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Why do children fail to overgeneralize the progressive inflection?*

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The progressive inflection *-ing* appears to be the earliest verb inflection acquired by children learning English as their first language (Brown 1973, Kuczaj 1976). However, unlike other verb and noun inflections, the progressive is rarely, if ever, overgeneralized to inappropriate forms. Brown suggests that this dearth of overgeneralization errors might be due to the child learning whether individual verbs are '*-ing*-able' (i.e. take the progressive inflection), such that the child only applies the progressive to verbs which he has coded as *-ing*-able. As Brown notes, this same acquisition strategy would also yield no overgeneralization errors for other inflections, yet these types of errors occur with other inflections, such as the regular past tense, plural, and third person present singular forms (Brown 1973, Cazden 1968, Ervin 1964, Kuczaj 1976, in press, Menyuk 1963, 1964, 1969, Slobin 1971*a*, 1971*b*). Brown suggests that perhaps the learning strategy applied to the progressive differs from that applied to later-learned inflections. The child may rely on his determination of whether a verb is *-ing*-able in his early application of the progressive, but abandon this cumbersome acquisition strategy when it comes to learning the past tense, plural, and third person singular present inflections. In these latter instances the child somehow learns the rules underlying the applications of the inflections, and so makes overgeneralization errors because he has not yet learned which forms are exceptions to the regular rules. In the case of the progressive, the child learns individual instances rather than a general rule and so makes no overgeneralization errors.

It is also possible that the child's failure to overgeneralize the progressive form is due to a difference between the progressive and those inflections which are overgeneralized. Consider first verbs which take the regular past tense (e.g. *walked*, *kissed*) and those which do not (e.g. *ate*, *fell*). Both the regular and irregular verbs express 'pastness', but only the regular verbs are transformed from the generic form (e.g. *walk*) to the past tense form (e.g. *walked*) via a regular transformation (the addition of the suffix *-ed*). This type of difference also holds between regular verbs which take the third person inflection *-s* and irregular forms which do not, and between regular nouns which take the plural inflection *-s* and irregular forms which do not. In other words, those inflections which are

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overgeneralized share a common trait – their irregular forms express the meaning that is expressed by the regular forms, albeit in an unprincipled fashion. The child's overgeneralizations do not alter the meaning of the forms, but only the form *per se* (by making an irregular form a regular form). However, the progressive does not have the equivalent of regular and irregular forms. The notion of an irregular verb for a particular inflection implies that the verb is somehow transformed in regard to the meaning expressed by that inflection, though not via the application of a regular rule or set of regular rules. Such verbs do not exist for the progressive. The progressive meaning is always expressed via the *-ing* suffix, so that there are no irregular progressive forms. Given this striking difference between the progressive and the inflections which are commonly overgeneralized, overgeneralizations of the progressive, if they occurred, would be of a different type than those for the past tense, plural, etc. The progressive lacks irregular forms, and it is precisely these forms which are needed in order for the traditional type of overgeneralization to occur.

So we need to think in terms of two types of overgeneralizations. Type A constitutes those overgeneralizations which consist of a regular rule being applied to an irregular form (e.g. the past tense, the third person singular present, the plural). The regular rule may be applied to the generic irregular form (e.g. *eated*) or to the past, plural, or third person irregular form (e.g *ated*). Type B constitutes those overgeneralizations which consist of the application of an inflection to verbs which do not take the inflection in the adult vernacular, but which are not irregular verbs (e.g. *knowing*, *believing*). The literature abounds with examples of Type A overgeneralizations, but instances of Type B overgeneralizations are virtually non-existent. (In an investigation in which the spontaneous speech of 15 children was sampled, Kuczaj (1976) observed only one possible Type B overgeneralization error, *we're not seeing her*, even though the children studied had ample opportunity to make such errors.) It appears that the child overgeneralizes regular rules only to those forms which he has ascertained are capable of expressing the meaning expressed by the regular rule, these forms being irregular forms. For example, both regular and irregular past tense forms express pastness, and so the child overgeneralizes the regular rule for pastness to the irregular forms which express pastness. However, inflections such as the progressive which do not have irregular forms will not be overgeneralized to inappropriate forms since the inappropriate forms are not capable of expressing the meaning ('temporary duration') which the appropriate forms can express. In essence, then, overgeneralization of a linguistic inflection seems to be based on the child apprehending a similarity in meaning between the appropriate forms and the overgeneralized forms. This similarity exists for Type A forms, but not for Type B forms.

