

A cross-linguistic investigation of early locative morphology

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In the acquisition of locative prepositions and case markers cross-linguistically, an interaction between the conceptual and the linguistic is apparent. Conceptually, early perceptual biases such as the preference for GOAL over SOURCE paths (e.g. Pléh, Vinkler & Kálmán, 1997) are reliable predictors of locative production. Linguistic factors such as syncretism have also been argued to contribute to early case marking production. Mikes (1967), for example, found that bilingual children were able to learn the agglutinating Hungarian locative case system almost a year earlier than the syncretic Serbo-Croatian preposition + case system, suggesting a role for linguistic complexity.

The present study, then, begins to tease apart the contributions of the lexical and conceptual by comparing the development of the morphologically diverse locative systems of Hungarian, Slovenian, and English-speaking 2-year-olds. The data for this study consist of previously unanalyzed longitudinal data from the Kranjc (1999) corpus for 19 Slovenian children between 1;11 and 3;0 (2;4 mean at start), and longitudinal and cross-sectional data from the CHILDES database (MacWhinney, 2000) for 6 Hungarian children (1;8-2;9, 2;0 mean at start) and 6 age-matched American children.

To investigate the role of linguistic complexity and assess its interaction with conceptual development, the following relation types have been analyzed in each corpus: IN, ON, AT, UNDER, BETWEEN, NEXT TO, IN FRONT OF, and BEHIND. Where they are reliably distinguished, path distinctions (GOAL vs. STATE vs. SOURCE) are also assessed. The outcome measure of this investigation is the percent correct production of locative markers in obligatory contexts, following the criteria of Brown (1973).

Our findings suggest that linguistic complexity does independently contribute to productive locative marking in 2-year-olds. Agglutinating locative cases and isolating adpositions were used more frequently and accurately than complex markers across these languages. The syncretic Slovenian case system appeared incomplete at this stage and prepositions were also sometimes omitted. While isolating adpositions were produced with comparable accuracy to locative case markers on the whole, almost no instances of the more complex adpositions such as ‘behind’ and ‘between’ were found. These results will be discussed in the context of the interaction between conceptual and linguistic development.

References

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