INPUT AND THE ACQUISITION OF MORPHOLOGY IN ESL CHILDREN

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Study 1: ESL vs. SLI

Introduction
- Typically Developing (TD) English L1 children acquire nominal morphology before verbal morphology (e.g., Brown, 1973).
- The gap between verbal morphology and nominal morphology is even greater for children with specific language impairment (SLI) (e.g., Rice, 2003).
- Paradis (2005) found that ESL children were less accurate with verbal morphology than with nominal morphology.
- The next step is to see if this pattern exists longitudinally in ESL children.

This study specifically looks at two homophonous morphemes, the third person singular (3SG) and the plural (PL).

Research Questions
1. What is the developmental pattern for the 3SG and PL in ESL children?
2. Is the time period between ESL children’s mastery of the PL and their mastery of the 3SG comparable to that of monolingual children (with or without SLI)?

Participants
- 15 ESL children were studied over the course of two years.
- Children’s first languages were Mandarin, Cantonese, Spanish, and Romanian.

Average Age and Months of Exposure (MOE) to English at Each Testing Interval (Round)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Round</th>
<th>Age (years;months)</th>
<th>Months of Exposure to English (MOE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>9.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>22.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>34.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Procedures
- Spontaneous speech samples were collected and coded for children’s use of the PL and 3SG in obligatory contexts.
- 3SG - CHI: always falls out.
- PL - CHI: I read to all of the book.
- Eltitication Task - The 3SG probe from the Test for Grammatical Impairment (TEG) (Rice & Wexler, 2001)

EXP: “Here is a teacher. Can you tell me what a teacher does?”

CHI: “A teacher teaches.”

Discussion
- ESL Children acquire the PL before the 3SG
- The time period between ESL children’s mastery of the PL and their mastery of the 3SG is smaller than the time period observed in either monolingual group.

Results
ESL Children’s Development of the Third Person Singular and Plural

Study 2: Why PL Before 3SG?

Introduction
- In L1 children, developmental constraints on linguistic representations lead to the 3SG being acquired after the PL (Rice & Wexler, 1996).
- A different explanation is needed to explain the PL before 3SG pattern in ESL children because:
  - They are too old for such development constraints
  - The discrepancy between the acquisition of the 3SG and PL is smaller for ESL children
  - Bybee’s (1995) network model of lexical organization suggests that children’s acquisition of regular inflection is tied to the number of types and tokens children hear.
  - Type Frequency – the number of unique stems that occur with the morpheme
  - Token Frequency – the number of times the morpheme occurs with any stem

Research Question
1. Is there a relationship between a morpheme’s frequency in the input and that ESL children’s rate of acquisition for that morpheme?

Procedures
- PL and 3SG frequencies were calculated in 3 corpora of spoken English:
  - British National Corpus (BNC) spoken – 10 million word corpus
  - BNC subcorpus of classroom speech – 450,000 word corpus
  - The BNC corpus was searched using Davies’ website – Variations in English Words and Phrases (VIEW)
  - A sample of Western Canadian English (WCE) – 71,900 word corpus
  - The WCE sample comes from the experimenters’ speech found in the spontaneous speech samples of Study 1

- The types and tokens of the PL and 3SG in the ESL children’s speech were used to sample the proportion of each of these morphemes in children’s lexicons.

Discussion
- The type and token frequencies for the PL and 3SG in ESL children’s input reflect:
  1. Their lexicons
  2. Their order of acquisition of these morphemes

Conclusion
- ESL children have a different developmental profile for the PL and 3SG than the profile observed in either group of monolingual children.
- ESL children’s longitudinal pattern of language acquisition does not resemble the pattern observed in L1 children with SLI.
- Input frequency is a possible explanation for the acquisition of nominal morphology before verbal morphology in ESL children.

References


