



Pronominal inflection is stranded inflection

An argument from child German

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Roadmap

The phenomenon

Three approaches to pronominal inflection

Errors with strong inflection

Potential analysis and further implications

The phenomenon

Strong inflection on German determiner

- (1) *'Strong' inflection on the determiner dies 'this'*

	MASC	FEM	NEUT
NOM	dies- er	dies- e	dies- es
ACC	dies- en	dies- e	dies- es
DAT	dies- em	dies- er	dies- em
GEN	dies- es	dies- er	dies- es

Inflection of *ein*-determiners

A class of determiners, so-called ***ein*-words**, deviates from the strong inflection pattern.

- indefinite determiner: ***ein*** ‘a’
- negative determiner: ***kein*** ‘no’
- possessive determiners: ***mein, dein, sein, ihr, unser, euer*** ‘my, your(sg), his, her/their, our, your(pl)’

(2) *Inflection of ein-words*

	MASK	FEM	NEUT
NOM	mein	mein-e	mein
AKK	mein- en	mein-e	mein
DAT	mein- em	mein- er	mein- em
GEN	mein- es	mein- er	mein- es

(3) *Inflection of determiners*

	MASC	FEM	NEUT
NOM	dies- er	dies- e	dies- es
ACC	dies- en	dies- e	dies- es
DAT	dies- em	dies- er	dies- em
GEN	dies- es	dies- er	dies- es

Strong inflection re-appears on *ein*-pronouns

- (4) a. Das hier ist **ein** Brief und das da ist auch **ein-er**.
that here is INDEF letter and that there is also INDEF-M.SG.NOM
'This over here is a letter and that over there is one, too.' [masc nom]
- b. **Sein** Gespräch ist heute und **mein-(e)s** ist morgen.
his interview is today and my-N.SG.NOM is tomorrow
'His interview is today and mine is tomorrow.' [neut nom]
- c. Du wäschst **ein** Hemd aber ich wasche **kein-(e)s**.
you wash INDEF shirt but I wash NEG.INDEF-N.SG.ACC
'You're washing a shirt but I'm washing none.' [neut acc]

Three approaches to pronominal inflection

Traditional descriptive grammar

- (poss./indef./neg.) **determiners** vs. (poss./indef./neg.) **pronouns**
- two different elements with two (slightly) different declinations

(5) *Inflection of ein-determiners*

	MASC	FEM	NEUT
NOM	-Ø	-e	-Ø
ACC	-en	-e	-Ø
DAT	-em	-er	-em
GEN	-es	-er	-es

(6) *Inflection of ein-pronouns*

	MASC	FEM	NEUT
NOM	-er	-e	-es
ACC	-en	-e	-es
DAT	-em	-er	-em
(GEN	-es	-er	-es)

e.g. Helbig and Buscha (2001), Durrell (2002), Duden (2009)

Pronoun = Determiner + NP-ellipsis

(Postal 1969, Abney 1987, Lobeck 1995, Wiltschko 1998, Elbourne 2001, Sauerland 2007, Murphy 2018, Weeber 2023)

⇒ where does strong inflection on pronouns come from?

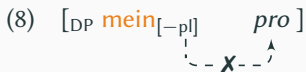
Two proposals:

1. Strong inflection licenses NP-ellipsis
(Lobeck 1995, cf. Bernstein 1993, Kester 1996*a,b*)
2. Strong inflection is stranded by NP-ellipsis
(Murphy 2018, cf. Saab and Lipták 2016)

(7) *Licensing and identification of pro* (Lobeck 1995: 4)

An empty, non-arbitrary pronominal [i.e., ellipsis site] must be properly head governed, and governed by an X^0 specified for strong agreement.

- Ellipsis sites are empty categories (i.e. *pro*).
- A terminal can license an ellipsis site iff it bears ‘strong agreement features’ (e.g. case)

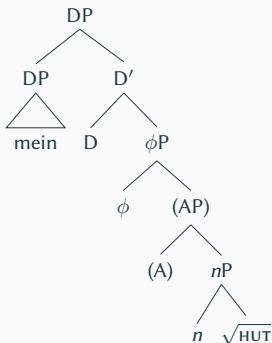


Inflection is stranded by NPE

(10) *Ellipsis-Morphology Generalization* (Elmo; Saab and Lipták 2016)

For every morphological operation MO that affects the domain of X, where X contains the target of MO, MO cannot apply in X if X is subject to ellipsis.

(11) *Structure of DP in German* (Murphy 2018)



- ϕ hosts strong inflection; lowers to n ; receives a contextual $\emptyset$ spellout.
- nP -ellipsis blocks Lowering; stranded affix re-attaches to determiner.

