

How Children Get Constructions

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1. Small Wonders

The English verb *get* is one of those little words which seem unremarkable just because they are heard so often. One tends not to notice what is everywhere present, but in the case of *get* there is much worth noticing. Not only is *get* one of the most frequent verbs in conversational English (cf. Biber et al. 1999), it is one of the first verbs children learn (cf. Clark 1996, Ninio 1999), and it is one which is learned in a broad range of constructions. By the age of 3, children may use this one verb with six or more distinct argument structures, including transitive, ditransitive, intransitive motion, caused motion, passive, inchoative and resultative constructions. Indeed, in the speech of children and adults alike, *get* occurs in more distinct syntactic frames than perhaps any other English verb, making it either the most polysemous verb in English or simply the most abstract one. In this paper I will argue that perhaps it is a little of both.

The grammar of *get* may be seen as a drama between the competing forces of idiomaticity and systematicity. On the one hand, *get* participates in a bewildering array of fixed idiomatic phrases — *get the idea*, *get the joke*, *get even*, *get the phone*, *get it on*, *get with it*, *get on with it*, *get over it*, and many more for which it seems difficult to discern any systematic syntax or compositional semantics. Thompson & Hopper (2001: 49) specifically cite this diversity of uses to suggest that the notion of argument structure itself is ill-conceived and irrelevant to an account of language use. Clearly, with a verb like *get*, speakers need more than just a few general rules of argument selection and complementation—to master the uses of this verb, they need to master an array of highly specific constructional routines. On the other hand, viewed in broad outline, the many and multifaceted constructional routines associated with *get* do in fact form a highly systematic pattern. Not only are the various uses closely related by regular patterns of semantic extension, both diachronically (Baron 1977; Givón & Yang 1994) and synchronically (Johansson & Oksefjell 1996), but, if one believes Haegeman (1986) or Gronemeyer (1999), they are in fact all manifestations of a single, very abstract, basic lexical entry for *get*. The same verb, it

seems, proves both that grammar is a messy affair of idiosyncratic constructional routines, and that it is a tidy system of tightly connected constructions.

This paper seeks insight into this paradox by examining young children's spontaneous use of *get* constructions in one diary study and seven longitudinal corpora. The story I tell here is comparatively simple: children initially learn the uses of *get* more or less by rote, as an arbitrary collection of constructional islands. This initial learning is driven by children's exposure to primary linguistic data, and in particular by the frequencies with which they hear these constructions used. Once children have mastered a range of such uses, however, they begin to extract increasingly abstract schemas to represent their commonalities. Ultimately, while children must have detailed knowledge of *get*'s many individual uses, there is reason to believe that they also achieve some basic understanding of the ways those uses are connected to each other—that all of them are in fact instances of the same abstract lexical item. Rampant idiomaticity, it turns out, is not the enemy of abstraction, but rather its foundation.

The two mechanisms I argue for here—rote learning and schema abstraction—are not particularly controversial. There is considerable evidence that children learn the syntactic and morphological properties of individual verbs on a case by case basis (Bloom et al. 1980; Tomasello 1992; Clark 1996; Pine, Lieven & Rowland 1998), and there is considerable evidence that children make generalizations over the forms they have learned, inducing constructional schemas which lead them both to extend their uses in novel ways (Bowerman 1996; Israel 2002), and also to resist new patterns of use which conflict with their schemas (Akhtar 1999). The controversial claim here is not that children possess and rely on such general cognitive abilities, but rather that such abilities may in themselves account for the process of grammatical development, with little or no need for other innate, more specifically grammatical abilities.

The plan of the paper is as follows. Section 2 begins with a quick look at the systematic relation between sentence types and semantic contents found in *get*'s main uses, and argues for a reasonably abstract grammatical representation of these regularities. Sections 3 and 4 present data from one diary study and seven longitudinal corpora which suggest that children tend to learn the different uses of *get*, at least at first, as essentially unrelated idioms, and that what really drives the emergence of these constructions in children's speech is the frequency with which children hear them in the speech of those around them. Section 5 examines two varieties of innovative usage found in the children's corpora: early hypogrammatical utterances, which suggest the lack of some construction, or some feature of a construction; and later hypergrammatical utterances, which suggest that a child has learned to use some abstract construction creatively, but has not yet mastered the constraints on its use.

Finally, section 6 examines some of the semantic, syntactic, and morphological regularities that begin to emerge in children’s uses of *get*, and which provide circumstantial evidence that these uses are united in a complex and quite abstract network—that, at some level, all these very different uses are reflexes of a single polyconstructional lexical item *get*.

2. The Grammar of *Get*

The grammar of *get* reflects in miniature the core of English argument structure constructions, and the meanings *get* expresses in these constructions are among the most basic in any language. Table 1 illustrates a paradigm of 10 argument structures which appear with *get*, and identifies five basic senses which *get* may convey in these constructions: OBTAIN, MOVE, BECOME, UNDERGO, ACHIEVE. Which sense *get* conveys on any occasion, of course, depends in large part on what type of complement it appears with: that is, on the form of the XP. What is striking is not just how different these senses are, but also how very general they are.

Simple Forms		Causative Forms		Form of XP	Basic Sense
(1a)	<i>transitive</i> Sally got the ball.	(1b)	<i>ditransitive</i> I got Sally the ball.	Nominal	OBTAIN
(2a)	<i>simple motion</i> I got into the show.	(2b)	<i>caused motion</i> Sally got me into the show.	Oblique Locative	MOVE
(3a)	<i>simple result</i> Twiggy got drunk.	(3b)	<i>caused result</i> I got Twiggy drunk.	Adjective Phrase	BECOME
(4a)	<i>passive</i> I got promoted.	(4b)	<i>causative</i> Sally got me promoted.	Passive Verb Phrase	UNDERGO
(5a)	<i>simple event</i> I got to kiss Twiggy.	(5b)	<i>caused event</i> Twiggy got me to kiss her.	<i>to</i> Verbal Infinitive	ACHIEVE

Table 1: A Network of *Get* Constructions

In all its uses, *get* functions as a light verb denoting a relation between a thematic NP and an XP complement. In the simple construction, the theme NP is the grammatical subject, while in the causative construction, the theme is a direct object, and the subject role is filled by an agent or stimulus argument which acts to bring about the relation between the primary NP and the XP. The meaning of *get* depends largely on the nature of its XP complement: generally, where the XP denotes a locative relation (e.g. source, path, goal), *get* profiles the completion of motion along a path; where the XP profiles an atemporal relation, *get* profiles the process of entering that state; and where the XP denotes an object of some sort, *get* denotes the process of acquiring or gaining control of that object.

