

Kristin Kersten

Verbal Inflections in L2 Child Narratives

A Study of Lexical Aspect and Grounding

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Adult: Show me the mouth!
Child: Die Maus is nich da!

Adult: Oh, I missed it!
Child 1: Mist sagen wir nicht! Oder? Wir sagen das nicht!
Child 2: Doch, Mist ist nicht so schlimm...

Child: Tu es un mouton!
English-speaking adult: Et toi, tu es une chèvre.
Child: Non, mais toi, tu es un mouton!
Adult: Non, mais toi, tu es une chèvre.
Child: Non, et toi, tu ne me comprends pas, parce que moi, je parle français!

[You are a sheep!
And you, you are a goat.
No, but you are a sheep!
No, but you are a goat.
No, and you, you don't understand me because I, I'm speaking French!]
(A French-German bilingual child in an English-German preschool)

Child: Eric is red, Paul is dead, and Tini is fat!

Child: I love you!
Adult: I love you, too.
Child: I love you three!

Child: There's a/ (laughs) there's a #
Adult: A what?
Child: *Ich weiß gar nicht XXX*
Adult: You forgot/
Child: *A Bambi, sag ich dann eben.* (laughs)

Child: *Weißt du was Frau P. mir auch beigebracht hat? Wenn ich was nicht weiß, dann sag ich einfach was so Ähnliches!* (laughs)

[Do you know what else Mrs. P. taught us? If there's something I don't know, I simply say something similar!]

(The examples are taken from Westphal (1998), Leibing (1999), Berger (1999) and Kersten (2002, 2009a,b), and from personal notes.)

To Holger

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Online-Appendix:

http://www.wvttrier.de/downloads/kersten_online-appendix.pdf

List of Abbreviations

ACC	accomplishments
ACH	achievements
ACT	activities
AH	aspect hypothesis
AMB	ambiguous grounding context
ASTH	<i>Aspectual Semantic Transfer Hypothesis</i>
BG	background
BTC	Basic Time Concept (Klein 1994)
DH	discourse hypothesis
DTH	defective tense hypothesis
FG	foreground
(-)FOC	grounding context with reduced focus on main character
IL	interlanguage
L1	first language
L2	second language
LA	language acquisition
PT	<i>Processability Theory</i> (Pienemann 1998)
SLA	second language acquisition
STA	states
V- \emptyset	base form of the verb (verbal stem)
V-ed	regular past inflection
V-irreg	irregular past inflection
V-ing	progressive form (present, past, bare progressive)
V-s	3 rd person singular inflection

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1. Introduction

Carolyn (2000, Grade 1):

There is a dog and a boy and the do/ dog looking in a glass, and in the glass sitting a frog and the moon shining. And then, the boy are sleeping and the dog sleeping. And then, the boy looking in the glass and the frog is/ is not there.

Carolyn (2002, Grade 3):

Ehm one night a little boy ehm has caught a little frog and put him in a glass and ehm then he took the glass and bring it in his bedroom, and then he looks at the little frog, and the frog thinks when the little boy sleeps: "I go out in the forest to my family," and ehm the light is on, and the little dog ehm looks in the glass exactly on the frog. And when the frog ehm go out of the glass in the night, the little dog and the little boy are sleeping, and ehm the moon is shining in the window, and ehm all is standing around and is dark. And when the day comes and the ehm sun shines on the glass and the little boy ehm wakes up and the dog a/ as well, ehm the glass was empty because the frog ehm in the night go ehm to his family again, in the forest.

This study focuses on eighteen German children who started learning their second language in a bilingual preschool and elementary school program. Their task was to narrate picture stories in the new language to interviewers who did not understand their mother tongue. To accomplish this task with their still limited language skills, the children needed to resort to all kinds of creative linguistic means in order to make themselves understood – a great challenge especially to the smallest children in their first year of language acquisition. However, they all managed without exception to convey the story to the adults, and the pride they took in their newly acquired skills was easily recognizable. In the course of four years of elementary schooling, we observed the development of their linguistic expression and their increase in fluency and language competence. Carolyn's introductions to the story in Grade 1 and Grade 3 as quoted above are a vivid example of this process. After a period of four years, at the age of ten, all children were able to express everything they wanted to say, albeit not always grammatically target-like, yet in a fluent and linguistically complex narration style.

This study analyzes a special part of this four-year development from a linguistic point of view, namely the distribution of the verbal inflections which the children use in their picture story narrations. Since half of the group started learning English in elementary school, the data corpus is well-suited to investigate two hypotheses about the distribution of verbal morphology in early learner language: The Aspect Hypothesis (AH) and the Discourse Hypothesis (DH) make competing predictions about a skewed distribution of inflections based on different linguistic contexts. Whereas the AH ascribes a bias for specific inflections to the semantic category of the verb or predicate, the DH attributes the effect to the narrative context of foreground or background. The oral picture story narrations of the children, which were collected longitu-

dinally over a period of four years, represent an ideal corpus for the focus of both hypotheses.

This book is structured as follows: Following this introductory section, the second chapter presents the theoretical frameworks of both the Aspect Hypothesis and the Discourse Hypothesis. A special focus will be placed on different explanations for the effects observed. The third chapter will discuss some methodological issues which have been raised in previous research and which impose certain constraints on the interpretation of the data. This chapter will also discuss and explain in detail the coding conventions used for data analysis. The analysis of lexical aspect restricts itself to four well-known aspectual classes, the so-called Vendlerian *aktionsarten*. For the coding of discourse grounding it was necessary, however, to use a novel subdivision which is suited to account for a more fine-grained pattern of grounding procedures than the traditional twofold distinction of foreground and background. The fourth chapter first gives an overview of the research context (the *Kiel Immersion Project*), of the subjects, and of the data elicitation procedure. It then subdivides the data into four developmental groups. For reasons which will be explained below, these four groups do not correspond to the four grades in which the data was elicited. The groups are expected to shed light on a developmental sequence of the children's use of verbal inflections. The fourth chapter finally presents the raw data scores which underlie the data analysis, and the statistical calculations. Based on these scores and procedures, the results of the study are presented in chapter five. They are ordered according to verbal inflection. The subsequent summary illustrates the developmental sequences observed in this corpus for the distribution of inflections according to lexical aspect and grounding. The findings of this study corroborate both the predictions of the Aspect Hypothesis and the Discourse Hypothesis, as well as Bardovi-Harlig's (2000) observation that lexical aspect and discourse effects interact in early phases of second language acquisition. It becomes clear, however, that there are different time windows for sensitivity to different categories. The sensitivity to aspectual categories precedes the one to grounding, and the aspectual categories were in fact found to be even more sensitive to discourse grounding than described in earlier studies. Chapter six contains a general summary of the results, demonstrates the impact of the findings, and discusses their implications for future research.