

7. CONCLUSIONS

7.1. The aim of the study was to analyse the acquisition of noun morphology by a Lithuanian child and to compare our findings with the respective studies in other languages. Our analysis was based on the corpus of longitudinal and spontaneous language production by the Lithuanian named Rūta. Considerable correspondences with other languages were noted in comparing the process of language acquisition; however, a number of idiosyncratic features were established for Lithuanian.

The descriptive framework which we have adopted drew on the model of *Natural Morphology*, on the theoretical concepts of a *binary opposition* and *markedness*, as well as on the principles of *self-organisation*. The results of our study have corroborated a number of theoretical assumptions advanced on the basis of the analyses carried out in other languages.

A close examination of our data has demonstrated that the three phases of the acquisition of morphology posited for other languages can be distinguished in Rūta's case as well, and these are the phases of (1) *premorphology* (the 1;7 period), of (2) *protomorphology* (the 1;8-2;3 period), and (3) *modularised morphology* (the 2;4-2;5 period). However, it is not possible to draw a sharp dividing line between these phases in terms of exact time reference; therefore, they should serve more as acceptable time guidelines.

7.2. The premorphological phase. This period is characterised by an extensive use of onomatopoeic words, interjections, and word combinations without a clear meaning or form. Early developments of morphological forms are recorded as well, especially with respect to the acquisition of diminutives and the grammatical categories of case, gender and number.

7.2.1. *The use of diminutives*. Rūta uses diminutives from the very beginning of the observation period. During the 1;7 period the type frequency of diminutives in Rūta's speech is 21%; within one month it rises to 51%. This rise in frequency was strongly influenced by a regular use of diminutives by the mother. A noteworthy feature of Rūta's speech is that the girl starts using several diminutive suffixes simultaneously

rather than acquiring them gradually. Diminutive and simplex forms are used by Rūta to denote the same referent.

7.2.2. *The category of number.* The period of 1;7 shows a lexicalised phase of number distinctions. To mark this distinction, Rūta employs the numeral *du* ‘two’ and the adverb *daug* ‘much, many’ (both forms mean ‘more than one’). Some morphological singular and plural noun forms were used during this period as well; however, plural noun forms are just mechanical repetitions. Within a month, during the 1;8 period, correct feminine noun forms (microclass II.3) appear.

7.2.3. *The category of case.* During the early phase of case acquisition, the first grammatically correct inflectional endings emerged with feminine nouns. The first nominative and genitive singular case endings of feminine nouns were *-ė* and *-ės* (microclass II.3) and the nominative case ending *-a* (microclass II.1); all these inflectional forms appeared at the period of 1;7.

At this early phase, inflectional endings of masculine nouns were substituted with the premorpheme *-a*, followed by the emergence of the grammatically correct endings *-as* and *-is*. All the three forms, however, have been used interchangeably for some time. The vocative singular of feminine nouns was used correctly at the beginning of the observation period and also with considerable frequency, namely, it amounted to 11%. At the age of 1;8 the accusative singular forms make a more frequent appearance (13.9%); the same holds for other cases, such as the dative, the instrumental, and the locative (the last two case forms are predominantly repetitions of Mother’s utterances, as found in the recorded input). During the 1;7-1;8 period the most frequent case forms are the singular nominative, genitive, accusative and vocative, as well as the nominative plural case form. The first cases that appear in Rūta’s speech are the so-called grammatical cases whose basic functions are to mark nouns as performing certain syntactic roles. Thus the nominative case functions as the grammatical subject, the genitive is used to denote a possessor, and the accusative performs the function of a direct object.

7.3. The protomorphological phase. In Rūta’s case, the protomorphological phase begins at the end of 1;8 and at the beginning of 1;9 and ends at about 2;3. It is at this period that the system of morphological grammar starts to develop. We have in mind such phenomena as the application of patterns of rules, generalisations and the word spurt. Language use at this period is marked by creativity, and it does not come as a surprise that some deviations from adult speech norms are noticed.

7.3.1. *The use of diminutives.* Occurrence of diminutives is especially frequent in this period. The diminutive token frequency at 1;10 is 50%, at the age of 2;0 it rises to 72%, and later on it remains stable around 60%. The type frequency during this period is also relatively high, i.e., about 40%. Different diminutive suffixes are used, the most frequent being *-ukas* for masculine nouns and *-ytė* for feminine nouns. The basic form of a noun and a derived diminutive are used in turns without any difference in meaning. To express the semantic meaning of ‘smallness’, diminutives are used only in combination with the adjective *mažas* ‘small’. The most frequent diminutive forms are derived from basic nouns which belong to the lexico-semantic groups of ‘Body parts’, ‘Animals’, ‘Toys’, and ‘Persons’.

7.3.2. *The category of number.* Formal plural marking of masculine nouns belonging to different microclasses appeared during the 1;9 period. The meaning of cases has been acquired while acquiring singular noun forms, therefore, plural forms of masculine and feminine nouns were acquired in a relatively short period of time.

Rūta was inclined to treat all nouns as countable nouns, and it is due to this fact that the use of uncountable nouns, especially *pluralia tantum* nouns, did not correspond to language norms.

7.3.3. *The category of case.* The most frequent case in Rūta’s data is the nominative singular. During the 1;9-1;10 period the token frequency reached 60%, and in later periods it made up more than 45%. This high frequency of nominative forms was influenced by the use of self-reference items. The token frequency of the accusative case is almost stable, around 15%, whereas the genitive case forms up to the period of 2;0 constituted 7%, and in later periods its frequency rose to 12%. From 1;11 onwards the dative becomes more frequent (approximately 6%).