Figures 1 and 2 use the basic conventions of Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 1987, 1991) to sketch the abstract semantics of simple and causative *get*

constructions. In both constructions, *get* denotes a perfective process in which a thematic participant undergoes some change of state, and as a result enters a relation with a second entity, represented here as the XP. The nature of this relationship depends on the nature of the XP itself, which can code a thing (NP), a location (typically, a PP or a locative adverbial), a state (typically an adjective phrase, or sometimes a PP) or a process (a non-finite VP). In the simple constructions, the theme participant functions as the primary figure, or trajector (tr), of the main clause process, while the XP is the secondary figure, or landmark (lm). In the causative constructions, the primary figure (tr) is a new participant, an actor or stimulus of some sort, which affects the theme participant, now the secondary figure (lm), causing it to enter into the relation coded by the XP.

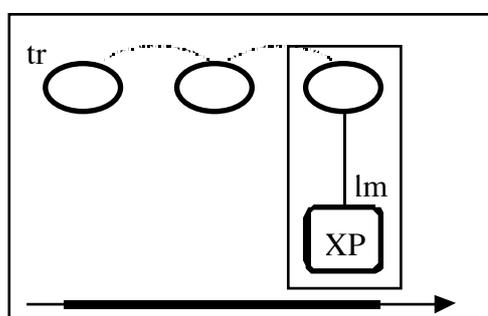


Figure 1: Simple *Get*

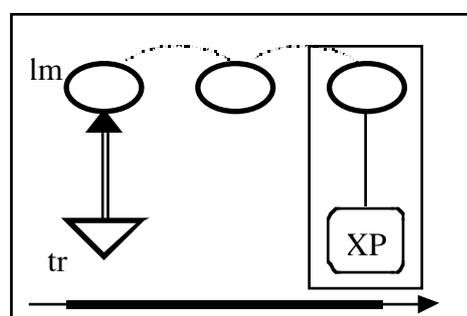


Figure 2: Causative *Get*

These two abstract constructions are tightly related both conceptually and syntactically. Conceptually, the two constructions highlight different aspects of a general event type involving a change of state: the simple construction focuses on the change of state itself while the causative construction highlights the action which brings about the change of state. This basic conceptual difference is reflected syntactically in the assignment of grammatical functions, with the theme participant surfacing as the grammatical subject in the simple construction, and the actor argument as subject in the causative construction.

All *get* constructions involve the same basic syntax, consistent with the syntax for canonical transitive and intransitive clauses in English generally. The subject NP controls verb agreement, takes nominative case and (canonically at least) precedes the finite verb; the direct object NP (where it occurs) takes accusative case and immediately follows the main verb. The secondary predicate coded by the XP invariably occurs after *get* and all its other arguments. None of these properties, of course, are peculiar to the verb *get*: they are all basic features of English grammar. What is peculiar about *get* is that unlike just about any other verb, *get* can appear in just about any of the various argument structure constructions possible in English.

To master a pattern like this would seem to require at least two levels of abstraction. First, in order to master any of the basic *get* constructions, children must understand the nature of the complement (i.e. the XP) that use requires. For example, since the ‘move’ sense of *get* can occur with a locative complement of almost any sort, fully productive mastery of this use requires some abstract notion of what can count as a locative complement. This in turn seems to require some recognition of the semantic commonalities among an odd group of syntactic constituents: locative complements, for instance, can include particles (*up, down, away*), deictic adverbials (*here, there*), prepositional phrases (*on me, off the table*) and even the odd locative noun (*home*). Similar complexities attend a child’s mastery of the ‘become’ and ‘obtain’ senses.

Only when children have mastered these lower-level categories can they begin to appreciate the more abstract alternation between simple (or unaccusative) and causative constructions, which applies to all of *get*’s basic senses. In order to represent the commonality of *get*’s various complement types in an abstract XP category, children must first be familiar with each of the complement types (PP, AdjP, NP, VP, etc.) for which the XP category may stand. Only once these or some similar set of specific categories are in place can a child imagine the schemas that abstract over all these complement types (the XP). And only once children have abstracted such a schema can they begin to be aware of the very regular patterns of word order and complementation which unite the various uses of *get*.

As it turns out, children master the grammar of *get* rather slowly. They begin by building up a repertoire of distinct constructions, each involving independent form-meaning mappings. Several of these subconstructions are relatively frequent on their own, and as each becomes more entrenched, children may discover the syntactic and semantic regularities uniting them. The evidence I present below suggests that children start off knowing very little about these constructions, and that over the course of a few years they learn a great deal. In particular, children’s early usage appears to be entirely ungoverned by the abstract patterns of argument structure alternations which are so striking in the adult grammar. Evidence for these categories appears rather to emerge gradually as a function of the children’s growing experience with the ways *get* is used by those around them, and their growing facility in using the verb themselves.

I will focus here on the three most frequent of the *get* constructions — the ‘obtain,’ ‘move,’ and ‘become’ uses. Since children younger than 3 or 4 do not reliably distinguish between verbal and adjectival participles (cf. Israel, Johnson & Brooks 2000), for the purposes of this study I treat the passive and causative uses of *get* + passive participle (the ‘undergo’ sense) as instances of *get* + adjective (the

‘become’ sense). I will argue that each of the basic senses and each of the causative alternations are learned independently of one another, and that early on at least, children may not even recognize these constructions as different uses of a single morphological verb. I will also argue that children do in fact develop quite abstract representations of the grammatical patterns governing the use of *get* — in some real sense, they learn the grammar. My evidence for these claims is of three kinds: 1) the order in which different *get* constructions emerge in different children’s spontaneous usage; 2) the frequency with which different *get* constructions are used and experienced; 3) the ways in which children use *get* creatively.

