

„Impact of type of referring expression on the acquisition of word order in German“

Antje Saueremann (Leibniz-Zentrum Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft, ZAS Berlin)

A puzzle in the area of language acquisition concerns the production-comprehension asymmetry for non-canonical sentences. Preschoolers usually have difficulties in accurately understanding non-canonical sentences approximately until age six (e.g., Dittmar et al., 2008) although they produce non-canonical sentences already around age three (e.g., Poeppel & Wexler, 1993). In addition, results are heterogenous concerning children's sensitivity to the impact of information structure on the production and comprehension of word order (e.g., Narasimhan & Dimroth, 2008; Grünloh et al., 2011).

I examined the role of the type of referring expression in the acquisition of the relationship between word order and information structure. Three corpus analyses assessed the impact of givenness, topic status and the referring expression on word order in the spontaneous speech of two- to four-year-olds and the child-directed speech produced by their mothers. The results reveal similar ordering patterns for children and adults. Word order was to a large extent predictable from the type of referring expression, especially regarding the word order involving the sentence-medial positions. Information structure had an additional impact only on word order variation that involved the sentence-initial position.

Two comprehension experiments tested whether the type of referring expression and topic status influences the comprehension of non-canonical sentences in four- and five-year-olds. The results demonstrate that children's comprehension of non-canonical sentences improved when the topic argument was realized as a personal pronoun. However, children's comprehension did not improve when the topic argument was realized as a lexical NP.

In sum, the results of both production and comprehension studies support the view that referring expressions may be seen as a sentence-level cue to word order and to the information status of the sentential arguments. The results highlight the important role of the type of referring expression on the acquisition of word order variation and indicate that the production-comprehension asymmetry is reduced when the type of referring expression is considered.

Dittmar, M., Abbot-Smith, K., Lieven, E., & Tomasello, M. (2008). German children's comprehension of word order and case marking in causative sentences. *Child Development*, 79 (4), 1152–1167.

Grünloh, T., Lieven, E., & Tomasello, M. (2011). German children use prosody to identify participant roles in transitive sentences. *Cognitive Linguistics*, 22, 393–419.

Narasimhan, B., & Dimroth, C. (2008). Word order and information status in child language. *Cognition*, 107, 317–329.

Poeppel, D., & Wexler, K. (1993). The full competence hypothesis. *Language*, 69(1), 1–33.