

The role of complexity in the acquisition of morphology

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It is commonly known that there are some very general early milestones in first language acquisition. However, recent research on cross-linguistic language acquisition has shown that the tasks which children encounter in learning different grammars vary extremely. One of the relevant features that plays a role in the acquisition process is complexity. In English, which has little morphology and very strict word order research has shown that children learn grammatical constructions in an item-specific way (e.g. Lieven et al. 1997, Tomasello 2003). The main focus of this presentation is on the processes relevant for learning complex morphology.

The hypothesis investigated in this presentation states that children learning morphology proceed in a lexical-specific way as well. This helps them extracting meaningful information from the input in a piecemeal fashion. We thus expect that in early acquisition, instead of generalizing individual verbs and nouns to different morphological environments, children restrict them to one morphological environment.

Results of two case studies support this hypothesis. Study 1 investigates the acquisition of inflectional morphology in Russian, a language with elaborate morphology and Study 2 focuses on inflectional morphology in Chintang a language with very complex polysynthetic morphology. I will show the development of morphology over time, discuss similarities and differences between the acquisition processes in these two languages and present a solution on how to measure and determine productivity in studying language acquisition longitudinally.

Tomasello, M. 2003. *Constructing a language: a usage-based theory of language acquisition*. Harvard University Press, Harvard, MA.

Lieven, E. V. M., Pine, J. M. & Baldwin, G. 1997. Lexically-based learning and early grammatical development. *Journal of Child Language*, 24, 187–219.