

Some Issues of Grammatical Development in Early Trilinguals

Melanie Mikes
University of Novi Sad

El artículo describe la adquisición temprana, entre los 1;6 y los 2;6 de la morfología de casos en dos sujetos trilingües en húngaro, alemán y serbocroata. La autora polemiza sobre la existencia, en los primeros momentos de la adquisición del lenguaje, de un sistema gramatical único o de sistemas gramaticales diferenciados para cada una de las lenguas que incorporan los bilingües y trilingües. Sus datos apoyan la creencia en la existencia de sistemas gramaticales diferenciados desde los inicios de la adquisición de la morfología y la sintaxis.

Palabras clave: Adquisición morfología, trilingües, sistemas gramaticales diferenciados.

This paper describes early acquisition of case morphology, between 1;6 and 2;6 in two trilingual subjects, Hungarian, German and Serbo-Croatian speakers. The author discusses about the existence of an only grammar system or different grammar systems, in the early stages of language acquisition, for each of the languages which bilingual and trilingual speakers learn. These data support the existence of differenced grammar systems during early morphology and syntax acquisition.

Key words: Morphology acquisition, Trilinguals, Differenced Grammar Systems.

In general, the issues of grammatical development may be approached in two ways, with many intermediate positions. The language-independent approach claims that the child's early grammar is built upon a universal set of conceptual/semantic categories, while the language-dependent one assumes that language development is constrained from the very beginning by the structure of the language to be acquired (Studies on morphological and syntactic development, 1986).

Dirección de la autora: Melanie Mikes. University of Novi Sad, Yugoslavia.

A shorter version of this paper was presented at the 5th Child Language Congress, Budapest 1990.

Meisel believes that formal properties of a language play a crucial role even during the early phases of language acquisition (Meisel, 1986, p. 125). As an advocate of the language-dependent approach he presents empirical data in order to prove that «bilinguals are capable of differentiating grammatical systems; fusion is not necessarily a characteristic of bilingual language development» (Meisel, 1989, p. 37). On the contrary, Volterra and Taeschner (1978) and Taeschner (1983) present a three-stage model of bilingual children's early language development according to which bilingual children go through two one-system stages first being marked by a mixed lexical system and the second by a mixed morphosyntactic development. De Houwer (1987) offers several arguments against the three-stage model. She assumes that bilingual children do develop their two languages separately from a very early age on, and she claims that their language development resembles that of monolingual children. She states that her data on the morphosyntactic development of her English-Dutch bilingual subject «provide strong support for a theory of language acquisition that sees the child's attention to the input and her subsequent manipulation of it as central to the acquisition process» (De Houwer, 1987, p. 148).

In my paper on some issues of the lexical development in early bi- and trilinguals I have presented some evidence that bi- and trilinguals need not go through the stage of one-lexical system development (Mikes, 1990). The alleged second stage will not be discussed in this paper, but some evidence will be given in favour of the separate development hypothesis.

The main body of the empirical data I am relying on is the early speech development of two trilingual boys in the period from 1;6 to 2;6. Both children, observed by me, were acquiring hungarian, serbocroatian and german simultaneously in their microenvironment from the birth on. The children communicated in hungarian with their mothers, and in serbocroatian with their fathers. In the microenvironments of the children both serbocroatian and hungarian were used to the same extent, while outside the family serbocroatian dominated. However, the children had enough opportunity to hear and use hungarian outside their microenvironments as well. The use of german was restricted to the interactions with their grandmother.

For this occasion I have chosen to focus my attention on the acquisition of case morphology. I have had several reasons to do so: firstly, the divergencies between the case systems and their morphology in hungarian, serbocroatian and german offer sufficient material for a possible explanation of some phenomena in the grammatical development of early bi- and trilinguals. Secondly, an analysis of the acquisition of the case systems by two serbocroatian-hungarian bilingual girls and a monolingual serbocroatian girl has already been presented in one of my earlier studies written in collaboration with Plemenka Vlahović (Mikes & Vlahović, 1966 & 1967). Thirdly, some studies on the acquisition of the case morphology in german offer valuable material for comparison.

