REFERENCES


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SUMMARY

There is general agreement in the literature that in the acquisition of any language there is a fairly stable sequence of the development of syntactic structures. This thesis addresses some aspects of that sequence for Dutch children up to four years of age. Three aspects of syntactic development are examined: the one-word sentence, in a longitudinal study, and the structure of the clause and of the verb phrase in a mainly cross-sectional study. There is little agreement on the methodology for describing a sequence of development required for the latter study. In this thesis method takes an important place.

The theoretical issues in child language development focus on the extent to which syntax is innate and modular. This thesis contributes to the discussion around these issues by examining the similarities and dissimilarities between child language and adult language. The basic assumption is that child language should be viewed from the psychological perspective of the child, and from the linguistic perspective of adult language.

The syntactic framework in this investigation is presented in chapter 1. From the one-word stage onwards, syntactic terms are used to describe early utterances. The framework is based on Crystal, Fletcher and Garman's developmental syntax scale LARSP (Language Assessment Remediation and Screening Procedure). It is a structuralist framework, in which the first level distinguishes the clause elements subject, verb, object, complement and adverbial. This analysis serves best the description of clause development in children because the increase in the number of clause elements marks the development of clause structure in Dutch as well as in German and English. For the description of the one-word sentence and the verb phrase, other distinctions complement the structuralist approach.

The First Fifty Words

The study of the first 50 words is a traditional subject in the study of language acquisition. The first 50 words of 37 Dutch children were collected in a separate study, reported on in chapter 2. In monthly lists mothers wrote down the new items in their children's vocabularies until the 50th word was produced. At the mean age of 21.3 months, the Dutch child reaches the 50-word milestone. Boys from a lower socio-economic background have a significantly lower rate of acquisition of the first 50 words than other subgroups.

Of the first-50-word vocabularies of the Dutch children 58% consists of nouns, 10% of verbs and 8% of adverbs. A comparison between functional classes in American English and Dutch reveals close similarities in early vocabularies.

In the literature two styles are distinguished in the acquisition of early vocabularies: the expressive style, where less than 50% of the first 50 words consists of nouns, versus the referential style, where the proportion of nouns used is 50% or more. In the present study 70% of the children were considered to be neither expressive nor referential. The six children who were labelled 'expressive' used five times as many Social Expressions like 'hello', and 'goodbye' as the five 'referential' children. Five of the six expressive children were from the lowest socio-economic group, while all five referential children
were from the highest group, four of them boys. It is suggested that the value placed on the type of language use in these socio-economic groups differs. This is discussed in chapter 6.

On the basis of four case studies, I assume that the number of words which is generally acquired before the early word combinations emerge is a little under one hundred.

The Clause Element Index

The measurement of syntactic development requires a yardstick to determine the syntactic level of a child's language sample. The age of the child and the Mean Length of Utterance are rejected as yardsticks and the Clause Element Index (CEI) is proposed. This is reported in chapter 3. The CEI measures by clause level only, and assumes that the acquisition of structures on lower levels can be predicted from the clause level. The CEI consists of a set of criteria which works as follows: if a language sample contains a minimum percentage of 5% of clause structures with a certain number of clause elements in the declarative sentence, this number of elements indicates the Syntactic Stage of the language sample. The Syntactic Stages run from Stage II with a minimum of 5% of two-element declarative structures, to Stage VI with a minimum of 5% of six-element declarative structures or multi-clause utterances. Imperative and interrogative sentences are calculated as containing an extra clause element. In this way one hundred spontaneous language samples of Dutch boys and girls aged 1;6 - 3;11 were indexed. Within the Syntactic Stages the occurrence of particular structures was investigated. This resulted in a Dutch version of LARSP: TARSP Taal Analyse Remediëring en Screening Procedure (Schlichting 1993). Apart from clause structures (single and multi-clause) TARSP lists all the verb phrase, noun phrase, adjective phrase and prepositional phrase structures which occur with some regularity in the 200-utterance language samples of the children studied. Regularity is defined as the occurrence of one token in 50% of the language samples indexed to a particular Stage. Besides other topics, the validity of the CEI is investigated. One of the ways in which this is done is by demonstrating that as children advance in their syntactic ability as measured by the CEI, they use more types and more tokens of mature clause and verb phrase structures. For this purpose the developing clause and verb phrase structures are described across the six Syntactic Stages and their frequencies are calculated.