3. Early Lexical Specificity: The Travis Diary

Because *get* often appears in children’s very earliest word combinations, a longitudinal corpus can easily miss a child’s first uses of this verb. For this reason, I examined data from the Travis diary (Tomasello 1992), which sought to include every novel word combination produced by a single child between the ages of 1;0 and 2;0¹.

The results for Travis are striking. *Get* occurs early in the diary, and is the first verb to appear with a post-verbal direct object, at 1;5.01. Significantly, *get* emerges almost simultaneously in both the ‘obtain’ and ‘move’ uses; however, the two uses appear to function as unrelated constructional islands. A few representative examples of Travis’s earliest uses are given in (6-7) below.

(6) ‘Obtain’ Constructions

Get it.	1;4.24
Block get it.	1;4.25
Get it hat.	1;5.01
Get the pencil.	1;6.11
Mommy get sauce.	1;7.29
Me get it.	1;7.30
Daddy get it bottle.	1;8.03

(7) ‘Move’ Constructions

Get out.	1;5.06
My get out.	1;5.19
Pete get out.	1;5.24
Get out this	1;6.25
Get off	1;7.25
Maria get off there.	1;7.25
Get down.	1;7.26

Starting at about 1;5, Travis uses the expression *get it* for entities she wants or is in the process of obtaining. Only a couple of weeks later she starts using the expression *get out* to denote motion away from a location. In the ‘obtain’ use, *get* always occurs fused with *it* in what appears to be an unanalyzed phrase, *get-it*. Tomasello records 39 such uses over two months before Travis begins to use *get* in the relevant sense without a following *it*. Similarly, the first uses in the ‘move’ sense

¹ All ages are given as YEARS;MONTHS.DAYS.

all have *get* fused with the particle *out* in what appears to be an unanalyzed phrase, *get-out*:. Again, it takes almost three months before Travis extends the construction to include the particles *off* and *down*. It seems then that Travis starts out with distinct lexical forms, *getit* and *get-out*, for her first two *get* constructions.

Travis’s further mastery of *get* constructions appears to build directly on her early ‘obtain’ and ‘move’ constructions. The use of *got* appears first in the ‘obtain’ sense, where *gotit* appears to be learned as an inflected form of *getit*. As the examples below show, Travis uses *gotit* for over a month before producing an example without a fused *it*, and she goes more than four months before she extends her use of *got* to the ‘move’ construction.

(8) Travis’s Early Uses of *Got*

Got it.	1;6.25
Got it ball.	1;6.25
Ring got it.	1;6.29
Ball gone; get it; got it; get it ball.	1;7.16
Danny got me.	1;7.28
Lady got umbrella.	1;8.19
Got all in the mud.	1;11.0

Travis begins to extend her ‘move’ construction to a ‘cause move’ use quite early, but again, she seems to build directly on the patterns she has mastered for the ‘move’ construction. As the examples in (9) show, her first uses involve locative particles—*out*, *down*, and *off*— which she has previously used in the simple ‘move’ construction.

(9) ‘Cause Move’ Constructions

Get out kisses.	1;6.06	<i>wants candy kisses out of wrapper</i>
Get Grover... Grover get out	1;8.01	<i>wants Grover out of crib.</i>
Get down this book.	1;8.08	<i>wants it from top shelf.</i>
Get down me.	1;8.11	<i>wants Mama to get her down.</i>
Get out me.	1;8.17	<i>she wants out of track.</i>
Get me off.	1;8.22	<i>wants off swing.</i>
Get the silk off.	1;8.22	<i>wants it off her.</i>
I got chalk all over me.	1;11.0	<i>she did and does.</i>
Get this away on my guitar.	1;11.25	<i>wants paper off guitar.</i>

In these first uses the particle rigidly follows *get*, even where the result is less than felicitous. This suggests both that Travis is using a [*get* + particle] schema productively to denote caused motion, and that she has not yet mastered the word order constraints associated with this construction in the adult language. Generally speaking, Travis’s ‘move’ and ‘cause move’ uses seem to develop in tandem. One

striking piece of evidence for this is the fact that Travis begins to use the past form *got* in both constructions at precisely the same age, 1;11.0— a full four months after she had begun to use this form with the ‘obtain’ sense.

Finally, toward the end of the diary, Travis also begins to master the ‘become’ sense of *get*. The four recorded instances, all from the same day, are given in (10).

- (10) **‘Become’ Constructions**
- | | |
|-------------------------|--------|
| It gets heavy. | 1;11.0 |
| Maria got really mad. | 1;11.0 |
| I get hurt, fall down . | 1;11.0 |
| I got it clean . | 1;11.0 |

As the data suggest, Travis masters the ‘obtain’ and ‘move’ uses of *get* very early, and the ‘cause move’ use follows quickly thereafter. But while the ‘cause move’ use seems to build on the ‘move’ use, Travis does not exploit the general pattern of a causative alternation to produce either a ‘cause obtain’ (i.e. ditransitive) or a ‘cause become’ (resultative) use of the verb. Travis, it seems, learns the three basic senses of *get* as independent and seemingly unrelated constructions; her use of each of these develops gradually by small analogical steps; and she does not appear to generalize across these constructions, or to extend her use of one *get* construction in ways that might be motivated by her knowledge of other *get* constructions.

4. Emerging Constructions in Longitudinal Corpora

Travis’s use of *get* appears to develop from lexically specific and semantically simple constructions to increasingly complex patterns of combination. The first question is whether this sort of development is typical of English speaking children in general, and if it is, whether there are any general patterns to the ways in which children elaborate these different constructions. And since the Travis diary stops so early, it would be useful know just how much further this development normally proceeds.

