

Language typology and the acquisition of the French, Dutch and German determiner systems

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In this contribution we investigate the impact of subtle typological differences on the first language acquisition of determiners in one Romance and two Germanic languages. All three languages have definite and indefinite articles plus possessive and demonstrative determiners in (nearly always) initial position of a noun phrase expressing number and gender.

The acquisition predictions are mainly based on two premises. The first premise states that the less complex, the more reliable and the more salient a pattern is, the greater is the ease of its acquisition. The second premise consists in the comparative description of the three above-mentioned independent variables of the three determiner systems: the determiner systems of French and Dutch are less complex than the German one (because of its case system and three genders instead of two); the reliability (in terms of the parameter of biuniqueness – uniqueness – ambiguity) increases from German over Dutch to French; French determiners are least salient because they are always unstressed monosyllables, Dutch has very few bisyllabic and thus stressable determiners, German many bisyllables among indefinite articles, possessives and demonstratives. This allows distributed predictions.

An intervening variable is the amount of productive morphological richness of the nouns, because greater richness of bound morphology stimulates children to focus on it. Because of greatest richness of diminutive formation in Dutch and of plural formation in German, children acquiring these languages are liable to focus on these formations. Both categories are unproductive in French, thus French children can focus only on determiner acquisition.

These predictions were largely confirmed by the investigation of the three rich longitudinal corpora of one child per language: the French girl Pauline (1;2 – 3;0), the Dutch girl Jessica (1;6 – 3;0), the Austrian boy Jan (1;3 – 3;0).

284 words