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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 inexpedient 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:
  - bil [bil] ‘car’ - bil-er [bil-e] ‘cars’
  - man [man] ‘man’ - mand [man-] ‘men’
- Plural suffix + stem change:
  - fra [fra] ‘from’ - færd-er [fær-er] ‘traveled’
  - minus [mu] ‘mouse’ - mus [mu-] ‘mice’

Possible suffixes

\[ \text{suffixes: } /-s/, /-er/, /-er\text{, and } /-en/ \]

Possible stem changes

\[ \text{stem changes: } /s/, /a/, \text{ and } /n/ \]

Productivity scale

Danish plural markers
1. FULLY PRODUCTIVE: a-suffix without phonemic stem change.
2. SEMI-PRODUCTIVE: a-schwa and zero suffix without phonemic stem change.
3. UNPRODUCTIVE: markers with phonemic stem change and markers with the foreign suffix:

Danish Plural Markers

\[ /3/ /a/ \text{, and } /-en/ \]

Hypothesis

We predict:
- FULLY PRODUCTIVE plural markers to be the most frequent in child language input - hence also in output, but not in semi-PRODUCTIVE and then UNPRODUCTIVE plural markers.
- Marker frequency of FULLY PRODUCTIVE plural markers are less than Products.
- Children to overgeneralize FULLY PRODUCTIVE plural markers and sometimes also semi-PRODUCTIVE but never UNPRODUCTIVE plural markers.
- The error direction goes from UNPRODUCTIVE to FULLY PRODUCTIVE plural markers.

Empirical data

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

Naturalistic spontaneous child language input and output: Two twin pairs from the Odense Twin Corpus and two siblings from Danish Plunkett Corpus. The children are recorded in interaction with their families approximately once every month. The recordings are transcribed in CHLIDES and coded in OLAM (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 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 picture. 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, 8, 9 and 10 years participated in this task.

Results

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

<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 PRODUCTIVE</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEMI-PRODUCTIVE</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNPRODUCTIVE</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Table 2 we see that the interaction is significant, thus the effect of productivity changes with age. The impact for the covariates changes the picture in the adjusted analysis compared to the crude rates presented in Figure 1.

Conclusions

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

References


For further information

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