To address these questions, I examined the uses of *get* in seven longitudinal corpora from the CHILDES database (MacWhinney 1995). Between them these corpora cover an age range from 1;6 to 5;2. The corpus is not without its biases—for instance, all eight children are first-born, monolingual speakers of American English, and the parents are disproportionately likely to have advanced degrees in psychology or linguistics. Nonetheless, it presents a broad picture of how children’s mastery of *get* proceeds from early and halting combinations to increasingly complex and creative uses.

Table 2 lists the seven corpora consulted, the age range each covers, the number of *get* tokens found for each child³, and for four of the corpora the number of tokens found in the adult input to the children.

Child	Age Range	Child Tokens of <i>Get</i>	Adult Tokens of <i>Get</i>	Reference
Eve	1;6-2;3	243	411	Brown 1973
Naomi	1;3-4;9	302	437	Sachs 1983
Peter	1;9-3;2	1025	935	Bloom 1974
Nina	1;11-3;4	498	949	Suppes 1974
Sarah	2;3-5;1	1253	**	Brown 1973
Adam	2;3-5;2	1385	**	Brown 1973
Abe	2;5-5;0	1901	**	Kuczaj 1976

Table 2: The Seven Subjects and their *Get* Tokens

Mainly because they cover different age ranges, the different corpora offer different sorts of insight into the larger developmental story. Given the very early ages at which *get* tends to emerge in multiword speech, only those corpora covering the earliest ages (i.e. those of Eve, Naomi, Peter, and Nina) can help to determine the order in which the various *get* constructions emerge. On the other hand, evidence that children are using these constructions productively and that they understand the relations among them only comes much later, and for these issues it is the corpora covering the latest ages (those of Sarah, Adam, and Abe) that are most useful.

The first question to ask here is when do the various *get* constructions first appear in the different corpora. In order to be sure that the constructions are actually being used productively, Table 3 gives the age of each child to the nearest month at the time of their third distinct, non-imitative use of each construction (ages in parentheses indicate fewer than three distinct utterances for a given construction type).

³This number includes all forms of the verb, including *got, gotta, gets, getting* and *gotted*. It excludes immediate imitations of adult utterances and repetitions of their own utterances.

	Abe	Adam	Eve	Naomi	Nina	Peter	Sarah
OBTAIN	2;5	2;3	1;7	1;10	2;0	1;11	2;4
Cause OBTAIN	2;8	2;7	1;9	(2;11)	(2;11)	2;3	3;1
MOVE	2;6	2;3	1;9	1;8	2;1	1;11	2;10
Cause MOVE	2;6	2;4	2;1	2;5	2;2	2;0	2;11
BECOME	2;6	2;5	2;0	2;9	2;2	2;6	2;10
Cause BECOME	2;11	3;0	2;1	(3;9)	3;3	2;8	3;1

Table 3: The Emergence of Six Constructions in Six Children

It is worth noting that the corpora for Abe, Adam and Sarah all begin too late (well into the children's third years) to be reliable guides to their earliest uses of *get*. Indeed, Abe and Adam appear to be already productive with three or more constructions by the time of their earliest recordings. These three children are of particular interest, however, in considering whether children's more advanced grammatical development is continuous with their earliest constructions. And the data here do point to a few clear developmental tendencies which seem to be consistent across all seven subjects.

First, each sense tends to occur in the simple constructions before they occur in the corresponding causative constructions. The one minor exception to this (out of 21 possible exceptions) is that both the 'move' and the 'cause move' senses appear at roughly the same time in the Abe corpus; however, since these uses also both occur very early in the corpus, it seems likely that Abe was already using both constructions to begin with and so their simultaneous appearance in the corpus does not necessarily indicate a simultaneous development. The second basic tendency is for 'obtain' constructions to appear before 'move' constructions. This tendency is not so robust as the first, but it does hold for four of the seven subjects, and only one subject (Naomi) appears to be a positive counterexample, with the 'move' use preceding the 'obtain' use. Somewhat more robust is the tendency for 'move' uses to precede 'become' uses, which holds for five of the seven children, the only exceptions being Abe and Sarah, who produce both uses at approximately the same time. Not surprisingly, all seven subjects master the 'obtain' use significantly before the 'become' use. Finally, it is worth noting that although each child must eventually master the causative alternation three times, once for each of the three basic senses, it does not appear that mastery of the alternation for any one sense helps the children much in mastering the alternation for the other senses.

The question now is where these tendencies might come from, and in particular whether or not they might be related to the ways children most frequently hear *get* being used around them. To address this question, I looked at the use of *get* in the

adult input in the corpora for Eve, Naomi, Nina and Peter: the four corpora which start earliest and which therefore seem most likely to offer a reliable view of children's earliest uses of the verb.

Table 4 gives the frequencies for each of the *get* constructions found in these corpora. The numbers represent the percentage of all *get* tokens which occur in each construction. The "IN" columns give the frequencies of occurrence for each construction in the adult input to the child; the "OUT" columns give the frequencies with which the children themselves used these constructions.

	Eve		Naomi		Nina		Peter	
	IN	OUT	IN	OUT	IN	OUT	IN	OUT
OBTAIN	54%	63%	36.4%	52%	42%	47.5%	46%	62%
C-OBTAIN	2%	6%	3%	0.5%	2%	0.5%	2%	1%
MOVE	18%	13%	17.3%	27%	12%	22%	18%	15%
C-MOVE	8%	8%	18%	14%	10%	14%	15%	8%
BECOME	12%	7%	15%	6%	27%	13%	14%	3%
C-BECOME	3%	2%	7.3%	0.5%	3%	1%	2%	1%
Other	3%	1%	3%	0%	4%	2%	3%	10%
Correlation	.966		.895		.79		.875	

Table 4: *Get* Constructions in Four Longitudinal Corpora

The bottom line here is the correlation between what the child hears and what she produces. As the table shows, the correlations for these children are very strong, ranging between .79 and .96. The results suggest that the frequency with which a child hears a given construction largely predicts the frequency with which she will produce that construction.

