

# Prosodic Licensing of Early Verbs in Murrinhpatha

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## Abstract

A key characteristic of children's early word productions are errors of omission, the omission of segments and syllables from children's speech compared with adult productions (e.g. Demuth, 1996). In particular it has been noted for verbs that children omit inflectional morphology (e.g. Brown, 1973; Freudenthal et al., 2015; Wexler, 1994). Theories which attempt to account for children's early verb productions tend to fall into two broad approaches. One focuses on phonological and prosodic features of the adult target language (e.g. Demuth, 2006; Peters, 1985), while the other argues that children's early verb productions are impacted primarily by morphosyntactic development (e.g. Courtney & Saville-Troike, 2002; Schütze & Wexler, 1996).

In this talk I report on findings from the acquisition of Murrinhpatha, the language of the Kardu Diminin, Kardu Yek Maninh, Rak Kirnmu, Kardu Yek Nangu, Yek Wunh, Kardu Kura Thipmam and Rak Malgin clans (Ward, 2018). Murrinhpatha is a polysynthetic non-Pama Nyungan language with long morphologically complex verbs. The Murrinhpatha acquisition data support a prosodic licensing account of early verb productions (Forshaw, 2021 Ch. 5), where children's productions are sensitive to the prosodic structures of the adult target language (Demuth, 1996). Children's verb productions are also found to be influenced by factors of perceptual salience (Peters, 1985; Slobin, 1985). I argue that morphosyntactic accounts of early verb production are ill equipped to account for the acquisition of Murrinhpatha verbs due to their morphological complexity and templatic morphology (Mansfield, 2019; Nordlinger, 2010).

I conclude this talk by discussing the need for the field of language acquisition to become more representative of the world's languages (Kidd & Garcia, 2022) and the potential conflict with the needs of smaller minoritised language communities (e.g. Gaby & Woods, 2020; Smith, 1999).

## Bio

William (Bill) Forshaw is a Linguist based at the Research Unit for Indigenous Language at the University of Melbourne. His research interests include Bilingual Education, Literacy Education, Australian Languages and Language Acquisition. Bill's work has largely focused on Murrinhpatha and the community of Wadeye, NT including a period of five years working as the school linguist at OLSH Thamarrurr Catholic College. Bill's recently published monograph *The Acquisition of Complex Morphology: Insights from Murrinhpatha* provides (2021) argues that morphological complexity, which broadly includes factors of transparency, predictability/regularity, richness, type/token frequency and productivity, must become central to our understanding of morphological acquisition.