

The role of parental input in early verb acquisition: Evidence from child German

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Keywords

lexical acquisition, verb particles, parental input

Abstract

The goal of our study was to investigate the influence of quantitative factors in the input on the acquisition order of verbs. Previous studies (e.g., Penner, Schulz & Wymann 2003; Schulz, 2003) reported that German children start to produce verb particles like "auf" (UP), "ab" (OFF) or "zu" (CLOSED) around 14 months of age even before they produce their first simplex verbs. All the verb particles acquired first share the semantics of dominating a telic event. Telic verbs designate events with terminal endpoints. Nontelic verbs designate events without an endpoint (van Hout, 1996). In telic particle verbs, the endpoint is marked by the telic particle (1).

(1) Sie hat die Tür *auf*gemacht.

She has the door *up*-made.

She opened the door.

⇒ door open

Therefore this study looked into a possible advantage for telic verb particles and particle verbs regarding their frequency in the input. Using a longitudinal design, we tested whether children's early preference of telic verb particles is dependent of the parental input. The analysed data comprises 7465 utterances of 3 mothers of normally developing children and one late talker mother recorded in 12 one-hour home sessions at children's age of 14, 16, 18 and 20 months.

Considering the reported lexical acquisition order of verb particles and simplex verbs in German children, we hypothesized that the parental input contains verb particles more frequently than simplex verbs. Contrary to our hypothesis the mothers of the normally developing children produced more simplex verbs than verb particles. The children are exposed to twice as many tokens of simplex verbs than tokens of verb particles or particle verbs and to a similar amount of types of simplex verbs and types of verb particles or particle verbs. A Type Token Ratio analysis indicates an advantage for verb particles in the input due to the fact that the children are listening to a specific particle significantly more often than to an individual simplex verb. Nevertheless the most frequent particles used by the parents do not correspond with the ones the children initially produce, although the predominant share of the mothers' 10 most frequently produced particles is of the same semantic class, i.e. telic particles (cf. van Hout, 1996). Furthermore, the 3 mothers of the normally developing children and the mother of the late talker child produced a similar amount of tokens and types of verb particles, particle verbs and simplex verbs. This implicates that differences in lexical verb acquisition between late talkers and normally developing children are not due to differences in the mothers' use of these categories.

All this evidence indicates that input frequency cannot account for the order of acquisition of verb particles and simplex verbs in children's early verb acquisition. Rather than relying on environment-driven learning strategies, normally developing children seem to adhere to learning mechanisms that are independent of the parental input. The findings are in agreement with the learnability-driven account by Schulz et al. (2001) stating that German speaking children initially focus on the verb's event-semantic structure and follow an endstate-orientation in acquiring the verbs' meanings. When learning languages that provide verb particles children start with verb particles rather than with full verbs, since telic particles encode the event-semantic type [Endstate] most transparently.

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