Constructing Morphological Representations
The Acquisition of German Possessive Markers, Determiners and Quantifiers
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Proponents of construction-grammar/usage-based approaches argue that children’s earliest morpho-syntactic representations may lack some target distinctions, and that children acquire these distinctions incrementally, with initial restrictions of inflections to individual words (Tomasello 2006). Similar predictions can be derived from lexical learning models, which also assume item-based incremental learning (Eisenbeiss 2003). In contrast, proponents of generative full-competence approaches argue that children in the early two-word stage have already acquired the morphological distinctions of their target and generalise inflections rapidly (e.g. Wexler 1998).

This talk provides evidence for incremental, item-based learning. It is based on 48 recordings from 4 monolingual German children (1;11-3;6) and presents an analysis of (i) D-elements: case/gender/number-marked articles, possessive pronouns, demonstratives, quantifiers and (ii) possessive -s on names or kinship terms (Susannes/Mamis Auto ‘Susanne/mommy’s car’):

- The rate of overt D-elements is initially low in stage I, rising to 60-64%. In II, it drops to 4-42%, increasing in III and reaching target-like values in IV. This U-shaped development suggests reanalysis, which is supported by the observation that in I, D-elements occur in formulaic predicate+D-combinations (e.g. das-is-ein-X ‘that-is-a-X’, ≤74% of overt D) or in a few D+noun-combination types (<10 per file).
- In I, children do not exhibit target-like D-element inflection. Annelie, Leonie and Mathias also show U-shaped curves in the rate of target-like inflections (I: 50-66%, II: 25-55%, III: 38-86%, IV: 72-85%), suggesting that early target-like forms are part of unanalyzed combinations. Hannah initially uses 68% phonologically reduced forms, then produces a few correct forms (8/10) before she goes through a stage of D-element omission, which suggests reanalysis.
- Children start to mark individual grammatical distinctions at different stages: II: sg-vs.-pl, fem-vs.-masc/neut, III: neut-vs.-masc, nom-vs.-acc/dat, IV: acc-vs.-dat. Before the respective distinction appears, overgeneralizations occur, e.g. overgeneralizations of masculine forms to neuter contexts before the acquisition of the neut-vs.-masc-distinction.
- Developmental dissociations also suggest incremental development: forms with -0-endings (ein ‘a’,….) and the nom.fem and nom.masc endings –e and –r appear early, but are initially often overgeneralised (40-45% in I). Annelie and Mathias use nom/acc.neut.sg.-s in I, but only in 6 potentially formulaic utterances (da-is-au(ch)-eins ‘there-is-another-one’,…). A later drop in -s-correctness rates suggest re-analysis. Acc.masc–n appears early, but in inappropriate contexts. It is not used in II and only 43% target-like in III. Dat.masc/neut–m appears in IV.
- In I, no possessive -s occurs (0/11 contexts), but rates soon increase: II:4/11, III:35/40, IV:24/24. The first markers are restricted to high-frequency nouns (e.g. mamis ‘mommy’s’…..).
- -s-Overgeneralizations only occur in III/IV (e.g. affes, ‘monkey’s’….III:1/40, IV:2/24). Taken together, the observed developmental dissociations, U-shaped curves and initial lexical restrictions of possessive and D-element support construction-grammar/usage-based approaches or lexical learning approaches which assume item-based incremental development.