Frequency also does well in predicting the order with which the constructions are learned: for these children anyway, what they hear frequently, they learn quickly. The point is made graphically in table 5, where the constructions for each child are listed from top to bottom in order of their emergence, and are numbered from one to six based on the order of emergence that would be predicted based on their frequency in the input alone. For Eve, Nina and Peter the observed order follows the predicted order in all but one case; for Naomi it follows in all but two cases.

Eye	Naomi	Nina	Peter
1. obtain	3. move	1. obtain	1. obtain
2. move	1. obtain	3. move	2. move
6. cause obtain	2. cause move	4. cause move	3. cause move
3. become	4. become	2. become	6. cause obtain
4. cause move	6. cause obtain	5. cause become	4. become
5. cause become	5. cause become	6. cause obtain	5. cause become

Table 5: Actual and Predicted Orders of Emergence

The exceptions here are particularly interesting. The most common exception is that the ditransitive use of *get* ('cause obtain') is learned earlier than frequency might predict. It is striking that this occurs for three out of four of the children. In the remaining two cases, it appears that the basic developmental tendencies noted above may trump the effect of frequency: thus Nina masters the 'move' sense before the 'become' sense, despite the higher frequency of 'become' in her input; and Naomi uses the simple 'move' sense before the 'cause move' sense, despite the higher frequency of the latter.

Of course it would be rash, at best, to expect raw frequencies in the input to explain all the details of grammatical development. In fact, one of the clearest trends observed among these children — the tendency for the simple constructions to emerge ahead of the causative constructions — might well be motivated by the fact that the simple constructions are simpler: syntactically, they have one fewer constituent and semantically, they lack the notions of a causer or a causing event. Still, the strong correlation here between frequency in input and frequency in output shows that it would be at least equally rash to ignore the role which frequency can and does play. Clearly, what constructions a child learns depends largely on what constructions they hear, and how often they hear them.

Frequency alone, however, is not enough for a theory of learning. Such a theory should also have something to say about what it is that allows children apparently to extract a grammar from all the usage they hear. To understand, how children learn these constructions, and more importantly, to understand just what it is that these children are learning, one must examine the fine-grained facts of their developing usage. The next section thus turns from quantitative to qualitative features of the corpora, and examines the ways children do appear to use these constructions both flexibly and creatively, if not always in a perfectly adult-like fashion.

5. Learning and Creativity

Learning is the acquisition of knowledge which one did not have before. More than just a change in linguistic behavior, real language learning requires a change in a child's (or other speaker's) internalized grammar. The important thing is not just that new constructions appear in their speech, but that the way children represent these constructions develops as a function of their experience with them. Of course, evidence of these representations can only be indirect, since only children's overt linguistic behavior is observable. Still, we may gain some insight into what children know about the constructions they use by carefully observing the ways in which these uses can deviate from the usage they hear most often.

For the purposes of this paper we may distinguish two broad classes of innovative uses in child speech: *hypogrammatical* innovations, which tend to occur early in development, and *hypergrammatical* innovations, which tend to occur later. A hypogrammatical use is one in which a child fails to conform a regular convention of adult usage by, for example, omitting an obligatory element, or adding an inappropriate element, or scrambling normal word order. A hypergrammatical use is one in which a child innovatively extends a grammatical pattern to a new lexical type — as, for instance, when Abe produces *gotted* instead of *got*. Hypogrammatical utterances provide evidence that children do not understand some salient feature of the adult grammar: they involve what Braine called “groping patterns,” in which the child tries “to express a certain kind of meaning before he has learned rules specifying how that kind of meaning should be expressed” (1976: 10). Hypergrammatical utterances, on the other hand, involve the creative (over-)extension of regular or semi-regular patterns to novel cases where they normally do not apply. Such innovative uses provide clear evidence that children have abstracted a rule or schema of some sort, and that they can use this rule productively.

Hypogrammatical uses in general appear to be quite common in children before younger than 3. As Clark (1996: 66) suggests, “children may know which arguments can appear with a verb...but they rarely, if ever, produce all the obligatory arguments at once in their early utterances.” Hypogrammatical innovations with *get* are common in children's first year or so learning the constructions. Such uses are a small minority of children's total uses, but they stand out, if for nothing else, for their striking absence at later ages. To count as a hypogrammatical use, a verb must occur in an fluent and spontaneous utterance, it must convey a clear and conventional meaning, and it must deviate somehow from the verb's normal syntax. With *get*, such deviations typically take the form either of an omitted obligatory constituent, or a scrambled word order.

The examples in (11) and (12) illustrate errors of omission. In (11), Eve, Adam, Naomi and Nina use *get* as a plain intransitive with no postverbal complements at all. In (12) Naomi, Peter, and Sarah use *get* with a secondary predicate (the XP) but with the obligatory direct object left implicit.

- | | | |
|---------|--|--------------|
| (11) a. | you can't get now (=get me now) | Eve 2;3 |
| b. | I'm getting [response to *MOT: get down.] | Adam 2;8.0 |
| c. | I can't get [response to *MOT: you can get up] | Naomi 2;2.25 |
| d. | let me get (=let me get them) | Nina 2;3.18 |
| e. | that got. [response to *MOT: what got torn?] | Nina 2;10.2 |
| (12) a. | he got on face ? [=what's he got on face] | Naomi 2;1.9 |
| b. | I can't get fixed ! [=I can't get it fixed] | Peter 2;9.14 |
| c. | um # please get fix . [=get it fixed] | Sarah 3;6.30 |

These examples are all pragmatically well-formed, but syntactically deviant. Their intended meanings are clear in context. It seems unlikely that these are simply performance errors. Few of these examples are particularly complex compared to other utterances these children produce at the same age, so it's hard to see the omissions here as due to processing complexity. What's more, the choice of omitted argument is in each case well-motivated by pragmatic considerations: typically, the children omit the most saliently accessible constituents—in other words, those which are most easily recovered in the local discourse context. The “errors” here thus seem to be more a matter of design than of accident. Apparently, these children are simply unaware that the grammar of *get* requires the overt encoding of certain arguments, whether or not they are pragmatically recoverable. They understand something about the kinds of situations *get* can denote, but have not fully mastered the grammatical constraints which govern its usage.