The period observed has been divided into two stages. Stage one comprises the time span from 1;6 to 2;0, and is characterized by the acquisition of case markings in hungarian and serbocroatian. Stage two comprises a period of four months: from 2;1 to 2;4 for Vuk and from 2;3 to 2;6 for Egon. (Namely, because

TABLE 1. TIME INTERVALS SPENT WITH THE GERMAN INTERLOCUTOR

Age	Vuk	Egon
1;6	2-8 hours 5 times a week	4-5 hours 4 times a week
1;7	2-8 hours 5 times a week (interruption of 8 days)	4-5 hours 4 times a week
1;8	2-8 hours 5 times a week	4-5 hours 4 times a week
1;9	2-8 hours 5 times a week	4-5 hours 4 times a week
1;10	2-8 hours 5 times a week (interruption of 7 days)	until 1;10,20, 4-5 hours a week; afterwards interruption of 3 weeks
1;11	2-8 hours 5 times a week	from 1;11,13 to 1;11,27, the whole day (together with the main hungarian interlocutor)
2;0	2-8 hours 5 times a week from 2;0,9 on	4-5 hours 5 times a week from 2;0,5 on
2;1	2-8 hours 5 times a week	4-5 hours 5 times a week until 2;1,7
2;2	2-8 hours 5 times a week	GI absent
2;3	2-8 hours 5 times a week (3 pauses of 3-5 days each)	4-5 hours 5 times a week from 2;3,16 on
2;4	2-8 hours 5 times a week (interruption of 12 days)	4-5 hours 5 times a week
2;5	2-8 hours 5 times a week until 2;5,7	4-5 hours 5 times a week

of my absence no observation of Egon's speech development was going on during two months.) The main characteristics of stage two are the acquisition of case markings in german and the acquisition of prepositions in serbocroatian and german. Hungarian postpositions appeared only sporadically.

When comparing Vuk's and Egon's acquisition of hungarian case morphology with that of the child observed by MacWhinney (1976, p. 404), some correspondence between them may be stated. Both MacWhinney's monolingual subject Zoli and the trilingual boys acquired possessive, accusative, instrumental, allative and illative at an early age:

Zoli	1;8 - 1;10
Vuk	1;6 - 1;8
Egon	1;7 - 1;10

However, unlike Zoli, the trilingual boys used case markers for dative and sublativ at that early age. Neither did Zoli use any markers for denoting «position at» until 2;3 while these markers were already in use in Vuk's and Egon's speech in the period from 1;10 - 2;0. As to the appearance of markers for denoting «motion towards», it may be stated, in general, that both the monolingual Zoli and the trilingual boys acquired these markers before the markers for denoting «position at» and «movement from».

The early acquisition of hungarian case markers for denoting local relations in the speech of the two bilingual hungarian-serbocroatian girls reported in the already mentioned earlier study (Mikeš & Vlahović, 1966 & 1967) was taken up by Slobin, as an argument speaking in favour of the Formal Complexity Hypothesis (Slobin, 1973). However, this argument has its weak points. Namely,

TABLE 2. SURVEY OF THE ACQUISITION OF CASE MARKINGS AND PREPOSITIONS (VUK)

Age	MLU (with GI)	Hungarian	Serboroat	German
1;6	1.2	illative sublative possessive	accusative genitive part.	
1;7		dative instrumental	genitive loc. (without prep.)	
1;8		accusative allative	dative instrumental accusative loc. (without prep.) possessive vocative	
1;9	1.9			possessive
1;10			<i>na</i> + acc. <i>po</i> + loc.	
1;11		adessive		
2;0	2.2*	inessive		
2;1			<i>za</i> + acc. <i>pored</i> + gen. <i>u</i> + acc. <i>bez</i> + gen. <i>pod</i> + instr. <i>na</i> + acc.	<i>zu</i> <i>nach</i> <i>auf</i> <i>von</i> <i>für</i> + acc. <i>unter</i> + acc. <i>in</i> + acc. <i>von</i> + dat.
2;2			<i>na</i> + loc. <i>u</i> + dat. <i>kod</i> + gen. <i>ispod</i> + gen.	<i>mit</i> + dat. accusative <i>an</i> + acc. <i>auf</i> + acc. <i>ohne</i> <i>in</i> + dat.
2;3				
2;4	2.3**	superessive	<i>u</i> + loc.	dative <i>auf</i> + dat. <i>zu</i> + dat. <i>bei</i> <i>an</i> + dat.

* 66% of tokens were german utterances.

