

Learning the Form and the Function of German Verb-Second Constructions

The acquisition of finiteness or Verb-Second in German and Dutch is one of the best studied phenomena in child language, much inspired by research within the Principles & Parameters version of Generative Grammar. It was assumed that the fronting of finite verbs was licensed by the inflectional properties of a particular language, or that it may be hindered initially by lexical-semantic constraints (e.g., the association of certain inflectional forms with particular event types; Hyams 2001).

Alternatively, researchers from other theoretical backgrounds assumed semantic constraints (finiteness in the sense of assertion marking: Jordens, Dimroth 2002; Lasser 2002; Lindner 2002), lexical constraints (interaction of finiteness and the Aktionsart of the verb; Jordens 1990, 2002; De Haan 1987) or processing constraints (lack of salience of finite forms, growing processing window; Wijnen, Kempen & Gillis 2001; Freudenthal, Pine & Gobet 2004, 2006). Despite the many studies of the phenomenon, there is no cohesive explanation. The processing approaches seem compatible with usage-based theories of acquisition, but they are not linked to the lexicalist or semantic explanations, despite the fact that construction grammar and usage-based approaches emphasize the unity of form and function.

I will review the findings of previous studies and illustrate how the limitations observed in children's production of finite structures interact in order to establish a more comprehensive account. Regarding the time course of acquisition, the vast majority of studies focused on the very early phase of acquisition when finite verbs first occur next to root infinitives. Item-specific effects are most likely to occur in this early phase. Based on dense longitudinal data of a German speaking child I will show that

- (a) the initial use of verbs shows a strong function-specificity, i.e. there are only verbs that occur in more than one tense form. Finite forms are learned in addition to non-target non-finite constructions, they do not simply replace them.
- (b) the proper command of German word order (including verb fronting over several constituents) is a rather late achievement given that the child has mastered the component parts of these constructions beforehand.

These findings contradict a common conclusion of previous studies, namely that the acquisition of finiteness and the corresponding word order is a very quick process (e.g., Poeppel & Wexler 1993). They support processing accounts that argue that children will abstract gradually over usage-events. However, the case of German variable word order raises the question whether the course of acquisition can be appropriately described as one of progressing from concrete to abstract constructions (e.g. Tomasello 2003), since verb-second is a general process that cannot be reduced to a single semantic functions. Likewise, word order variation does not always indicate a difference in pragmatic function. Instead, it seems that the function side of verb-second constructions develops over time as well. This implies that the variability found in the developmental trajectory is just that: variability in form and function in the process of sorting out complex interactions of form and meaning.