

Acquisition of German diminutive formation and compounding in a comparative perspective: Evidence for typology and the role of frequency

Wolfgang U. Dressler, Laura E. Lettner & Katharina Korecky-Kröll
Department of Linguistics and Communication Research, Austrian Academy of Sciences
(Vienna)

Introduction

Many linguistic models underline the importance of first language acquisition as external or substantial evidence for or against theoretical positions in grammar theory. Here we will address questions of two main conference topics: typology and frequency in language use.

1. The acquisition of inflectional morphology has been found to develop more rapidly in languages with richer inflection, especially in agglutinating languages (Xanthos et al. in print). Does this also hold for word formation? Is there a difference within the intra-morphemic gradual typology of prototypical inflection (e.g. case) – non-prototypical inflection (e.g. plural) – non-prototypical derivation (e.g. diminutive) – prototypical derivation (e.g. affixal transcategorization) – semi-affixation as transition to compounding – compounding?

2. The importance of type and/or token frequency for morphological theory is highly valued in usage-based theories and in various psycholinguistic models, much less so in other models, especially if they exclude frequency from arguments on competence. Also in acquisition studies the relevance of frequency is not unanimously accepted outside lexical acquisition (cf. Gülzow & Gagarina 2007). How much do frequency distributions in child speech (CS) follow those in child-directed speech (CDS)? Can order of emergence in CS be predicted by frequency distributions in CDS? Does age of acquisition have an impact on adult language?

Data basis and methodology

The data of children (CS) and of their adult care-givers (CDS) come from the “Cross-linguistic Project on Pre- and Protomorphology in Language Acquisition” coordinated by the first author in behalf of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. It collects, transcribes, codes (according to international CHILDES methodology) and analyses in strictly parallel ways the development of spontaneous speech in 18 languages. Although we will compare also published and pre-published results from other languages of the project, we will focus on the data of 4 Viennese children collected between 1 and 4 times per month: Jan (1;3 – 6;0 years of age), Lena (1;7 – 4;3), Kathi (1;6 – 3;0), Paul (2;0 – 3;6).

The typological approach will be a renewal of both characterological morphology (in the sense of V. Mathesius) and ordering typology (in the sense of Hempel & Oppenheim 1936 and as distinguished from typological classification, cf. Dressler 2008). As to language use, we will restrict our investigation to the relationships between type and token frequency in CDS on the one hand and CS on the other. A brief description of Austrian German diminutive formation (distributed into productive nominal diminutives, lexicalised diminutives, hypocoristics and a transitional category between hypocoristics and diminutives) and of Austrian German compounding as far as it occurs in CS and CDS will be given on our handout.

Results

Diminutives are acquired early in all languages which use them productively (cf. Savickiene & Dressler 2007) and hypocoristics are central in the acquisition process, which fits the typological implication between the presence of productive hypocoristics and common noun diminutives. This early emergence of diminutives has nothing to do with either ordering

language typology or with its character as a non-prototypical type of morphology (as hypothesized in Dressler & Karpf 1995) but with the priority of pragmatics over semantics of hypocoristics and diminutives, i.e. basic pragmatic meanings of diminutives are more central than the semantic meaning of smallness (Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994); accordingly basic pragmatic meanings are earlier acquired by children than semantic ones. This can be explained only partially by frequency considerations, although there is a further pragmatic frequency effect of the fact that mothers (and women in general) tend to use diminutives more frequently than fathers (and men in general). Inflection starts to be acquired as early as diminutive formation, whereas prototypical derivation emerges later, presumably due to its smaller relevance for the acquisition of syntax. At least in German, semi-suffixation (as in *Freund-schaft* ‘friendship’) emerges still later due to the rather abstract semantic meanings of the words thus formed and of the ensuing non-frequency in CDS (an effect of mothers fine-tuning to the needs of their small children).

Nominal compounding emerges as early in German as inflection and diminutive formation (cf. Dressler, Lettner & Korecky-Kröll in print). This appears not to be the case in most other languages of the pre/protomorphology project (cf. also Bermann 2008). The reason seems to lie in the relative importance of compounding in the respective adult languages, which goes beyond mere frequency distributions. Also the different frequency of compound types in CDS is only partially reflected in the order of emergence in CS. For German, order of emergence includes: noun compounds before other compounds, endocentric much before exocentric compounds, transparent concatenative before opaque interfixed compounds, binary much before recursive compounds.

Conclusion

Our results support views which assign an important but not an overwhelming role to frequency factors. We will object to many “frequentists” that they are counting frequency in the wrong place and overlook age of acquisition effects. As to typology, we will propose that the most important predictive factor is the role of morphology as opposed to syntax and the lexicon in the particular language system, which results in the degree of morphological richness of a language. Already small children are sensitive to this degree because it is important for the efficiency of their communication and therefore they attend more or less to the acquisition of morphology, thus English children much less than Turkish children. Here first language acquisition differs fundamentally from adult second language acquisition.

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