(12) *Derivation without ellipsis*

[DP **mein** [ϕ_P $\phi_{M,SG,NOM}$ [$_{nP}$ *n* Hut]]]

(13) *Derivation with ellipsis*

[DP **mein** [ϕ_P $\phi_{M,SG,NOM}$ $\langle [_{nP}$ *n* Hut] $\rangle$]]

- (14) a. $/-\emptyset/ \leftrightarrow [\phi, M, SG, NOM] / [{}_n n \text{ ___ }]$
b. $/-\emptyset/ \leftrightarrow [\phi, N, SG, NOM/ACC] / [{}_n n \text{ ___ }]$
c. $/-er/ \leftrightarrow [\phi, M, SG, NOM]$
d. $/-es/ \leftrightarrow [\phi, N, SG, NOM/ACC]$

Inflection is stranded by NPE

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[_{DP} **mein** [_{ϕ P} [_{n P} [_{n} n $\phi_{M,SG,NOM}$] Hut]]]

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Inflection is stranded by NPE

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[DP **mein** [ϕ P [ϕ $\underbrace{[n \ n \ \phi_{M,SG,NOM}]}_{\emptyset}$ Hut]]]

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[DP **mein** [ϕ P [$\underbrace{[_n n \phi_{M,SG,NOM}]}_{\emptyset}$ Hut]]]

(13) *Derivation with ellipsis*

[DP **mein** [ϕ P $\boxed{\phi_{M,SG,NOM}}$ $\langle [_n n \text{ Hut }] \rangle$]]

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Inflection is stranded by NPE

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[DP **mein** [ϕ P [ϕ $\phi_{M,SG,NOM}$] Hut]]]

$\underbrace{[n \text{ } n \text{ } \phi_{M,SG,NOM}]}_{\emptyset}$

(13) *Derivation with ellipsis*

[DP **mein** [ϕ P $\phi_{M,SG,NOM}$ $\langle [n \text{ } n \text{ } \text{Hut}] \rangle$]]

$\underbrace{\hspace{10em}}_{\text{X}}$

- (14) a. $/-\emptyset/ \leftrightarrow [\phi, M, SG, NOM] / [n \text{ } n \text{ } __]$
b. $/-\emptyset/ \leftrightarrow [\phi, N, SG, NOM/ACC] / [n \text{ } n \text{ } __]$
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Inflection is stranded by NPE

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[DP **mein** [ϕ P [$\underbrace{[_n n \phi_{M,SG,NOM}]}_{\emptyset}$ Hut]]]

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[DP **mein** [ϕ P $\boxed{\phi_{M,SG,NOM}}$ $\langle [_n n \text{ Hut }] \rangle$]]

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c. $/-\text{er}/ \leftrightarrow [\phi, M, SG, NOM]$
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Inflection is stranded by NPE

(12) *Derivation without ellipsis*

[_{DP} **mein** [_{ϕ P} [_{n P} [_{n} **n** $\phi_{M,SG,NOM}$] Hut]]]

$\underbrace{\hspace{10em}}_{\emptyset}$

(13) *Derivation with ellipsis*

[_{DP} **mein** [_{ϕ P} [**-er**] $\langle$ [_{n P} **n** Hut] $\rangle$]]

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(13) *Derivation with ellipsis*

[_{DP} **mein** [_{ϕ P} [**-er**] <[_{n P} n Hut]>]]


- (14) a. $/-\emptyset/ \leftrightarrow [\phi, M, SG, NOM] / [{}_n n _]$
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Inflection is stranded by NPE

(12) *Derivation without ellipsis*

[_{DP} **mein** [_{ϕ P} [_{n P} [_{n} n $\phi_{M,SG,NOM}$] Hut]]]
 $\underbrace{\hspace{1.5cm}}_{\emptyset}$

(13) *Derivation with ellipsis*

[_{DP} **mein-er** [_{ϕ P} $\langle$ [_{n P} n Hut] $\rangle$]]

- (14) a. $/-\emptyset/ \leftrightarrow [\phi, M, SG, NOM] / [{}_n n __]$
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Errors with strong inflection

Two general types of errors in child language

Omission error (marked in green)

Children do not pronounce linguistic material that is required in the target language.

Commission/Undercompression error (marked in orange)

(e.g. Slobin 1973, MacWhinney 1985, Snyder 2011, Guasti et al. 2023)

Children pronounce underlying linguistic material that typically remains unrealized in the target language.

(15) *Omission error*

*Das ist **mein**.
that is my
'That's mine.'

