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ON EARLY ACQUISITION OF VERB INFLECTION IN AUSTRIAN GERMAN AND FRENCH: THE CASE OF PERSON AND NUMBER MARKING

0. Introduction

Whereas there exist a few longitudinal studies on the monolingual acquisition of verb inflection in German (e.g. Clahsen, Penke & Parodi 1993; Köhler & Bruyère 1996; Vollmann, Sedlak, Müller & Vassilakou 1997) and in French (e.g. Bassano to appear; Champaud 1994; Sabeau-Jouannet 1973), no theoretically and methodologically coherent contrastive study on monolingual verb acquisition in the two languages has been published so far. Our paper, which is part of an ongoing research project¹ on the early acquisition of verbs in Austrian German and French, intends to fill this lacuna.

In the course of the acquisition of morphology, some categories or parts of categories are acquired earlier by children than others. At least three possible reasons can be assumed for the order of acquisition: I. some categories (or elements thereof) may be in general conceptually more complex, and so take longer to learn; II. language typology may influence the process of morphological acquisition; and III. idiosyncratic language-specific properties may affect the order of acquisition. A certain number of factors such as input frequency, perceptual and pragmatic saliency in child-centered speech situations may interfere with the three reasons cited above.

This paper will discuss, within the functionalist theoretical framework of Natural Morphology, the issue of the emergence of the grammatical categories 'person' and 'number' in the speech of one Austrian German and one French speaking child. The focus will be on person and number marking on verbs. After a characterization of German and French person and number marking according to the three subtheories of Natural Morphology (1.1.), several hypotheses about its acquisition will be formulated (1.2.). In (2.) the database and the method of analysis will be described. Section 3 will present the results for both German (3.1.) and French (3.2.) data. Under (4.) the relevance of our assumptions on acquisition for the analyzed data will be discussed. The conclusion (5.) will briefly sum up the major results.

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¹ Bilateral French-Austrian project Amadée 45197: 'Acquisition chez l'enfant de en français et en allemand autrichien'.

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