

Acquisition of inflectional morphology in Estonian: individual differences in the acquisition of number

The realization of the category of number varies cross-linguistically, in Estonian language both nouns and verbs inflect in number. The presentation examines the role of individual differences in the early acquisition of number inside the set of triplets. The main goal is to investigate if the development of number is homogeneous across children in the set of triplets or not, and which are the factors determining the individual variation.

Some preliminary data of the language acquisition of a set of triplets will be presented. The recordings of spontaneous speech of triplets were transcribed according to CHILDES-system, and investigated using the pre- and protomorphological point of view (see for example works of W. U. Dressler and A. Karpf) comparisons with singletons were made on the basis of MLU. The observation period covered the emergence of premorphological operations and first miniparadigms in the protomorphological phase of language acquisition.

The acquisition of morphology of children in the multiple birth set, who have the same input, should be at least at the premorphological phase, where the role of input frequencies is considered to be most important, identical. Examination of the data suggests that there are individual differences present already at the premorphological phase: where one child starts with suffixless plural nominative case forms, the other child starts with quantifiers and plural partitives, the third one does not use plural forms at all, instead of plural case forms there were a lot of constructions where numerals with singular case forms were used for expressing the plurality in her speech.

Close examination of the children's plural forms suggests that plural is at the observation period not productive: in first recordings the number of plural forms was extremely low, a lot of plural nouns were rote-learned and almost none of the plurals occur in singular in the same recording. The number of plural forms slightly increases, but is low also at the end of the observation period.

The data suggests that the acquisition of number can be different also in nouns and verbs: the marking of the category of number in nouns emerges early in the speech of two children, the number in verbs emerges almost two months later. But one child acquired plural verb forms earlier than plural noun forms. Plural verb forms form one miniparadigm with singular verb forms since the emergence of first plural verb forms. Most plural nouns were rote-learned even at the end of observation period.

Although some differences in the acquisition of number can be the result of different amount of speech material in a given recording session, still the use of some kind of individual acquisition strategy can be assumed, concerning for example the acquisition of noun inflection versus verb inflection.