

From variable to stable word order in development

This paper investigates whether the usage-based claim that early child language is of limited productivity is valid in an area that is not lexically-specific and shows variability in word order. Complex verbs in German (auxiliary-verb or verb-particle constructions) undergo the verb-second effect in declarative sentences and questions. This leads to a separation of the finite and non-finite verb-component, and to word order differences in different clause type. The word order change does not carry functional content in itself: pragmatic differences are achieved by topicalizing or extraposing the other elements in the clause.

The separation of the verbal components is frequent (about 30-35% of all verbs) and affects all verbs regardless of their semantics. These factors provide an interesting new setting for usage-based analyses of acquisition: In line with Construction Grammar, most previous studies focused on structures that were defined by their function (e.g., questions or complement clauses) and/or by the lexical items involved (e.g., particular auxiliary or modal verbs, ditransitives).

Analyses are based on 2020 complex verb constructions produced by a German-speaking boy in the first 6 months of his language production. The onset of complex verb constructions is not lexically-specific: there are a number of different particle-verb and auxiliary-verb combinations right away. Within 1-2 months, inflectional paradigms are established for the auxiliary verbs. Nonetheless, these early examples are of very limited complexity because pre- and middle-field are left empty. Subsequently, the child may produce an element in the pre- or in the middle field but does not fill both positions in the same clause. These findings do not support the Universal Grammar accounts according to which children acquire verb-second as a side-effect of acquiring finite inflection: The utterances with complex verbs are initially too short to have errors!

Within the next 3 months, the number of empty pre-field declines from 73 % to 12% for auxiliary-verb constructions and from 66% to 15% for particle verb constructions. The proportion of empty middle fields declines from 60/100% to 22/19%. The vast majority of other constituents consists of one word only. Gradually, DPs, PPs, and multi-categorical sequences (e.g., NEG+ADV) emerge. The more complex arguments tend to be placed in the pre-field initially, but predominantly occur in the middle field in the last two months. In turn, the pre-field is then filled by pronouns and adverbials (e.g., *da* 'there'). Thus, word order is more standardized towards the end of the investigation period than it was in the earlier phases. The acquisition of German word order thus differs from English, where order seems to be a very strong determinant of early acquisition. The more variable word order in the German child's data first reflects the variability in the input. The increase in stability shows that the child has abstracted the most common sentence onsets in German, and is able to maintain the sentence plan over a growing middle field. Thus, productivity is limited earlier on, but the limits concern other aspects of syntax than in English.