

Root Infinitives in Malagasy

In this paper it is proposed that there is a Root Infinitive (RI) stage in child Malagasy, a Western Austronesian language spoken in Madagascar. The properties of this stage are explored based on a longitudinal study of three Malagasy children, ages 1;6-2;8. Arguments supporting the proposal include subject omission patterns and the distribution of default pronouns in the children's speech.

It is well known that various child languages exhibit an RI stage, a period during which infinitives occur in root clauses in complementary distribution with finite clauses (Wexler 1994; Rizzi 1994; Hoekstra and Hyams 1998). Furthermore, a connection between RIs and null subjects has been established in acquisition studies of Indo-European languages including Dutch (Haegeman 1994), German (Kraemer 1993), Icelandic (Sigurjónsdóttir 1999), and others. The empirical generalization is that the rate of subject omission in child language is significantly higher in non-finite root contexts than in finite ones. Thus, for example, in child German sentences such as (1) are far more common than sentences such as (2) and the converse is true in finite clauses. This is consistent with the hypothesis that case is not licensed in the subject position of RIs. Furthermore, it has been shown that children use subject pronouns with 'default' case, as in (3) and (4), and that these occur almost exclusively in RIs (Schütze, 1995). In adult language these default pronouns appear only in non-case-licensing positions.

Malagasy verbs are formed by affixing a precategorial root with a number of voice and tense affixes (5). However, a significant number of children's verbs are bare verbal forms that lack these affixes and are not grammatical in adult speech (6). I claim that these bare forms are the equivalent of RIs in Malagasy. The claim is supported with evidence from subject omission and 'default' pronouns. Malagasy children omit subjects significantly more often with bare verbs than with fully inflected verbal forms (Table 7). This is consistent with the empirical facts from other well-studied languages that exhibit an RI stage.

Table 7: Rate of subject omission with finite and bare verbs

	Null Subject	Overt Subject
Bare Verb	251 (47%)	279 (53%)
Finite Verb	180 (36%)	325 (64%)

$$*\chi^2(1) = 14.6, p < .01$$

Additionally, Malagasy children use the default 1st person singular pronoun *izaho* (in some sort of phonologically reduced form) in subject position, a position occupied by the marked form *aho* in adult grammar (compare adult (5) to child (6)). This substitution takes place significantly more often with bare verbs than with fully inflected verbs complying with the patterns observed in other languages with an RI stage (Table 8).

Table 8: Distribution of *izaho* and *aho* with bare and fully inflected verbs.

Pronoun	Inflected Verb	Bare Verb
<i>aho</i>	40 (73%)	15 (27%)
<i>izaho</i>	5 (24%)	16 (76%)

$$*\chi^2(1) = 15, p < 0.0001$$

- (1) Wasser holen (GERMAN, Andreas, 2;1)
 Water get-inf
 (He) is getting water'
- (2) Auf Teddy fenster gucken
 also Teddy window look-INF
- (3) Me want one. Me do it. (ENGLISH, Bethan, 1;9)
- (4) Moi mettre ça comme Pol. (FRENCH, Max, 2;3)
 me put that like Pol
 'I (want to) put it like Pol.'
- (5) n- i- tomany aho (MALAGASY, Adult)
 PST- AV- cry 1SG.NOM
 'I cried'
- (6) tomany za (MALAGASY, Tsiorisoa, 2;7)
 cry 1SG.StrongForm
 'I cried'

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