

The role of morphological case in the acquisition of locative verbs

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Locative verbs such as *pour* (1a) and *fill* (1b) have one of the two following types of argument structure : a moving object precedes a location (Figure-frame) or vice versa (Ground-frame). The question is to know how children acquire these structures. Interestingly, English-speaking children between three and six years of age (3;0-6;0) tend to overgeneralize the Figure-frame, as shown in (1c) (Bowerman 1982; Gropen et al. 1991; Kim, Landau et Phillips 1999).

- (1) a. Mommy poured milk into a glass.
- b. Mommy filled a glass with milk.
- c. *Mommy filled milk into a glass.

In this paper, we focus on Russian. In this language, an alternation between Figure and Ground frames is reduced to an opposition between accusative (ACC) and instrumental (INSTR) Cases:

- (2) a. Mama nalila molok-o v stakan.
 mommy poured milk-ACC into glass
 ‘Mommy poured milk into a glass.’
- b. Mama napolnila stakan molok-om.
 mommy filled glass milk-INSTR
 ‘Mommy filled a glass with milk.’

Do Russian-speaking children commit the same errors as their Anglophone peers? In fact, if instrumental case is the most difficult to acquire (Gvozdev 1961), we expect that errors like (1c) should be quite frequent: Russian speaking children would overgeneralize Figure-frame in order to avoid the use of instrumental case.

In our study, conducted in Belarus, we performed an elicited production task with 41 Russian-speaking children of three age groups: 3;0-4;0 (n=9), 4;0-5;0 (n=18) and 5;0-6;0 (n=14). In order to determine the knowledge of instrumental case, we elicited its use in the following contexts:

- (3) a. prepositional (*pod stol-om* ‘under table-INSTR’);
- b. predicative (*on stal čelovek-om* ‘he became human-INSTR’);
- c. instrumental (*stuknut’ molotk-om* ‘to hit hammer-INSTR’);
- d. locative (2b)

Our study shows that, by the age of 3;0, children already have a solid knowledge of instrumental case in Russian. Context (3b) is the only one where they clearly preferred nominative, while 70% of our control group opted for the instrumental case marking. As for locative verbs, such as *napolnit* ‘to fill’, children were very conservative with the use of the Figure-frame: the error rate was only 5%, compared to almost 100% in English (Kim, Landau et Phillips 1999).

Contrary to what we have expected, instrumental case appears to block errors of the type shown in (1c). This leads us to conclude that case markings function as a protective mechanism against incorrect associations between verbs and different syntactic structures. Morphological case accelerates the acquisition of argument structure.

References

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