

BILINGUAL ACQUISITION OF GENDER

An impressive amount of data has been collected and analysed through research in monolingual and bilingual acquisition of gender so far. Attempts have been made to solve the puzzle of how children assign nouns to genders, and how they are able to learn correct agreement forms and use them as productively as they do even as early as age two. One possible explanation is that children memorize gender as a part of each noun. However, a few strong points against such an approach have been claimed, and are best summarized by Corbett (1991: 7):

First, native speakers typically make few or no mistakes in the use of gender; if the gender of every noun were remembered individually, we would expect more errors. Second, words borrowed from other languages acquired a gender, which shows that there is a mechanism for assigning and not just remembering gender. And third, when presented with invented words, speakers give them a gender and they do so with a high degree of consistency. Thus native speakers have the ability to ‘work out’ the gender of a noun: models of this ability are called ‘assignment systems’.

Rote learning is far from being the ideal way of gender assignment. A more likely route to learning a gender system is believed to begin with recognising the patterns operating in a given language rather than memorizing every single noun with its gender. For young speakers of a morphologically complex language, e.g. Polish, such patterns, namely “the fact that the occurrence of certain agreeing forms (on verbs, adjectives and so on) depends on the presence of nouns of a certain gender” (Corbett 1991: 82), are easy to recognize.

It remains to be clarified how the patterns of distributing particular inflectional suffixes are acquired in child speech. What emerges from the work on various languages is the fact that children do not follow one particular order of acquiring the distributional rules, since they often depend on the morphological complexity of the language, as well as the relative strength of the extra- (semantic) and interlinguistic (formal) clues available to them. The studies carried out oscillate between two theoretical positions (Pérez-Pereira 1991b: 4):

- a. gender differentiation is established on the basis of semantic features coming from extralinguistic reality (natural gender theory) – children primarily attribute the gender of words on the basis of the semantics (see Mulford 1983);
- b. gender is a phenomenon of the linguistic system – agreement is the essence of gender; children are able to recognize that e.g., nouns with a particular ending co-occur with other parts of speech such as pronouns or articles; morphological and syntactic data is the most important (see Karmiloff-Smith 1979; Maratsos 1980; Levy 1983a)

Research on language acquisition can provide valuable and necessary insights to the way such systems work on condition that basic linguistic descriptions of the phenomena to be investigated are

available. From the early years of the twentieth century, researchers have been documenting the speech of children using diaries, parental notes and questionnaires, and later also audio- and video-recordings to investigate, among hundreds of other issues, the emergence and development of grammatical gender in the speech of young speakers. The limitations of this talk allow me to look at the recent studies in the acquisition of grammatical gender only, i.e. from 1980s onwards. Both monolingual and bilingual children have been studied, and languages with both rich as well as poor gender systems have been investigated. The first part of my talk, i.e. a comparative overview of methods and results obtained by other researchers, is aimed at setting the scene for the second part of the talk, which will focus on my own PhD project.

The AGGA project (Acquisition of Gender and Gender Agreement) investigates the acquisition of gender in the speech of Polish-English children, who are raised bilingually from birth. The objectives are: (1) to analyze the process of acquisition, (2) to investigate the degree of independence of the two gender systems, and the degree of interference between them; (3) to determine the importance of intra- and extralinguistic clues used by children when assigning gender to Polish and English words. Based on what well-known and highly-respected researchers in the field have concluded so far, two hypotheses can be suggested: a) Polish-English children will learn gender distinctions in a similar way to monolingual children (comparing the error rate), and b) the two gender systems will develop highly independently.

In the second part of my talk I will present preliminary results to the following claims:

1. the Polish gender system develops highly independently from the English gender system
2. intralinguistic clues play a more significant role than extralinguistic clues

My database consists of longitudinal data that have been collected from five Polish-English bilingual children between March 2006-February 2008. Illustration and support for the claims stated above will be taken from data obtained from one girl, Amelie, whose speech has been audio- and video-recorded between the age of 26-42 months.

References:

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