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The emergence and development of compounds in young children's speech production

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Compounding is extremely productive in Danish, with regard to both conventional and more innovative compounds. This applies to nouns in particular, and somewhat to adjectives and verbs (Bauer 2011). The present study investigates the emergence and development of compound nouns in a longitudinal corpus of naturalistic spontaneous child speech (CS) and child directed speech (CDS) of four Danish children and their families – from the first occurrence up to the age of 3;11.

Prosodically, Danish compounds are very complex, since Danish has the typical Germanic stress pattern for compounds (with stress gradation), and in addition the *stød* (a contrastive laryngeal syllable rhyme prosody with a complicated grammatical distribution). Since *stød* depends on the sonority shape of the syllables, and since there can be several *stød* in one word, Danish is prosodically even more complex than Swedish and Norwegian (which have tonal word accents in addition to the typical Germanic stress, but lack the particular phonological restrictions of Danish).

The main research questions to be investigated are: How is the development of compound nouns in Danish children's language acquisition? Which parallels can be drawn to the children's language input? Do the children treat conventional and innovative compounds alike? How do the children pronounce the compounds, in particular with respect to prosody?

The study shows that compound nouns start to emerge well before the age of 2 years. The number of compounds increases with age. The vast majority of compounds are endocentric noun+noun compounds, but all children also produce verb+noun and adjective+noun compounds. The development goes from prototypical to more complex compounds. In general we see very much the same picture in CS as in CDS. During the first months of acquisition, the children do not show any signs of composition or decomposition of compounds, i.e. the compounds seem to be rote-learned in the early stages. Since the children (almost) never swap elements, it could be considered an argument for the children not seeing the compounds as two elements. On the other hand, the children do produce innovative compounds, though they are not very frequent.

The study will furthermore explore the children's actual pronunciation of the compounds along with aspects of the interplay between CS and CDS as well as similarities and differences between the individual children.

References

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