Grammatical gender in L1 and child L2 acquisition of German – the role of morphophonological patterns

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Studies on the acquisition of Romance languages indicate that phonological cues (i.e. correlations between the phonological and morphological shape of nouns and their gender) play a crucial role in L1 acquisition. Children pass an initial stage in which gender errors occur as the result of overgeneralizations of such gender cues (Karmiloff-Smith 1978). In a later stage children tend to ignore such gender cues and set a default value instead if a noun's gender is unknown. These findings lead Hawkins and Franceschina (2004) to assume that in the initial stage gender concord takes place at the vocabulary level, based on the phonological shape of a certain noun, whereas the ignorance of such features indicates that gender concord takes place on a syntactic level.

This paper addresses two questions. (i) Phonological cues in Romance languages are much more reliable for gender assignment than in German. In German, several morphological and phonological cues have been described on a probabilistic basis, e.g. two-syllable nouns ending in a schwa-vowel are often feminine (Köpcke & Zubin 1983) but only few of these cues are unambiguously linked with a certain gender. Thus an interesting question is, whether children apply such cues in gender assignment in German. If so, we would expect overgeneralizations of these cues, e.g. the appliance of the schwa-ending cue leading to *die Affe* [fem] instead of *der Affe* [masc]. (ii) There is an ongoing debate, whether the acquisition of syntactic features underlies maturational constraints (Smith & Tsimpli 1995). Thus an important question is, whether bilingual children reach a stage, in which gender concord takes place on a syntactic level. If so, they should not rely on phonological cues, but set a default value if a noun's target gender is unknown.

The present study presents elicited production data of 16 monolingual children (age 3;0 to 5;0) and 26 early sequential bilinguals (12 to 30 months of exposure) with Turkish, Russian or Polish as their L1. Definite articles were elicited for 13 high frequency nouns and 5 pseudo nouns containing a morphological or phonological gender cue.

The main results show that grammatical gender is acquired late in L1 and L2 acquisition. In the L1 group 20-29% of all definite articles are not correctly marked for gender until age 4;0. In the L2 group less than 60% of all article forms are correctly marked for gender up to 30 months of exposure.

The L1 and L2 children produce significantly more gender errors with nouns, whose gender is not predictable by a morphophonological cue than with nouns, whose gender is predictable by a morphophonological cue. But these gender errors cannot simply be interpreted in terms of an overgeneralization of morphophonological cues neither in L1 nor in L2 acquisition of German. An individual analysis shows that the children overapply one article form (masculine or feminine or neuter) regardless of the morphophonological shape of a noun. This error type is interpreted as a default strategy and indicates that acquisition of grammatical gender takes place on a syntactic level.

References:

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