Clause structure

Chapter 4 describes the development of clause structure. In the earliest clause structures, in Syntactic Stage II, children combine two clause elements (subject, verb, object, some types of complement, and adverbial). In Stage III three clause elements are combined in the declarative sentence. Negation, which emerges in Stage III, is the first indication that children take a propositional attitude towards their own utterances. In Stage III the imperative sentence and in Stage IV the two types of questions emerge. This indicates that children are beginning to see their interlocutors in a different perspective; in the terms of Vygotsky, they become communicative talkers rather than ego-centric ones. In
Stage V some precursors of the main clause with a subordinated clause occur. Stage VI shows the emergence of the multi-clause sentences, both coordinated and subordinated. The early coordinated clauses are syntactically and semantically immature. The placement of the verb in subordinate clauses, which is in sentence-final position as opposed to the second position in independent clauses, is always correct.

The first clause-element in the sentence: subject, object, adverbial or wh-word, is often deleted, especially in the early Stages. In Stage VI most of these first clause elements are expressed, but the object in first position is still deleted in nearly 50% of fronted objects. The phenomenon of null first elements is attributed to performance factors.

Dutch early sentences show great variation in word orders. In many types of clause structure all the orders that are possible in adult spoken Dutch occur. Though children are generally purported to start out with one neutral sentence type, Dutch children already produce two orders of subject and verb in the earliest sentences containing a subject and a finite verb.

**Verb phrase structure**

As children advance in syntactic ability according to their CEI, their utterances contain more verb phrases, greater variation in verb categories, more morphological variety and a larger proportion of verb phrases with a finite form. These developments are described in chapter 5.

The increase in verb phrases with a finite form is attributed to the following factors: the increasing use of the copula, which is mainly finite; the increasing use of modal verbs and auxiliaries, which complement previously nonfinite forms; the changes in the frequencies of the various lexical verb classes; the increasing use of finite forms of lexical verbs, which were previously mostly used in nonfinite form.

A comparison of the percentages of finite forms as used by children and adults in 26 frequent lexical verbs showed that both groups use some verb classes most frequently in finite form, for example the proform verbs and the cognition-utterance verbs, and other verb classes mainly in nonfinite form, notably the highly transitive verbs. The correlation of finiteness in the 26 verbs between children and adults is .70. The different uses of finite and nonfinite forms of the same verbs are related to codings of differing semantic contexts. As children develop, the verb classes which were previously found only in nonfinite form, become more frequent in finite form and vice versa, but for these developments cognitive growth towards more abstract and more communicative thinking is required.

**Conclusions**

The results of this investigation are discussed in chapter 6. The validation of the CEI is firstly dealt with. The CEI is shown to be a valid and reliable instrument to index language samples to a Syntactic Stage, and it is seen to correlate highly with the Mean Length of Utterance and less highly with age. Children from a higher socio-economic background develop faster than those from a lower socio-economic background; girls develop faster than boys.
The theoretical conclusions centre round the differences between child and adult language. It is proposed that syntactic development is best characterized by a development from, in Givón's terms, a pragmatic mode of communication to a syntactic mode. A widening use of syntactic structures requires a social change towards a more communicative speech style. It is shown that the higher a frequency of a particular word order in adult language, the earlier the moment of acquisition of that order. The chapter ends with a study of errors and with recommendations for future research, stressing the need for the comparison of child and adult data in the investigation of syntactic structures in child language.