** 67% of tokens were german utterances.

TABLE 3. SURVEY OF THE ACQUISITION OF CASE MARKINGS AND PREPOSITIONS (EGON)

Age	MLU (with GI)	Hungarian	Serbocroat	German
1;6	1.1			
1;7		illative possessive	genitive part.	
1;8		accusative	accusative genitive loc. (without prep.) vocative	
1;9	1.5	sublative allative dative	possessive accusative loc. (without prep.)	
1;10		instrumental inessive adessive		
1;11		ablative elative	dative instrumental	
2;0	2.7*	superessive		
From 2;1,7 to 2;3,17 observations were interrupted				
2;3			no data	possessive
2;4	2.4**		no data	accusative <i>in</i> + acc. <i>in</i> <i>zu</i> <i>von</i>
2;5			no data	dative <i>auf</i> <i>auf</i> + acc. <i>nach</i> <i>für</i> <i>vor</i> <i>auf</i> + dat. <i>bei</i> <i>in</i> + dat.
2;6			no data	<i>ohne</i> <i>zu</i> + dat.

* Only 31% of tokens were german utterances.

** 97% of tokens were german utterances.

both hungarian and serbocroatian case endings/suffixes for denoting local relations appeared simultaneously, but without prepositions (as additional requisites) in serbocroatian. Hungarian, of course, uses only suffixes for denoting basic local relations. So by using suffixes for marking local relations in hungarian and case endings for marking the same relations in Serbocroatian the bilingual girls followed the same trend in the acquisition of case morphology in both languages. The omission of prepositions may be explained by one of Slobin's universal principles «Watch the end!» (Slobin, 1971), without including the Formal Complexity Hypothesis in the explanation of this phenomenon.

The trilingual boys used serbocroatian genitive and accusative locative constructions (without prepositions) and the corresponding local cases in hungarian (illative, allative and sublative) at the age 1;7 - 1;9. For instance:

Ex. (1/A) V 1;7,9

The child wants to go to his aunt.

Ch: *Tete*. (teta = aunt)

The child added the serbocroatian case ending of genitive *-e*, but omitted the preposition *kod* (to, at).

Ex. (1/B) V 1;8,15

The child is going home to this daddy with his mother.

Ch: *Tatádó*. (tata = daddy)

The child added the hungarian allative suffix *-hoz* (*-ó*) to the noun *tata*.

Ex. (2/A) E 1;8;1

The mother asks the child where he was.

Ch: *Bebe*. (beba = baby)

The child added the serbocroatian case ending of genitive *-e*, but omitted the preposition *kod* (to, at).

Ex. (2/B) E 1;9,18

The mother and the child are about to go to the granny.

M: *Megyünk! Siessünk!* (Let's go! Hurry!)

Ch: *Bákihoz*. (báki = granny)

The child added the hungarian allative suffix *-hoz* to the noun *báki*.

Ex. (3/A) V 1;7,21

The child wants to go to the shop.

Ch: *Bótba*. (bolt/bót = shop)

The child added the hungarian illative suffix *-ba* to the noun *bót*.

Ex. (3/B) V 1;8,8

The child wants to go to the shop.

Ch: *Radnju*. (radnja = shop)

The child added the serbocroatian case ending of accusative *-u*, but omitted the preposition *u* (to, in).

At the end of stage one (2;0) Vuk and Egon did not use prepositional phrases in german to express spatial relations. Most frequently they substituted them by adverbs of place and their pronominal equivalents. For instance:

Ex. (4) E 2;0,12

The naked child is making gestures of swimming on the bed.

Ch: *Da schwimmt.* (Here swims.)

Ex. (5) E 2;0,20

The child asks permission to step on the cabinet.

Ch: *Steig hinauf?* (Step upward?)

However, when the speech situation required more explicitness, the boys used the noun without preposition. For instance:

Ex. (6) V 2;0,13

Ch: *Gehen Zimmer lesen.* (Go room to read.)

Ex. (7) V 2;0,15

The child wants to go home to his mother.

GM: *Aber jetzt gehen wir nicht nach Hause. Mami ist noch nicht zu Hause.* (But we are not yet going home. Mummy is not yet at home.)

Ch: *Mamili gehen wir!* (/To/Mummy let's go!)

As in German nominative and accusative are not differentiated by means of case endings in nouns, it is quite natural that at this early stage these semantic relations were expressed by means of the position in the utterance, but more often the verb indicated the semantic relation, or it had to be guessed by the context. If we take into consideration that accusative case endings/suffixes were the first to be acquired by the trilingual boys in Hungarian and Serbo-Croatian, a conclusion similar to that of Meisel (1986, p. 138) seems to be quite acceptable. One may conclude that if the language the child is acquiring offers morpho-syntactic devices, the child will use them even in speech situations and contexts where they are not indispensable from the pragmatic and semantic point of view.

