Another example of the apparent poverty of the stimulus

The child will hear lots of sentences with a subject like *he* followed by *is*, such as:

(1) *He is happy.*

Many times, *he* and *is* will be contracted, as in:

(2) *He’s happy.*

In fact, the child will probably hear contracted forms like *he’s* more often than *he is*, but examples of both are certainly plentiful in the environment. The child could then be reasonably expected to formulate a simple rule: Contract *he* and *is* into *he’s* when they are together (or more generally, contract the subject and *is* when they are together).

What is interesting is that children seem to know not to do contraction in certain cases. To see this, consider the following two sentences:

(3) *I wonder whether he is happy at school.*

(4) *I wonder how happy he is at school.*

These sentences are very similar, but if you are a native speaker of English (and probably even if you are not), you know that you can do the contraction in (3), but that it sounds very bizarre in (4). It turns out that there are structural reasons why contraction doesn’t work in (4), but how did you ever figure this out when you were a child learning English? It is hard to imagine that the environment would somehow provide direct evidence that contraction is impossible in (4). So here we have another example of children figuring something out about their language on the basis of what would seem to be insufficient evidence from the environment.