

The acquisition of Estonian: frequency of verbs and adverbs

This report discusses the early phases of the acquisition of verbs and adverbs in Estonian. The longitudinal data (recordings of spontaneous speech) of two Estonian typically-developing monolingual children aged 1;3-3;0 and their caregivers was analyzed and compared in relation to frequency of verbs and adverbs in correlation with other word classes.

Although the acquisition of verbs has been in the center of many studies on first language acquisition less attention has been paid to the acquisition of adverbs and the distribution of different word classes in children's speech.

Child-directed speech has been shown to account for emerging lexical features in child language. Naigles and Hoff-Ginsberg (1988) have noted that the order of acquisition correlates with the frequency of verbs in the input, same frequency effects have been noted also in Vihmani and Vija in the acquisition of Estonian verbs (2006). Therefore the frequency effects between child-directed speech and child's speech are worth analyzing in detail.

The preliminary goal of our report will be to give an overview of the distribution of different word classes in the speech of children and their caregivers. The main aim is to specify how this distribution changes when the child gets older and what kind of effect has the acquisition of verbs with different structure to the frequency of adverbs. We also demonstrate different frequency effects of verbs and adverbs in child speech and child-directed speech.

Distributional information about the occurrence of verbs and adverbs shows that during the early period of language acquisition the adverbs are as frequent or in some recordings even more frequent than verbs. The frequency of verbs and adverbs increases during the children's third year of life but starting from the child's age 2;8 the frequency of adverbs remains lower than the frequency of verbs. It can be supposed that adverbs serve as verbs in the speech of younger children and when the child gets older and acquires more verbs with different structure (derivated verbs *etc.*) the amount of adverbs does not increase so rapidly any more. The type and token ratio demonstrates some relevant differences not only between child speech and child-directed speech but also between verbs and adverbs.

References

- Naigles, L.R., & Hoff-Ginsberg, E. (1998). Why are some verbs learned before other verbs? Effects of input frequency and structure on children's early verb use. *Journal of Child Language*, 25, 95–120.
- Vihman, M. M. & Vija, M. (2006). The acquisition of verbal inflection in Estonian. In N. Gagarina & I. Gülzow (eds.), *The acquisition of verbs and their grammar: The effect of particular languages* (pp. 269-295). Dordrecht: Springer.