# Elicited Infinitival Complement Production by Preschool Children

Jamie D. Fisher, M.A. & C. Melanie Schuele, Ph.D.

Vanderbilt University Department of Hearing and Speech Sciences

## INTRODUCTION

Infinitival complements are among the earliest types of complex syntax produced by young children. Infinitival complements appear as an argument to a complement taking verb, in the direct object position of the sentence, for example, I want [complement taking verb] to eat [infinitival complement, in direct object position]. Typically in English, the grammatical marker or morpheme to appears in the infinitival complement. Infinitival complements can have an overt subject – I want Mary to eat – or a subject co-referential with the sentence subject – I want to eat infinitival complements with co-referential subject. Noun-Verb to-Verb (N-V-to-V) forms emerge in children’s language around the second birthday, prior to Noun to Verb Noun to Noun to-V forms, appearing at about 2½ years of age (Bloom et al., 1984; Limber, 1973). The production of reduced infinitives, for example, wanna, gonna, precede the production of infinitival complements with to.

### Past Infinitival Complement Research:
- Eisenberg & Cairns (1994)
- Eisenberg and Craig (1994)
- Washington and Craig (1994)

The proposed study will compare infinitival complement production in a lower SES group of preschool children as compared to a higher SES group in order to further investigate age and SES differences in elicited production data. Results described how age and SES influences production of infinitives in preschool children.

## METHODS

### PARTICIPANTS

- **80 preschool children**
  - Age range: 3.0–4.11 (M = 4.0; SD = 0.51)
  - Forty preschoolers from lower socioeconomic status (SES) group age-matched with 40 preschoolers from higher SES group (see Table 1). All children were administered the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-IV (PPVT-IV) and the Preschool Language Scales-4 (PLIS-4).

### RESEARCH QUESTION 1: Does the number of infinitival complements produced by preschoolers vary by age?

The results of the ANOVA indicated a main effect of age (F(2, 77) = 10.98, p = .001). Tukey’s HSD post-hoc analysis revealed significant difference between 3;6-3;11 and 4;0-4;11 age groups (p = .005), as well as a significant difference between 3;0-3;5 and 4;0-4;11 age groups (p = .005). In the elicited task, the older groups produced more infinitival complements as compared to the younger groups (see Figure 1).

### RESEARCH QUESTION 2: Does the number of infinitival complements produced by preschoolers vary by SES?

The results of the ANOVA indicated a main effect of SES (F (2, 78) = 9.14, p = .002). Tukey’s HSD post-hoc analysis revealed significant difference between lower SES and higher SES groups (see Figure 2). There was no age by SES interaction (p = .149).

### RESEARCH QUESTION 3: Does the percent inclusion of infinitival “TO” vary by age?

The results of the ANOVA indicated a main effect of age (F(3, 70) = 3.41, p = .017). Thus, there was no developmental change observed in the inclusion of infinitival “TO” across three- and four-year-olds (see Figure 2).

### RESEARCH QUESTION 4: Does the percent inclusion of infinitival “TO” vary by SES?

The results of the ANOVA indicated there was a main effect of SES (F (1, 72) = 10.31, p = .002). The higher SES group include more complex syntax, including infinitival complements and number of different complement taking verbs. When the preschool children were compared by number of infinitival complements and number of different complement taking verbs produced by preschoolers variations were found based upon age. As anticipated, as preschoolers increased with age they were more proficient with their use of infinitival complements and complement taking verbs. However there was no difference found due to age with the percent inclusion of infinitival “TO”. These results are consistent with Eisenberg’s (1994) findings.

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