This paper presents evidence for two distinct stages in the acquisition of syntactic categories in Malay and Indonesian, drawing from an ongoing longitudinal study of 8 children in Jakarta, documented in a naturalistic corpus of close to one million utterances.

Jakarta Indonesian is characterized by an extremely impoverished inventory of syntactic categories. Almost all expressions, including those whose translational equivalents into English are nouns, adjectives, verbs, and their phrasal projections, belong to a single open syntactic category, S(entence); all members of S exhibit the same syntactic behaviour, including shared distributional privileges. In addition to S, there is a single closed syntactic category S/S, consisting of a few dozen semantically heterogeneous items whose distributional privileges are more restricted: as suggested by the categorial-grammar notation, members of S/S combine with members of S to form other members of S.

In Gil (2000), a universal theory of syntactic categories is proposed, which makes certain empirical predictions with respect to typology (cross-linguistic variation), phylogeny (language evolution) and ontogeny (language acquisition). With regard to acquisition, the theory predicts that in Jakarta Indonesian, the category S will be acquired before the category S/S. In other words, children acquiring Jakarta Indonesian should pass through an intermediate stage in which all expressions, including those which ultimately end up as members of S/S, are uniformly assigned to the category S.

This paper provides evidence in support of this prediction, deriving from errors of overgeneralization which occur in the naturalistic corpus. Specifically, the early child corpus contains instances of members of S/S behaving as though they were members of S: occurring by themselves as complete sentences, or in other constructions characteristic of members of S. Thus, as predicted, it would appear as though children acquiring Jakarta Indonesian pass through an initial stage in which all expressions, including those which ultimately end up as members of S/S, are uniformly assigned to the category S.

Since members of S/S do not form a semantically coherent set, they pose an interesting puzzle: how does the child eventually learn to identify members of this category? The answer, it is suggested, is that children make use of negative indirect evidence, as proposed by Pinker (1981, 1984) and Goldberg (1995): if the child observes that in certain contexts an otherwise preferred construction is repeatedly avoided, s/he may accordingly infer that, in the contexts in question, this construction is disallowed. In the case at hand, the child observes that in certain contexts members of S occur by themselves as complete utterances; however, when, in similar contexts, a certain expression occurs over again and again in construction with another expression, s/he may conclude that the expression in question belongs to the closed syntactic category S/S.
REFERENCES