Other hypogrammatical uses of *get* show a basic disregard for the conventions of word order. Scrambling patterns with *get* include both preposed constituents, as in (13), and right-shifted direct objects, as in (14).

- | | | |
|---------|--|---------------|
| (13) a. | go block get it . | Adam 2;3.4 |
| b. | Daddy suitcase go get it . | Adam 2;3.4 |
| c. | a train me got . | Nina 2;5.27 |
| d. | baloney get . | Naomi 2;1.7 |
| e. | and this one got . | Naomi 2;7.16 |
| f. | telephone # get . | Peter 1;10.15 |
| g. | our peanut butter we got where is it [#] Mom ? | Abe 2;7.14 |

- | | | |
|---------|--|--------------|
| h. | uh@ down I get . | Naomi 2;1.7 |
| (14) a. | get away this . | Nina 2;2.6 |
| b. | we ge(t) wet em . | Sarah 3;2.16 |
| c. | if they get out of here these things . | Nina 2;9.26 |
| d. | got there tape in here . | Peter 2;5.0 |

In general, the more complex a construction is — the more constituents it has — the more susceptible it will be to hypogrammatical scrambling. The phenomenon appears to be particularly common with ditransitive uses of *get*, as in (15). These examples show that even when children correctly associate *get* with a type of event in which someone (X) causes someone else (Y) to have something (Z), they do not reliably conform to the convention that orders these as [X *gets* Y Z]. The examples below, in fact, show a clear preference for putting Y after Z.

- | | | |
|---------|---|---------------|
| (15) a. | I get puzzle get you . | Adam 2;6.17 |
| b. | I doughnut get you . | Adam 2;6.17 |
| c. | that Papa paper got xxx Eve valentine . | Eve 1;10 |
| d. | I get a pencil # Fraser # for write . | Eve 2;0 |
| e. | Mommy get pretzel me . | Peter 2;1.21 |
| f. | Mommy get it gave it to me . | Peter 2;2.14 |
| g. | to get ashtray you . | Sarah 2;11.23 |

But while these examples are syntactically deviant, they appear to be fairly effective pragmatically. The children understand what *get* means in these examples, they just don't get the ways it is normally used. These sorts of errors suggest that children either do not recognize the grammatical significance of word order in these constructions, or they do not feel bound by the same constraints as other speakers. Young children, it seems, have very open minds about the ordering of constituents in complex constructions (cf. Akhtar 1999).

Hypergrammatical innovations begin to appear typically in children's fourth and fifth years. While the earlier hypogrammatical innovations seem to reflect the absence of rules or schemas found in more mature grammars, hypergrammatical innovations can only occur when children have learned a rule too well — that is, when a regular pattern is creatively extended to a context in which it has not been previously heard or used. With *get*, errors of this sort provide some of the best evidence that children do make some use of abstract categories like LOC (locative) and STAT (stative) complement in their production of *get* constructions.

Overgeneralizations of this sort are by their nature somewhat unpredicable, but they do not appear to be a random phenomenon either. On the contrary, one finds strikingly regular patterns in children's innovative uses of *get*. For example, overextensions of the 'become' sense commonly occur with words like *dead* and *born*, as in (16), and with expressions denoting a child's age, as in (17). It is worth noting the tendency apparent in Abe's creative uses in (18) for the subject of *get* to be negatively affected by what it 'gets': e.g. *out*, *on fire*, and *under arrest*.

- (16) a. don't don't don't [#] another cow got dead . Abe 3;0.7
 b. because they don't want to get dead Abe 3;8.8
 c. he get died . Sarah 3;7.30
 d. I was gettin(g) born . Sarah 4;4.18
 e. well # <I will> [/] # I will get dead . Sarah 4;6.5
 f. and dey get dead . Adam 3;7.7
 g. if you swallow dat you might get dead # right ? Adam 4;7.0
- (17) a. when I get seven, are you gonna get me this pocket+knife ? Abe 3;6.19
 b. I can go to the store when I get [?] five years old . Sarah 4;8.7
 c. Mommy # when I get eleven # I'm gonna have one . Adam 5;2.12
- (18) a. no this I shooted and then the fire gotted out from a [/] a match . Abe 2;11.13
 b. my hand got on fire . Abe 3;3.15
 c. it gets on fire every time it's a magic ring put it on . Abe 3;4.8
 d. only if he does something bad then he gets under arrest . Abe 4;5.14
 e. good I'm getting colder off already . [= cooled off] Abe 4;8.0

It is worth noting that in most or all of these novel uses, the subject of *get* is construed as highly affected by the action of the predicate—usually adversely (cf. Lakoff 1971; Carter & McCarthy 1999).

Children's mastery of the 'move' constructions is evidenced by the use of a variety of novel locative forms with *get*. Typically, these involve an excess of oblique markings on a single locative constituent. Abe's use in (19e) actually features his own nonce preposition, but all four children seem to be comfortable constructing complex phrasal locatives: e.g. Naomi's *up back in bed* and Adam's *up in de school here*.

- (19) a. they get up back in bed again . Naomi 2;11.8
 b. hey # queen and princess # you have to get to home . Nina 3;2.4
 c. dey get up in de school here and dey go . Adam 3;7.7
 d. ok how did it get to over there ? Abe 3;9.6
 e. my army airplane gotted begainst@c the wall . Abe 4;1.29

Finally, the use of *get* sometimes encroaches on contexts where one normally expects a different verb, as in (20) where a form of *come* would be more idiomatic.