When reviewing stage one of the trilingual boys, we may state that the acquisition of case markings in Hungarian and Serbo-Croatian started at a low mean length of utterance (MLU) (1.2), roughly in the same way and at the same age as in monolingual Hungarian, bilingual Hungarian-Serbo-Croatian, and in monolingual Serbo-Croatian children. The acquisition of case markings in German started six months later at a much higher MLU (about 2.5). However, it started at an earlier age than Meisel noticed it in his bilingual German-French children. When using MLU as a parameter of comparison, Vuk and Egon started to acquire the German case system earlier than both Meisel's bilingual and German monolingual children. (The acquisition of the possessive construction of the type «NOUN + -s + NOUN» has not been considered in this paper. However, it should be noticed that this possessive construction appeared early both in monolingual German children's speech (Tracy, 1986, p. 53) and in the speech of the trilingual boys.)

It is at stage two (the first half of the third year) that the trilingual boys began to acquire the German case morphology. Unlike in Hungarian, where articles are indeclinable, and in Serbo-Croatian, where no articles exist, the German articles have the main role in the case morphology of noun phrases. It is why their use is of prime interest for us.

The trilingual boys already used hungarian articles (although not regularly) at the end of stage one, but it was not before 2;1 (Vuk) and 2;3 (Egon) that they began to use german articles. When comparing the appearance of the hungarian definite article in the speech of Vuk and Egon, we may state that it roughly corresponds to the appearance of the hungarian definite article in the speech of the bilingual girls I observed and the monolingual hungarian children. The appearance of german articles in the speech of the trilingual boys was noticed at the same age Tracy noticed it in the speech of six monolingual german children (Tracy, 1986, p. 55).

At the beginning of the four month period of stage two Vuk used the uninflected definite article only in 16 percent of tokens where it should have been used. This use increased to 79 percent at the end of the period. In Egon's speech the increase was from zero to 90 percent. Vuk was showing a preference for *die* and Egon for *das*. There is some evidence that Egon's preference for *das* may be connected to the hungarian *az*, which is, like German *das* used both as a demonstrative and an article. Another phenomenon in Egon's speech, which may be due to the transference from Hungarian, is the use of the definite article together with demonstratives. However, unlike in hungarian, Egon put the article before the demonstrative. For instance: *die diese Seite* (the this side). In copulative sentences both children sometimes omitted either the definite article or the copula in german. This phenomenon may be also ascribed to the influence of hungarian, where no copula is used, but the article is obligatory. For instance:

Ex. (8) E 2;4,17

The child has received a pear from a hungarian interlocutor (Melinda), but he had expected to receive a banana instead. The grandmother appears.

GM: *Was hat dir Melinda gegeben?* (What has Melinda given you?)

Ch: *Birne.* (Pear.) / pause / *Wo ist Banane?* (Where is banana?)

Then the child turns to Melinda.

Ch: *Hol a banán?* (Where / is / the banana?)

The use of the uninflected definite article in Vuk's speech did not show an increase: it was about 50 percent on an average, but in Egon's speech it started with 45 percent and ended with 86 percent. At the beginning the uninflected indefinite article was most frequently used when preceded by *noch* (more) or *wieder* (again). For instance:

Ex. (9) E 2;5,5

The child wants his grandmother to draw a big + (plus) for him.

Ch: *Großen Plus!* (Big plus!)

The grandmother has drawn a big + (plus).

Ch: *Noch einen großen Plus!* (Another big plus!) / another = more + an)

The great majority of tokens of omission belong either to the one word utterances or to copulative sentences.

In Vuk's speech the inflected articles *einen* and *dem* appeared in the first month of the second stage, and they were followed by *den* and *der* in the second

month. Both *den* and *einen* appeared in Egon's speech in the second month, followed by *dem* in the third month. When the rates of the correct use of German inflected articles in Vuk's speech at 2;4 are compared to the use of case markers in serbocroatian at the same age, both in the speech of Buk and in that of the monolingual serbocroatian girl Tanja, observed by Vera Vasić (personal communication), the rates of the correct use of case markers in serbocroatian are much higher (Vuk 85 and Tanja 95 percent) than those of the correct use of german inflected articles (42 percent). The fact that even the rather complicated inflectional system in serbocroatian does not cause great difficulties for children at this age, makes us believe that it is the role the case morphology plays in serbocroatian that promotes the acquisition of the case system. It may be postulated that the lesser the importance of the case morphology the slower is its acquisition.