(16) *Commission error*

*Das ist **mein-er** Hut
that is my-M.SG.NOM hat
'Thas is my hat.'

Expectations about error rates

Inflection licensing NPE:

(17) [DP **mein**_[-pl] *pro*]
 └─ ~~X~~ ─┘

(18) [DP **mein-er**_[+case, -pl] Hut]

- Children should avoid unlicensed *pro* (17) but tolerate inflected determiners.

⇒ **higher error rate for commission errors** than for omission errors

Inflection stranded by NPE:

(19) [DP **mein** [_{φP} $\langle$ [_{NP} [_n *n* ϕ] Hut $\rangle$]]]

(20) [DP **mein** [_{ϕP} [_{nP} [_n *n* *ϕ*] Hut]]]

-er

- Children may fail to correctly insert $\emptyset$ in (20) at a different rate than they erroneously lower into the ellipsis site (violating ELMO) in (19).

⇒ different error rates possible

- 9 German-language corpora of TD children (*Caroline, Grimm, Koch, Leo, Miller, Rigol, Stuttgart, Szagun, Wagner*) through the ChiLDES database (MacWhinney 2000)
- Age 2;0 (onset 2-word stage & case-marking on articles, Clahsen 1984, Mills 1985) to 5;0
- Query for possessive determiners ending in *-(e)r* and *-(e)s* in all persons and genders in various orthographic variants and with ± 2 lines of surrounding discourse
- Hits ($N = 5779$) checked for M.NOM or N.NOM/ACC (based on inflection and/or context in cases of NPE) as opposed to F.DAT/GEN or M/N.GEN or others
- Annotated for NPE (1 vs. 0) and inflection (1 vs. 0)

Some examples of comission errors

(21) CHI: das **mein-er** Kaffee is(t).
that my-ST.M.NOM coffee(M) is
'That's my coffee.'

MOT:**dein** Kaffee is(t) das.
your coffee is that
'That's your coffee.'

(Falko 2;01, Szagun 2001)

(22) CHI: aber auch noch (eine)n Fisch mal(e)n in **unser-es** Wasser.
but also yet a fish draw in our-ST.N.ACC water(N)
'but also yet draw another fish in our water'

MOT:ein Fisch?
a fish
'A fish?'

(Lisa 3;06, Szagun 2001)

(23) CHI: die wollen nach Hause in **ihr-es** Häus-chen.
they want to home in their-ST.N.ACC house-DIM(N)
'They wanna get home into their little house.'

MEC:oh, die wollen in **ihr** Häuschen.
oh they want in their house-DIM(N)
'Oh, they wanna get into their house.'

(Leo, 2;07, Behrens 2006)

Some examples of omission errors

- (24) TOM:will der **mein**-(e)s trinken.
wants he my-ST.N.ACC drink
'Does he want to drink mine?'

CHI: nee, der will **mein**.
no, he wants my
'No, he wants mine.'

(Simone 3;07, Miller 1979)

- (25) RIG: nein, is(t) ja nicht **mein** Papa
no is PRT not my dad(M)
'No, it isn't my dad.'

CHI: nee, **unser**
no our
'No, ours'

(Cosima 3;09, Lieven and Stoll 2013)

- (26) MOT:das war **mein** Tee.
that was my tea(M)
'That was my tea.'

CHI: nee, **mein**, nich(t) **dein**.
no my not your
'No, mine, not yours.'

(Sören 3;04, Szagun 2001)

Results

(27) Error counts

NPE	inflection		total	error rate
	yes	no		
yes	712	133	845	18.7%
no	67	2476	2543	2.7%
total	779	2609	3388	

- significantly **more omission errors** ($\chi^2(2) = 196, p < 2.2\text{e-}16$)
 - Omission errors may include
 - interruptions, non-continuations
 - ‘swallowed’ or mistranscribed M.ACC $-(e)n$ or M/N.DAT $-(e)m$
- ⇒ still unlikely that these account for 16 of the 18.7% of omission cases

Error development

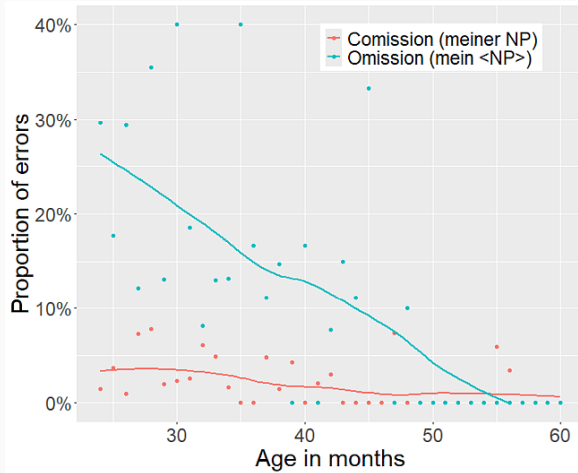


Figure 1: Error rates over age

Inflection licensing NPE:

- **higher error rate for comission errors** than for omission errors

→ ✗

Inflection stranded by NPE:

- **different error rates possible**

→ ✓

⇒ An approach where pronominal inflection is stranded by ellipsis (e.g. Murphy 2018) is compatible with the results.