With respect to prepositional phrases, there is a tendency on the part of Rūta to omit prepositions, especially during the early periods of language acquisition; later a preposition is substituted with the premorpheme *-a*.

Declensional classes of feminine nouns have been acquired very easily. The acquisition of masculine noun classes did not present major problems either. The most frequent errors in case marking are associated with the inflectional ending *-as*, which used to be substituted with the endings *-is* or *-us*. With respect to most frequent microclasses, their sequence is as follows: II.3 and II.1 of feminine nouns, and microclasses I.1 and I.3 of masculine nouns. The predominant frequency of these particular microclasses was influenced by the extensive use of diminutive nouns.

The meanings of individual cases were acquired gradually. The first to be acquired were the basic meanings of grammatical cases, which were followed by the acquisition of peripheral meanings. The same pattern is distinguished in the acquisition of concrete cases: basic meanings are captured earlier than the peripheral ones. There were no important problems related to the acquisition of individual cases. True, there were some difficulties in acquiring the genitive of negation rule: with negative verbs, Rūta used to mark nouns accusative or nominative. But even this problem had been resolved by the age of 2;3.

7.4. The phase of modularised morphology. This period (from 2;3 onwards) marks the end of the acquisition of all grammatical categories of the noun. More complex sentences prevail. Errors have almost disappeared (just 1.7% noted). Rūta's speech has achieved adult standards.

7.4.1. *The use of diminutives.* Diminutives are still used quite frequently, at the level of about 50%. However, the diminutive form is not used to denote the meaning of 'smallness', but it is assigned the pragmatic senses of 'tenderness' and 'love'. The nouns *Rūta* and *mama* 'mother' are used in the simplex form to express negative emotions.

7.4.2. *The category of number.* Both plural and singular noun forms are used correctly. The same holds for *pluralia* and *singularia tantum* nouns.

7.4.3. *The category of case.* Formal morphological case marking on nouns of both genders is grammatically correct. One exception is the dative singular case ending of masculine nouns which is substituted with the feminine case ending *-ai* (transparency).

Rūta is now able to correctly use the various meanings of cases spontaneously. In addition, the peripheral (i.e., adverbial) meanings of individual cases are put to a more frequent use. A case in point are the genitive of manner and time, the accusative of time, the instrumental of place and the descriptive instrumental, as well as the locative of time.

7.5. There is a very close relationship between Rūta's acquisition patterns and the speech patterns used by her mother. Rūta has first acquired those linguistic elements which were salient, transparent, and, in addition, most frequently used by the mother. This pattern of native language acquisition is observed crosslinguistically as well.

7.5.1. Frequently occurring elements are treated as unmarked members, whereas less frequent are considered marked. Thus, singular is the unmarked member within the category of number; the nominative is the unmarked member of the category of case, whereas the locative case is the most marked. Masculine gender is the unmarked member of the opposition. All unmarked members were acquired by Rūta earlier than

the marked ones. All unmarked members are more frequent in both Mother's and Rūta's speech.

7.5.2. Elements which are acquired first are not only most frequent in Mother's speech, but also most salient and transparent. For example, diminutives are usually stressed on the suffix, and it is due to this clear pattern of stress that the diminutive suffixes are acquired rather early. The endings of feminine nouns *-ė* and *-a* are easy to remember due to the fact the girl's name has these endings, i.e., *Rūta* and *Rūtytė*. Likewise, the phoneme *a* frequently occurs with masculine nouns, especially at the early phases (this is a case for the other languages as well) due to the phonetic simplicity of the sound.

7.5.3. The derivational suffixes of diminutives were acquired first: the first correct pattern of usage falls within the period of 1;7. Correct inflectional endings emerge during the 1;8-1;9 period (feminine case endings appear at 1;7) and were used correctly at around the age of two. At the end of the observation period some prepositions are used correctly as well.

7.5.4. As regards Rūta, the acquisition of the grammatical categories of the noun was not a long and complicated process. The categories of number and case were acquired by the girl within the 2;0-2;3 period. Comparison of our results with the relevant data from other languages allows us to claim that noun morphology has been acquired by Rūta relatively early. Even the acquisition of more complex categories (for example, the category of case) did not present any major problems.

7.5.5. Reference to crosslinguistic data allows us to formulate certain claims with respect to which tendencies in child language acquisition are universal and which tendencies are language-specific. In our opinion, the universal tendencies noted during the observation period include the following phenomena: (1) the early appearance of diminutive forms; (2) the substitution of correct morphological markers with a premorpheme, especially during the early phase of language acquisition; (3) earlier acquisition of unmarked members of morphological oppositions and their more frequent use; (4) the primary opposition of accusative and genitive to the nominative case; and (5) a frequent use of self-reference items. However, these universal tendencies are more prominent during the early phases of language acquisition; later they are replaced by language-specific phenomena, such as meanings of individual cases or declensional classes.

One more note is in order before we close. No far-reaching generalisations with respect to the acquisition of Lithuanian noun morphology

can be put forward at this phase. This is due to the fact that our study has analysed the data of only one child. More data and more research is needed in order to establish which features in the process of child language acquisition are universal, and which are language-specific, pointing just to some idiosyncratic usage patterns on the part of a particular child.