There are, then, two possible reasons for the lack of overgeneralization of the progressive morpheme. Perhaps, as Brown suggests, children do not overgeneralize the progressive because they learn on an individual basis which verbs

take the progressive. Or perhaps children do not overgeneralize the progressive because there are no irregular verbs to which it can be overgeneralized. If Brown is correct, then one might ask whether children ever learn to use the progressive in novel instances or whether they just continue to add to their list of *-ing*-able verbs. Although it is possible that our adult knowledge of the use of the progressive is based on the continuous storing of information about individual verbs, it seems plausible that at some point in the acquisition of the progressive, knowledge about the POTENTIAL uses of the progressive is acquired, so that one can apply the progressive to instances that one has never heard.

The following is a presentation of some data that suggest that this type of knowledge is acquired, and that it is acquired in the pre-school years. Brown did not find any overgeneralization errors for the progressive, and apparently he also did not find any truly novel applications of the progressive. In Kuczaj (1976) several genuinely creative uses of the progressive were found. These instances are not overgeneralization errors, but are generalized uses of the progressive. As is the case for overgeneralization errors, these instances of creative generalized use provide evidence that the child has acquired some abstract knowledge concerning the application of the inflection in question. Just as *broked*, *goed* and *mans* are forms that the child creates on the basis of abstract knowledge rather than by memorizing each individual form, the generalized forms of the progressive show that the child is no longer simply listing which verbs are *-ing*-able. The child has acquired some abstract knowledge about how and when it is appropriate to apply the progressive.

The following are examples of the generalized uses of the progressive which were found:

	Adult	Child
(1)		*It's weather out there, too.* *Why is it weathering?* *Is that weather?* (H.K. 3 ; 6)
	Uh huh. It's raining and thundering.	
(2)		*Don't. You're gunning him.* (shooting with gun) *I don't want you to gun him.* (H.L. 5 ; 0)
	I'm only pretending. *I wouldn't really shoot him.*	
(3)		*I'm sticking it and that makes it go really fast.* (hitting ball with stick) (J.W. 5 ; 7)
	Well, if you keep hitting it that hard, you'll have to play outside. *You're gonna break something if you don't slow down.*	

	Adult	Child
(4)	*What are you doing?*	
		I'm shirting my man. (putting shirt on doll) (J.W. 5 ; 7)
(5)		*A fire. A fire. A fire is coming. Our house is fireing.*
	Our house is on fire?	
		Yeah. (A.K. 3 ; 3)
(6)		*She's ballerening.* (dancing in ballet) (A.K. 5 ; 1)
(7)		*Ben's hicking up. He's hicking up.*
	What?	
		He's got the hiccups. (A.K. 5 ; 2)

Creative applications of the progressive inflection are infrequent. Two reasons probably account for this relative lack of generalized use of the progressive. First, the progressive is applicable to numerous verbs, and most of the creative uses cited above could have been avoided if the child had used another verb or phrase (e.g. *putting on shirt* for *shirting*). Children, then, may rarely generalize the progressive to truly novel instances (e.g. *shirting*) because there is little need to do so; a sufficient number of acceptable progressive verbs exist to do the job.

The second reason that children do not generalize the progressive more often than they do may be due to the fact that parents do not provide much support for such creativity. In the above examples, the parents are highly resistant to repeating the novel progressive forms of the child. If the parent feels some need to clarify what the child has said, he does not repeat the novel progressive. Rather the parent uses a conventional progressive or generic verb (e.g. *shoot* for *gun* by H.L.'s father) with roughly equivalent meaning.

Note that the progressive does not seem to go beyond the information given in terms of overgeneralizations, but it does do so in terms of generalized, creative uses. The fact that children who use the progressive inflection creatively do not overgeneralize the inflection to inappropriate forms such as *know* suggests that the lack of overgeneralization errors for these children is due to the fact that they, like adults, do not view the inappropriate forms as capable of expressing 'temporary duration'. Perhaps early in the acquisition of the progressive form children classify individual verbs as *-ing*-able based on having heard the verbs used in the progressive, and restrict the application of the progressive to verbs which they have coded as *-ing*-able, as Brown has suggested. Later in the acquisition, however, children no longer restrict the progressive to verbs in their *-ing*-able list but instead have learned some general basis for the application of

the progressive, and so will generalize the inflection to novel appropriate uses (e.g. the child may produce *reading* even though he has not previously classified *read* as *-ing*-able), and to truly creative but appropriate uses (e.g. *shirting*), but will not overgeneralize the progressive to inappropriate instances (e.g. *knowing*). In other words, the lack of overgeneralization errors for the progressive may be the result of two phenomena, one exerting its influence early in the acquisition process, the other coming into play at a later time.

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