- (20) a. he always get to nursery school . Adam 3;6.9
 b. ow # my finger almost got off . Adam 4;0.14
 c. oh # where did dose flowers get over from ? Adam 4;10.2
 d. if a snake gets here, then I would come and say “we caught a snake.” Abe 3;8.23
 e. hey I found another fossil it's one that got from a little shell. Abe 3;11.12

Apparently, children may actually prefer the highly ambiguous *get* to the basic motion verb *come* —so much so that in (21) Nina uses *getting here* even when her mother’s question had primed the use of *come*.

- (21) *MOT: how does he come to school?
 *NIN: how?
 *MOT: in a car # doesn't he?
 *NIN: is he getting here in the car? Nina 3;0.24

The various hypergrammatical innovations in (16-21) provide clear evidence that children are able to use some of the basic *get* constructions flexibly and creatively, but they say little as to whether or to what extent children actually make connections among these flexible *get* constructions. At best, it seems that the local, analogical extensions found in these uses provide evidence for relatively low-level constructional schemas associated with *get*. Thus the uses in (16-18) seem to show that children have a productive use of *get* with stative complements, and the uses in (19-21) show a productive use with locative complements. The question remains, what evidence there might be that children make any real connection between these and other productive uses of the verb. Of course, it is always difficult to demonstrate an abstraction, but I can at least offer some suggestive evidence.

6. *e pluribus unum*

While the various *get* constructions seem to be radically different, there are in fact at least as many similarities holding them together as there are differences keeping them apart. As children master the full range of *get*'s uses, these similarities may play an important role in helping them to recognize the various *get* constructions as related reflexes of a single lexical item. In general, the more children learn about these constructions, the more similar they will seem.

The different meanings of *get* are not, in any case, as far apart as they sometimes seem. The 'move' and 'become' senses, for example, are linked by the basic event structure metaphors STATES ARE LOCATIONS, and CHANGE OF STATE IS MOTION FROM ONE LOCATION TO ANOTHER (Lakoff 1993). These are the mappings which allow us to think of things like trouble, moods, and personal relations as places which we can "get into", "get through", and "get out of." But while these mappings may motivate some of *get*'s polysemy, they do not appear to play much of a role in children's acquisition of this polysemy. Only one child in my sample used *get* with a metaphorical locative complement — Abe, who talks about getting *in trouble* at 4;2 and getting *under arrest* at 4;5. And all of the children seem to learn the 'move' and 'become' senses essentially independently. Still, the fact that there is a productive and systematic link between senses of these sorts suggests that children needn't represent the different *get* constructions simply as unrelated idioms.

The 'move' and 'obtain' senses are also closely related, at least in certain contexts. There is an important overlap in the referential potential of these senses, which arises from the fact that if one moves an object to a new location, one will then have that object in that location. Thus certain uses of the past *got* with a direct object, as in (22a), are equivocal, at least in colloquial American English, between a past event of receiving an object and a present state of possessing the object. Both readings are normally compatible with a situation where one has received and so possesses an object. Interestingly, the same sort of equivocation can be found in an example like (22b), where (again, in colloquial American English) *got her truck in the garage* can refer either to the past action of moving the truck into the garage or to the resulting state of having the truck in the garage.

- (22) a. Wendy got a new truck.
b. Wendy got her truck in the garage.

Examples like these, which highlight the connection between having something and being able to control its motion, appear to be fairly common in ordinary speech. Except for Travis and Nina, all eight subjects produced at least a few such equivocal examples. In several of these it seems clear that the child is aware of the connection between **moving** something into a position and **having** it in that position, and that this connection may partially motivate the use of *get* in both cases. This is particularly clear in the following excerpts from one session of Sarah's corpus, where at the age of 2;9.24, she uses *get/got* NP *on* in reference to the act of putting shoes on in (23), to the state of having a hat on in (24), and equivocally in (25), to both the act of putting and the resulting state of having cold cream on.

- (23) *MOT: and what's she doing here? line 306
 *SAR: get shoes on.
 *MOT: putting on her mummy-'s shoes # huh?
- (24) *MOT: here's a snowman. line 456
 *SAR: oh... he xx.... he got hat on # huh.
 *MOT: mmhm.
- (25) %act: offers her some more cold cream line 677
 *SAR: I got (e)nough on.
 *MOT: you got enough on?...you sure you don't want some more?

The link between the 'move' and 'obtain' senses of *get* is also evident where children apply the 'cause move' sense of *get* to code instances of transfer, where adults would probably rather use the verb *give*.

- (26) a. Get raisins to me. Travis 1;9.0
 b. think he will get a lot of cookies to him ? Nina 2;11.6
 c. that's mine Grandma got it to me . Abe 2;8.1
 d. Mommy, Terry got them to me and you ! Abe 2;8.6
 e. my Daddy got em to me . Abe 2;9.5
 f. it's not dry yet, why the mailman got this to me ? Abe 2;9.27
 g. I'm gonna get this gun to Gregggy . Abe 2;11.13

But while the semantic links between *get's* various uses give the lexical category some overall conceptual coherence, the real evidence that children may have access to an overarching, abstract lemma for *get* comes from the syntactic and morphological connections which unite the verbs many uses.

First, there is the basic syntactic fact, that each general sense of *get* comes in both a simple, one argument form, and a causative, two argument form. When children first begin to accumulate *get* constructions, each of these alternations appears to be learned independently, but once they have mastered what is essentially the same alternation for the MOVE, OBTAIN, and BECOME senses of *get*, the generalization may emerge that constructions of the basic form "NP₁ got XP" systematically alternate with constructions of the form "NP₂ got NP₁ XP".