Potential analysis and further implications

Secondary feature negligence → commission error

(28) *Secondary feature negligence (SFN)* (Hein et al. 2025)

Children's representations of secondary features are unstable leading them to occasionally ignore secondary features during Vocabulary Insertion.

(29) a. $/-\emptyset/ \leftrightarrow [\phi, \text{M}, \text{SG}, \text{NOM}] / [{}_n n \text{ ___}]$

b. $/-\text{er}/ \leftrightarrow [\phi, \text{M}, \text{SG}, \text{NOM}]$

(30) $[\text{DP } \text{mein} [\phi_P \text{ } \overbrace{[\text{nP } [{}_n n \phi_{\text{M,SG,NOM}}] \text{Hut}]}]]]$

$\swarrow \quad \searrow$
 $-\text{er} \quad -\emptyset$

Failure to respect Elmo → omission error

(31) *Elmo Failure*

Children occasionally fail to respect Elmo and lower material into an ellipsis site / apply Lowering before ellipsis.

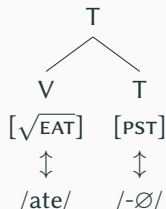
(32) $[_{DP} \text{mein} [_{\phi P} \langle [_{nP} n-\phi \text{Hund}] \rangle]]$



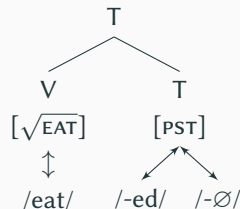
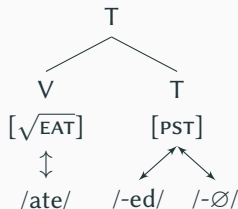
The diagram illustrates a lowering operation. A curved arrow originates from the DP 'mein' and points to the ellipsis site 'n-φ' within the nP complement. This represents the failure to respect the Elmo constraint, where material is lowered into an ellipsis site before the ellipsis is applied.

Commission errors in English past tense (Hein et al. 2025)

(33) *Target*
ate(-Ø)



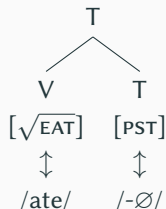
(34) *Commission error*
ate-d, eat-ed



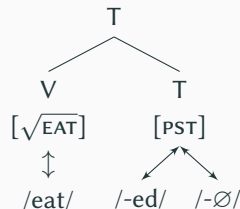
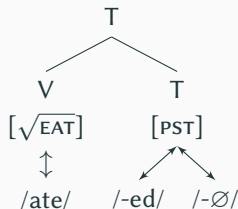
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b. $/\text{ate}/ \Leftrightarrow [\sqrt{\text{EAT}}] / __\text{[PST]}$
c. $/-\text{ed}/ \Leftrightarrow [\text{PST}]$
d. $/-\text{Ø}/ \Leftrightarrow [\text{PST}] / __\{[\sqrt{\text{EAT}}], [\sqrt{\text{BRING}}], \dots\}$

Commission errors in English past tense (Hein et al. 2025)

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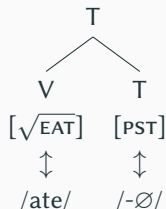
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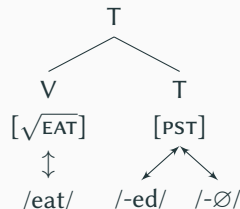
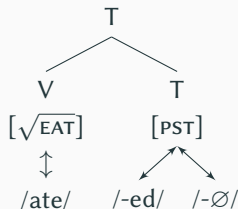
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Commission errors in English past tense (Hein et al. 2025)

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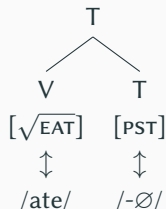
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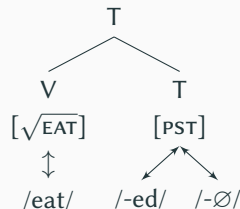
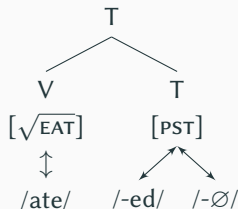
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Commission errors in English past tense (Hein et al. 2025)

