THE ACQUISITION OF VERBAL INFLECTION IN ESTONIAN

Two Case Studies

Abstract. The first six months of verb production is traced in two boys acquiring Estonian, based on both recordings and diary notes. Evidence of the emergence of contrast is identified and related to cumulative verb lexicon. Rate of verb learning is found to be variable whereas contrast emerges at a relatively constant rate for the two children. First contrastive use in context is illustrated for one child. The use of stems in lieu of obligatory inflections is described, as are phonological and morphological errors (errors of both omission and commission). The input frequency for all verb forms in the speech of one mother is analysed for tokens and types; only one exceptionally high frequency verb form appears to have had a direct effect on the child. The children are found to differ primarily in their focus on regular vs. irregular verb forms; the types of errors made are related to the learning path so defined.

1. INTRODUCTION

The first goal of the present study is to contribute to the descriptive study of Estonian morphosyntactic development. For this purpose we will present data from case studies of two boys, one (Andreas) a first-born child learning Estonian in a monolingual context in present day Estonia, the other (Raivo) a second-born bilingual child who learned Estonian in California over 25 years ago, exposed mainly to Estonian in the home but to English in day-care and the community at large. We will note both similarities and differences in the course of early verb form learning in the two boys. By identifying individual learning paths we should be able to obtain a clearer picture of the effects of the particular ambient language structure on the range of possible approaches to first verb form learning in general.

The second goal is to extend to the acquisition of a language of a different morphological type questions of productivity in the early learning of verb morphology which have been raised in studies of Italian (Pizzuto and Casselli 1994) and Spanish (Gathercole, Sebastián and Soto 1999). For this purpose we will apply to our data the definitions of emergent contrast proposed by those studies and we will also consider the context of use of emergent contrastive forms to determine the extent to which evidence of context flexibility supports the evidence of contrast within morphological
paradigms in the first six months of verb use. We will then look at the occurrence of overgeneralization in spontaneous production and other errors of morphological usage, looking for indicators of generalized knowledge of the grammar or of emergent links between different verb stems and morphological forms. Finally, we will assess the relation between input frequency, in terms of both types and tokens, in one mother’s input speech and the verb forms produced by her son.

In comparison with English, whose acquisition has been by far the most intensively studied to date, Estonian is a very highly inflected language. Although Estonian may be best known, along with both the closely related Finnic language Finnish and the distantly related Ugric language Hungarian, for its extensive nominal case system (14 cases: See Vihman 1982), the verbal system is no less rich in inflectional morphology (Erelt, Erelt and Ross 1997); neither system has received a great deal of attention from a developmental point of view (Dasinger 1997). Estonian also differs from the more inflected Indo-European languages, such as the Slavic languages or (in the case of the verb system) the Romance languages, for example, in that it is relatively agglutinative. Inflection is expressed exclusively by suffixation (and stress falls predictably on the first syllable in the core vocabulary (Tragel 2001); exceptions are relatively recent loan words, none of which are early learned verbs). Affixes typically express a single function each, i.e., mood, tense, person. There are no distinct verb classes or conjugations but merely stems and suffixes. Many stems are affected by internal changes known as ‘consonant gradation’ (with ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ grades), the phonological context for which is generally not transparent in Estonian, unlike Finnish, for example. The affixes are typically uniform, regardless of the stem to which they are attached, although many of the most commonly used core verbs show inflectional irregularities.

1.1. Adult verb system

Before embarking on our study of the children’s development we briefly present the main features of the Estonian verbal system (see Appendix), focussing primarily on forms that appeared in the boys’ production but providing an overview of the whole. The system includes several non-finite forms: two infinitives, traditionally known as ‘first’ (-ma) and ‘second’ (-da), and a set of four participles, present and past, active and passive.

The choice of the ma- vs. da-infinitive is determined by the control verb, e.g., *sa hakkad katsuma* ‘you’re starting to try/touch’, *sa hakkad sööma* ‘you’re starting to eat’ but *sa tahad katsuda* ‘you want to try/touch’, *sa tahad süüa* [irreg. form of söö+da] ‘you want to eat’. The *ma-*infinitive is considered a supine, expressing ‘an action following some other preceding action’ (Erelt, Erelt and Ross 1997). Practically speaking, however, the