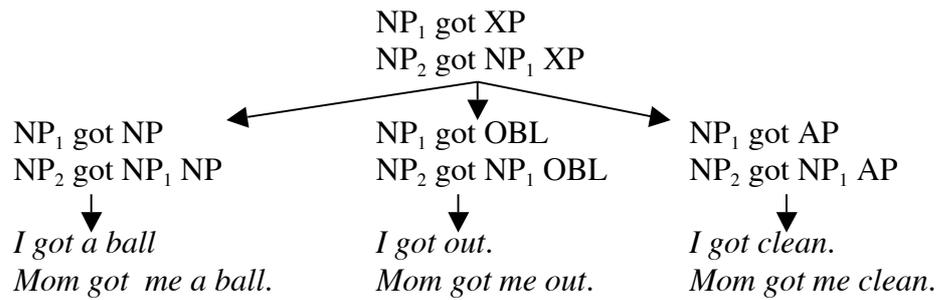


Figure 3: Emergent Schematicity in *get* Constructions

Equally important is the fact that all the basic uses of *get* occur with the same morphology and in the same syntactic environments. If children originally treat each of the basic senses of *get* as essentially distinct lexical items, then they must learn the morphosyntactic properties of each sense independently. But once children know them, they will discover that all of these constructions share a common morpho-syntax. Again, this will not be obvious at first, but as children learn to use their *get* constructions more flexibly, these constructions start to look more and more alike.

In principle, one might expect that the more formal similarities there are between any two constructions (that is, in terms of their phonology, morphology, or syntax), the more likely these constructions will be represented as instances of a more abstract grammatical type. My own impression is that by the time most of these children are 3 years old, they have begun to connect the various uses of *get* in an abstract network. Evidence for this can be found, among other places, in the flexible way one child, Nina, uses the different senses of *get* with various other morphosyntactic constructions: with negation (27), past tense (28), future tense (29), progressive (30), desiderative (31), obligative (32), and interrogative (33) constructions.

(27)	don't get a horse . don't get up . so they don't # they don't get sick .	Nina 2;2 Nina 2;4 Nina 2;6	DON'T GET XP
(28)	he got more food . they got up on the rock . they got frozen .	Nina 2;2 Nina 2;6 Nina 2;9	GOT XP
(29)	I will get moreketchup . I will get out of your bag . I will get tired .	Nina 2;3 Nina 2;10 Nina 2;4	WILL GET XP
(30)	her getting some of that too . getting all over him . her getting dry .	Nina 2;6 Nina 2;6 Nina 2;6	GETTING XP

(31)	I wanna get a box . I wanna get up . I wanna get dressed .	Nina 3;2 Nina 2;3 Nina 2;4	WANNA GET XP
(32)	have to get another toy . you have to get to home . we have to get these like that .	Nina 3;1 Nina 3;2 Nina 3;1	HAVE TO GET XP
(33)	did Elaina get a bicycle today ? did these things get out of here ? did # did rob get tired on the hike ?	Nina 2;6 Nina 2;10 Nina 2;11	DID NP GET XP

If a child systematically treats the different *get* constructions in parallel ways, one may conclude that that child makes a connection between them, and thus, in some sense, has an abstract lexical unit *get* ranging over these uses. In any case, even if one is skeptical as to what parts of this patterning a child really “knows”, it appears that these patterns are a regular feature of the usage data.

Even more compelling evidence for a single abstract lexical entry can be found in children’s more creative uses of morphology. Abe is somewhat notorious for his tendencies toward morphological overgeneralization, and his uses of *gotted* are exemplary in this respect. Over a period of more than two years, Abe produced 50 tokens of this form as the past of *get/got*, spread out more or less proportionally among the six basic *get* constructions.

(34) a.	look what Jean gotted for me .	2;5.0
b.	yeah I gotted her a big hug.	3;0.15
c.	this gotted on my hand.	2;11.6
d.	when I falled on the ground I gotted dirt in my mouth.	2;10.7
e.	I shooted and then the fire gotted out from a [/] a match .	2;11.13
f.	no I was covering my eye and I gotted it red .	4;3.21

Again, it seems reasonable to conclude from the fact that Abe applied his novel inflectional rule to all of the syntactically distinct uses of *get*, that Abe recognizes at least some basic commonality in the many different uses of this one verb.

7. Discussion

In the 2 or 3 years after children begin to use *get* they do learn a great deal about its grammar. Children’s first uses of *get* typically appear toward the end of their second year. The eight children observed in this study appear to master each of the

different *get* constructions one at a time, and only gradually to become aware of the systematic connections among them. There is no indication that children have any advance knowledge of the types of meanings *get* can express, of the types of complements it can combine with, or even of the types of constituents which can count as instances of these complement types. Early on at least, there is little reason to suppose that children even recognize the various uses of *get* as different uses of the same morphological verb, and there is good reason to think that they probably don't. As children master the grammar of these constructions, the formal and semantic similarities which unite them become increasingly evident. As a result children may develop increasingly abstract constructional schemas to represent the relations between different uses of *get*. There is evidence that children may begin to represent these uses as an instances of a single, abstract *get* lemma by around 3;0.

The acquisition of *get* and its many argument structures represents a remarkable, and a remarkably rapid accomplishment. It requires, first, that children learn to assign a number of distinct meanings to a single lexical form, and further, that they associate each of these meanings with a distinct set of syntactic realizations. The ease with which children learn to do this suggests that they are cognitively well-equipped for the task, but whatever talents children start off with, the grammar of *get* itself cannot be innate. Much of what children learn about *get*—in particular, the details of its polysemy and possible argument structures—is peculiar to the grammar of English, and so must reflect children's actual experience of the spoken language. What is not peculiar to English, however, are the basic mechanisms which support this development: rote-learning and schema abstraction.

Three major conclusions emerge from the evidence considered here: (1) Early Specificity—early uses involve specific, rote-learned formulae; (2) Emergent Grammar—knowledge of abstract argument structure patterns emerges from experience with specific instances; and (3) Gradual Development—there are no obvious discontinuities between early lexical specificity and later abstract competence. Givón and Yang (1994) suggest that the history of the *get*-passive is best understood as “a complex, multi-stranded development rather than a linear causal chain” (1994: 145). The same, it seems, could be fairly said about children's emerging mastery of the lexical item *get*: in as much as children even have a single lexical item here, it is the result of many independent strands of development gradually coming together in a network of constructions.

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