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Nominal compound acquisition in 10 languages: Psycholinguistic evidence from lexical typology

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We compare typologically (cf. [1]) emergence and early development of nominal compounding in longitudinal spontaneous speech corpora of 10 languages (up to age 3;0). We argue that wealth and productivity of compounding, as reflected in child-directed speech (CDS), morphological decomposition, pattern selection, productivity (specifically profitability) [2] of compounds in child speech (CS) of specific languages are better typological predictors of early emergence than general morphological typology, which characterises, to varying degrees, the investigated languages Turkish, Finnish, Saami as agglutinating, Estonian as agglutinating and inflecting, Lithuanian, Russian and Greek as richly inflecting, German, Danish and French as weakly inflecting. Statistical analysis of interaction effects in a Linear Effects Model confirms that compound richness in CDS of the languages investigated is the best predictor (cf. [4]). For this purpose we apply to first-language acquisition studies the theory and methodology of Lexical Typology [3] in quantifying the percentage of nominal compounds among nouns and studying onomasiologically their rivalry with multilexical words (phrases), derivations (particularly suffixations) and simplex words for each language and relating CS to CDS. The percentage of compound noun tokens ranges from about 1% in Lithuanian, Russian and French CS and CDS to 17% in German, whereas the percentage of compound noun lemmas ranges from more than 2% in Russian and 3.8% in French to 38% in German. These frequencies neither correspond to the morphological type of e.g. French and German (both weakly inflecting) nor are they related to the general wealth and productivity of compounds in adult speech found in written genres and described in grammars. However, rather close frequency relations exist between CS and CDS. The main result of our study is the importance of morphological richness in CDS (see above). Moreover, morphosemantic and morphotactic transparency is greater in CS than in adult speech and, as expected, complexity of compounds rises in the development of CS. Productivity and frequencies of lemmas, types and tokens must be differentiated. Evidence from CS should include relations to CDS and rely less on formal tests, since the latter require a high level of language awareness and have less ecological validity. Moreover, they just provide flashlights into specific developmental phases which usually differ among the participants in tests and are limited to single morphological patterns, whereas our study shows that first compound patterns emerge simultaneously or quasi-simultaneously with first inflection and derivation patterns. Finally it will be discussed whether and to which degree findings of test results from single languages are supported or not by our typological comparison of longitudinal studies. Examples are inversion of compound constituents [5], postulated non-occurrence of “regular” inflection of left-hand constituents [6], status of interfixes (linking elements).

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