(33) *Target*
ate(-Ø)



(34) *Commission error*
ate-d, eat-ed



- (35) a. /eat/ $\Leftrightarrow [\sqrt{\text{EAT}}]$
b. /ate/ $\Leftrightarrow [\sqrt{\text{EAT}}] / \text{ ___[PST]}$
c. /-ed/ $\Leftrightarrow [\text{PST}]$
d. /-Ø/ $\Leftrightarrow [\text{PST}] / \text{ ___[}\{\sqrt{\text{EAT}}, \sqrt{\text{BRING}}, \dots\}]$

⇒ Rate of commission errors (2–5 year-olds): 2.7%

Commission errors in German and English

(36) Comparison between German and English commission errors

	German ₂₋₅	English ₂₋₅
# of hits	2,542	74,458
# of errors	66	2,005
error rate	2.6%	2.7%

Expectation: similar rates of commission errors in other domains/languages if allomorphy between zero/non-zero exponents

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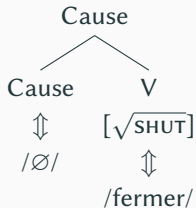
(37) *Two types of causative verbs in French* (Martin et al. 2022)

- a. **Ferme** les yeux.
close.IMP the eyes
'Close your eyes.'
- b. Un coup de vent a **fait tomber** un arbre.
a gust of wind has made fall.INF a tree
'A gust of wind made a tree fall over.'

(38) *Causativizing a verb with faire 'make'*

J'ai **fait fermer** les yeux aux enfants.
1SG.have made close.INF the eyes to.the children
'I made the children close their eyes.'

(39) *Target realization for French lexical causative fermer 'close'*

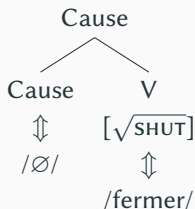


a. /fermer/ $\Leftrightarrow$ [$\sqrt{\text{SHUT}}$]

b. /faire/ $\Leftrightarrow$ [CAUSE]

c. /∅/ $\Leftrightarrow$ [CAUSE] / $__[\{\sqrt{\text{SHUT}}, \dots\}]$

- (39) *Target realization for French lexical causative fermer 'close'*



a. /fermer/ $\Leftrightarrow$ [√SHUT]

b. /faire/ $\Leftrightarrow$ [CAUSE]

c. /∅/ $\Leftrightarrow$ [CAUSE] / __[{√SHUT, ... }]

- (40) *Children's commission errors*

faire **fermer** les yeux
make.INF close.INF the eyes

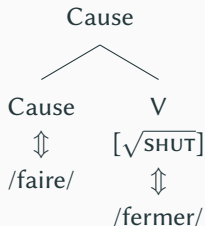
Childs intended meaning: 'Closing the eyes.'

Meaning in adult language: 'Making [someone] close the eyes.'

(LSN 4;02, Palasis 2009)

French causatives

(39) *SFN leading to commission error*



a. /fermer/ $\Leftrightarrow$ [$\sqrt{\text{SHUT}}$]

b. /faire/ $\Leftrightarrow$ [CAUSE]

c. /Ø/ $\Leftrightarrow$ [CAUSE] / $_\{[\sqrt{\text{SHUT}}, \dots]\}$

(40) *Children's commission errors*

faire **fermer** les yeux
make.INF close.INF the eyes

Childs intended meaning: 'Closing the eyes.'

Meaning in adult language: 'Making [someone] close the eyes.'

(LSN 4;02, Palasis 2009)

French causatives

Martin et al. (2022): Corpus study on 10 French corpora (1;7–6;11 y.o. children) reveals a rate of 10% of commissive use of *faire*.

Issue:

- rate of commissive *faire* in all uses of *faire*, NOT rate of commissive causative in all causative verbs.
- query for (inflected) *faire* + infinitive
- includes all commissive errors for a given lexical causative verb (e.g. *fermer*) but excludes all target uses of that verb

⇒ not comparable

Query for (inflected) *faire* + (infinitive) lexical causative verbs AND (inflected) lexical causative verbs.

- German-acquiring children make commission and omission errors with inflection on in possessive determiners and pronouns.
- The rate of omission errors is about 9 times that of commission errors.
- This ratio is more readily accounted for by the approach where pronominal inflection is stranded by NPE.
- This also allows to link commission errors (and their near-identical rate) in other languages/domains to a single underlying mistake of Secondary Feature Negligence.

Thank you for your attention.

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