The Acquisition of the Obligatory Subject / Underspecification

1. Underspecification of Inflections and Determiners

I = inflection; D = determiner

OPTIONAL SPECIFICITY STAGE: children choose whether they want to specify something or not

OPTIONAL INFINITIVE STAGE: children choose whether they use the finite or the nonfinite form of the verb

If an inflection or a determiner is not specified, it is underspecified.

2. Null Subjects

a) Analysis of the Null Subject Phenomenon

The null-subject property of early English is related to the phenomenon that nonfinite verbs are used instead of finite ones.

PRO: specific kind of subject in a nonfinite clause. PROs stand in the null case.

b) Empirical Evidence

1. Null Subjects and Inflected *be*

Null subjects will not occur with inflected forms of the verb *to be*.

2. Null Subjects and Modals

The null subject does not co-occur with modals (because in the English language modals are always finite).

3. Null Subjects and -ed, -s

In case studies it was found that null subjects and the past-tense morpheme -ed were found in the same sentence. So null subjects co-occur with -ed.

It was also found that null subjects occur with the third person -s, but less frequently.

4. Null Subject and Finite Subordinate Clauses

In a case study linguists found out that English children do not use null subjects in embedded finite contexts (in contrast to Italian children).

3. A Theory of Underspecification

a) The Underspecification of I

I marks finiteness which is TEMPORAL SPECIFICITY.

TO: temporal operator. The relation between TO and I is called an I-CHAIN (tense chain).

We can understand the specification of I as its TEMPORAL INDEX --> So underspecification means UNINDEXED.

b) The Underspecification of D

D marks NOMINAL SPECIFICITY. D specifies whether something is a familiar NP or a novel NP.

4. Conclusion

An underspecified head is one "which is not indexed with a linguistic antecedent and hence whose interpretation must be deictically assigned. [...]

Underspecification has morphosyntactic reflexes in the from of absence of finite morphology, determiner, [and] the presence of null subjects [...] The possibility of underspecification [...] reduces ultimately to the availability of an interpretive rule which links underspecified Ds and Is directly to the discourse domain. [...]

The shift to the adult grammar, and hence away from root infinitives, null subjects, and determinerless nominals, involves a restructuring [...] of the mapping between grammar and pragmatics." (Hyams, p. 115).

In the child's development, pragmatics, semantics, syntax, and morphology interact; "...this interaction is characterized by a staggered or uneven development in different domains." (Hyams, p. 116)

Bibliography:

Hyams, Nina. *The Underspecification of Functional Categories in Early Grammar.*
In: *Generative Perspective on Language Acquisition*. Ed. Harald Clahsen.
Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1996, p. 91-127.

<u>Examples</u>

Michael sleeps
Michael sleep

"pas manger la poupée"
"Michel dormir" (Hyams, p. 91)

"open door
Wayne in garden" (Hyams, p. 92)

The man sleeps --> the man = nominative
sleep --> null case

am	**are**	**is**
0/4	0/36	0/109
0/1	0/71	13/114
0/0	0/19	2/50

(from Hyams, p. 100)

implicit:
"I didn't turn of the stove." (when?)
"She left me." (who?)
or explicit:
"Yesterday, John washed the car."
"John knows the answer." (Hyams, p. 105)
$(TO_i) \approx$ yesterday
"(TO_i) John $[I_i]$ drove his car." (Hyams, p. 106)

$(TO_i) \approx$ yesterday
"(TO_i) John $[I_j]$ knows the answer." (Hyams, p. 106)

"(TO_i) Baby doll $[I_0]$ cry." (Hyams, p. 106)

"bar schlapen" (Hyams, p. 107)
The bear must / should sleep.

"FAMILIAR: the boy"
"NOVEL: a boy" (Hyams, p. 111)