In the corpora of Meisel's french-german bilingual children *den*, *einen* and *dem* were not observed at 2;4 (Meisel, 1986, pp. 161-162). According to Clahsen, Mills and Tracy (cited in Meisel, 1986, p. 132), accusative and dative markings on articles did not appear in german monolingual children before MLU 3.5. At 2;4, when *den* and *einen* were almost regularly used by Vuk, and made their appearance in Egon's speech, the MLU for Vuk was 2.3 and for Egon 2.4 (in interactions with their german interlocutor). Taeschner's bilingual german-italian girl Lisa produced the first examples of german declined articles after 2;10, but her sister Giulia began to produce them much earlier-after 2;2 (Taeschner, 1983, p. 126).

According to Tracy (1986, p. 61) the last phase of the acquisition of case morphology in german is the establishment of the appropriate relationship between prepositions and cases in prepositional phrases. The same is true for Vuk and Egon. Although they did not omit prepositions at the end of stage two (Vuk 2;4, Egon, 2;6), the rates of the inappropriate use of german prepositions when compared to those of the correct use, made up 29 percent. These rates compared to the correct use of serbocroatian prepositions at 2;4, show that the results were better in serbocroatian. Namely, no instances of incorrect use were noticed in the speech of the monolingual girl Tanja. Vuk's achievement was only somewhat lesser: 91 percent of correct use.

Both monolingual german children and Meise's bilingual french-german subjects showed a tendency to mark cases only once in one construction (Meisel, 1986, p. 164). The same is true for Vuk and Egon. Several instances were noticed where either the article or the preposition was omitted. For instance:

Ex. (10) V 2;2,3

GM: *Wo sitzt du?* (Where are you sitting?)

Ch: *In Wagen.* (In pram.)

Ex. (11) E 2;4,13

GM: *Wohin soll Bakili die Milch tragen?* (Where shall granny fetch the milk?)

Ch: *Dort dem Küche.* (There the / dative / kitchen.)

I observed instances where children used neither the article nor the preposition. For instance:

Ex. (12) V 2;1,12

Ch: *Pista bácsi weggegangen Hause.* (Uncle Pista gone home.)

Ex. (13) V 2;1,26

GM: *Wo steht die Schokoladenmilch? Wo?* (Where is the chocolate milk? Where?)

Ch: *Großen Tisch.* (Big table.)

In example (12) the noun was marked for case, and in example (13) the adjective. The small number of tokens does not permit us to ascribe this phenomenon to the influence of the hungarian and serbocroatian case morphology, but it should not be excluded either.

REFERENCES

- De Houwer, A. (1987). *Two at a Time: An exploration of how children acquire two languages from birth.* (Doctoral dissertation.) Free University of Brussels.
- MacWhinney, B. (1976). Hungarian research on the acquisition of morphology and syntax. *Journal of Child Language*, 3.
- Meisel, J. M. (1986). Word order and case marking in early child language. Evidence from simultaneous acquisition of two first languages: French and German. *Linguistics*, 24-1.
- Meisel, J. M. (1989). Early differentiation of languages in bilingual children. In K. Hyltenstam & L. K. Obler (Eds.), *Bilingualism across the lifespan*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mikes, M. (1990). Some issues of lexical development in early bi- and trilinguals. In G. Conti-Ramsden & C. Snow (Eds.), *Children's Language. Volume VII*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Mikes, M. & Vlahović, P. (1966). Razvoj gramatičkih kategorija u dečjem govoru (The development of grammatical categories in child language). *Prilozi proučavanju jezika*, 2. Novi Sad.
- Mikes, M. & Vlahović, P. (1967). Acquisition des catégories grammaticales dans le langage de l'enfant. *Efance*, 3-4.
- Slobin, D. I. (1971). *Cognitive prerequisites for the acquisition of grammar.* (Working paper.) Language-Behavior Research Laboratory, University of California, Berkeley.
- Slobin, D. I. (1973). Cognitive prerequisites for the development of grammar. In Ch. Ferguson and D. I. Slobin (Eds.), *Studies of child language development*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Taeschner, T. (1983). *The sun is feminine.* Springer-Verlag.
- Tracy, R. (1986). The acquisition of case morphology in German. *Linguistics*, 24, 1.
- Volterra, V. & Taeschner, T. (1978). The acquisition and development of language by bilingual children. *Journal of Child Language*, 2.
- Weissenborn, J. & Meisel, J. (1986). Studies on morphological and syntactic development, *Linguistics*, 24, 1.