio of nominative forms (he/she/I) to accusative forms (him/her/me) is about 6:1.
- Children's errors are in only one direction, and strongly *against* the input frequencies. (Child only substitutes the non-frequent accusative for frequent nominative.)



# Interaction between finiteness and case

Schutze and Wexler 1996, spontaneous production data from Nina:

<b>Subject</b>	<b>With finite verb</b>	<b>With    nonfinite verb</b>
He+She	255 (95%)	139 (54%)
Him+Her	14 (5%)	120 (46%)

- Nonfinite Verb: Either Accusative *or* Nominative
- Finite Verb: Almost completely Nominative

***Why this pattern??***