The Development of Children’s lexical skills: a cross-linguistic investigation

Christina Schelletter¹ and Christina Kauschke²

(1) University of Hertfordshire (2) Universität Potsdam

Background

- Previous claims of a universal noun bias in children’s early lexical development (Gentner 1982) have been challenged by acquisition studies of Mandarin and Korean (Tadif 1996, Kim, McGregor and Thompson 2000).
- In addition, recent studies of children learning European languages did not find strong support for the noun bias hypothesis either (Bassano 2000, Kauschke and Hofmeister 2002).
- However, experimental studies of pre- and early schoolage children report higher accuracies in the naming of nouns over verbs (Kauschke and Stan 2004), and higher accuracies of naming transitive over intransitive verbs (Davidoff and Masterson 1995/96).

Aims

- To compare the naming accuracy of children with different first languages, English and German, in a picture naming task for different ages.
- To compare children’s naming accuracy of nouns and verbs.
- To assess whether differences in the naming of transitive and intransitive verbs occur in both linguistic groups.

Methodology

Subjects
- 62 children, 31 English monolingual and 31 German monolingual
- 3 age groups: nine 4-5 year-olds, eleven 5-6 year-olds and eleven 6-7 year-olds
- There were 15 girls and 16 boys

Materials
- 72 pictures, black and white drawings: 36 noun pictures, 36 verb pictures
- Due to name agreement problems, 2 nouns and 7 verbs differed in the sets across languages

Mean number of correctly named items

Naming Accuracy for nouns and verbs

1. Nouns vs verbs

Mean Number of correctly named items

No difference in overall naming accuracy across languages.
- The German children are significantly better at naming nouns than the English children.
- Significant difference nouns > verbs for all children.

2. Developmental patterns

Mean number of correctly named items

Developmental increase in the naming accuracy of nouns and verbs.
- the youngest and oldest German children are better than equivalent English children on nouns.
- Oldest English children better than German children on verbs.

Naming Accuracy for transitive and intransitive Verbs

1. Transitive vs intransitive verbs

Mean number of correctly named items

- There is a cross-linguistic difference in the accuracy of transitive and intransitive verbs.
- German: intransitive > transitive
- English: transitive > intransitive

2. Developmental patterns

Mean number of correctly named items

- There is more development in verb accuracy in the English children compared to the German children.
- The oldest English children are significantly better on transitive than age-equivalent German children.

Differences English-German

- Word Order: English is an SVO language, German is underlyingly SOV, the order of noun phrases in German is more flexible than in English.
- Case marking: English has case-marking only on pronouns, German has case-marking on articles, adjectives, nouns and pronouns.
- Davidoff & Masterson (1995/96) argue that transitive verbs are closely associated with objects, this is true for English acquisition but it seems not for German.

Conclusion

- There is a noun advantage in children’s picture naming for both languages.
- Cross-linguistic differences show a higher accuracy for nouns in German children and a higher accuracy for verbs in the older English children.
- Different patterns in the accuracy of transitive and intransitive verbs can be linked to the structural properties of the languages: In English, transitive verbs are associated with objects in a VO pattern, in German this is not the case, resulting in a higher accuracy of intransitive verbs.
- This suggests that the grammatical properties of verbs have an effect on their retrieval.

References


E-mail: C.Schelletter@herts.ac.uk,
Kauschke@ling.uni-potsdam.de