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Influence of Productivity on the Acquisition of Inflectional Markers

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Introduction

- Studies on acquisition of inflectional morphology often distinguish between regular and irregular inflection. This distinction originates from studies of English, which is characterized by having one default inflectional marker for a grammatical category (e.g., the plural suffix -s) and a minor number of exceptions to this default rule.
- We find this distinction rather inapt since this is not the case for all languages (e.g., Danish, German).
- In order to address this issue we have developed a scale with three degrees of productivity.
- Productivity is here defined as the ability of the inflectional marker to occur on new words. For the plural system this means the ability to add the plural marker (stem change + suffix) to a new noun in order to form a new plural noun.

In Danish the plural can be formed in four different ways:
- Plural suffix: bi[l] [car] - bil-er [bi[l]s] [cars]
- Stem change: mand [man] → -er [man] -end [mænd] [men]
- Plural suffix + stem change: man [man] -e[s] hund, fodd-er [øl] [dogs]
- No change (singular = plural): mus [mʊs] [mouse], mus [mʊs] [mice]

Possible suffixes

Possible stem changes

Prod. FULLY

PROD. SEMI

PROD.

UNPROD.

Plural markers

1. FULLY PRODUCIVE: a-schwa suffix without phonemic stem change.
2. SEMI PRODUCIVE: o-schwa and zero suffix without phonemic stem change.
3. UNPRODUCTIVE: markers with phonemic stem change and markers with the foreign suffixes: /i/ /e/, /a/, and /i/.

Hypothesis

We predict:
- FULLY PRODUCIVE plural markers to be the most frequent in child language input - hence also in output. Therefore, we expect FULLY PRODUCIVE and less FULLY PRODUCIVE plural markers.
- Children to produce more correct plural forms of FULLY PRODUCIVE plural markers than of SEMI PRODUCIVE and more SEMI PRODUCIVE than UNPRODUCTIVE plural markers.
- Children to overgeneralize FULLY PRODUCIVE plural markers and sometimes also SEMI PRODUCIVE but never UNPRODUCTIVE plural markers.
- The error direction to go from UNPRODUCTIVE to SEMI PRODUCIVE to FULLY PRODUCIVE plural markers.

Empirical data

Lexical data: OLAAM is a computational coding and analysis system for Danish. The OLAAM-database includes about 43,000 lexical entries.

Naturalistic spontaneous child language input and output: Two twin pairs from the Odense Twin Corpus and two singletons from Danish Plunkett Corpus. The children are recorded in interaction with their families approximately once every month. The recordings are transcribed in CHILDES and coded in OLAAM (morphologically and phonologically). The children are in the ages of 0-9: 3:11.

Task 1: Semi-structured interviews on the basis of pictures and pre-prepared questions for maximal elicitation of noun plural forms. 80 monolingual Danish children aged 3, 5, 7, and 9 years participated in this task. 20 children in each age group. These children also participated in Task 2. In both age groups, 20 children in each age group. These children also participated in Task 2.

Task 2: Picture-based elicitation task with 49 items. The experimenter asked the child: “Here is a goose. Here are two what?” and the child was supposed to produce the plural form of the noun. 160 monolingual Danish children aged 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, and 10 years participated in this task.

Frequency of production of noun plural tokens:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of productivity</th>
<th>Lexical Frequency</th>
<th>Input plural types</th>
<th>Input plural tokens</th>
<th>Output plural types</th>
<th>Output plural tokens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FULLY PRODUCIVE</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEMI PRODUCIVE</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNPRODUCTIVE</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Frequency of FULLY PRODUCIVE, SEMI-PRODUCTIVE and UNPRODUCTIVE plural markers in child language input and output including their lexical frequency (the Odense Twin Corpus and Danish Plunkett Corpus).

Plural token frequency

0 ref. 1-9 1.92 <0.001 1.66 2.22
10-29 3.66 <0.001 2.74 4.89
30- 2.65 <0.001 1.91 3.67

Table 2. Logistic regression of the outcome “produced correct plural form” (Y/N), adjusted for productivity, age and their interaction as well as plural and singular token frequency (divided into quartiles).

Figure 1. Shows the proportion of correctly produced plural forms by age and degree of productivity in Task 2. In the younger age groups, children produce more correct plural forms of nouns taking a FULLY PRODUCIVE plural marker compared to nouns taking a SEMI PRODUCIVE plural marker, but they appear to coincide in the older age groups. On the other hand, UNPRODUCTIVE plural markers have much lower correctness rate in Task 2 compared to the other plural markers.

Conclusions

The study shows that plural acquisition is affected by morphophonological category
- Children produce more correct plural forms of nouns with a FULLY PRODUCIVE than a SEMI PRODUCIVE plural marker and more of the latter than of nouns with an UNPRODUCTIVE plural marker in both Task 1 and Task 2.
- Children overgeneralize the FULLY PRODUCIVE and SEMI-PRODUCTIVE plural markers but never the UNPRODUCTIVE in both Task 1 and Task 2.
- The error direction goes from UNPRODUCTIVE to SEMI PRODUCIVE to FULLY PRODUCIVE plural markers.

References


For further information

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