

Do case and gender information assist sentence comprehension and repetition for German- and Hebrew-speaking children?

Michal Biran ^{a,b,*}, Esther Ruigendijk ^c

^a University of Haifa, Department of Communication Disorders, Haifa, Israel

^b Tel Aviv University, Language and Brain Lab, Tel Aviv, Israel

^c Cluster of Excellence "Hearing4all", Department of Dutch, Oldenburg University, Germany

Received 21 December 2014; received in revised form 18 June 2015; accepted 23 June 2015

Available online



Abstract

Various types of morphological information can serve as cues to assist comprehension and production of complex sentences, i.e., case and/or gender information. These cues are realized differently in different languages, and thus might have different effects.

We examined the effects of case and gender information on comprehension and repetition of *wh*-questions and topicalization sentences, for German- and Hebrew-speaking typically developing children, and compared between the two languages. The participants were typically developing children, 3–6;8 years old, German- and Hebrew-speaking.

Comprehension was examined using a picture-matching task and production by using a repetition task. In half of the sentences the two figures were of the same gender and in half – of different genders. In Hebrew this difference manifests on verb agreement and in German – on the determiner. We compared between the children's performance on the different types of sentences, and between sentences with and without the gender/case cues.

Findings show the classical subject–object asymmetry in comprehension and repetition, and display a difference between German and Hebrew in the way cues assist comprehension and repetition. We argue that the difference between the facilitating effect of gender and case information relates to whether it is realized on subject–verb agreement or not.

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Keywords: Case; Gender; Hebrew; German; Language acquisition; Word order

1. Introduction

Complex sentences, such as relative clauses, topicalized sentences and *wh*-questions, are acquired relatively late in the language acquisition process. This is especially so if they are reversible non-canonical sentences for which correct theta-role assignment is crucial for correct interpretation and production. Several types of information may serve as cues to guide theta-role assignment (in comprehension as well as in production), for example, word order, case, gender and number agreement. These cues are realized differently in different languages, and, there are differences in their reliability in different languages.

* Corresponding author at: Department of Communication Disorders, Faculty of Social Welfare and Health Sciences, University of Haifa, Israel. Tel.: +972 4 8288583; fax: +972 3 9249619.

E-mail address: biranmi@gmail.com (M. Biran).


In the current study, we focused on *wh*-questions and topicalized sentences (OSV and OVS) in German and Hebrew. These types of sentences have been studied less intensively as, for instance, relative clauses (see for instance Arosio et al., 2009; Belletti and Contemori, 2010; Belletti et al., 2012; Friedmann et al., 2008; McKee et al., 1998; Novogrodsky and Friedmann, 2006). Moreover, compared to relative clauses, they are structurally a bit less complex since they have no embedding, and hence are easier to study in younger children. For all of these structures, as far as they have been studied, it has been found that object-first structures are comprehended and produced correctly later than subject-first structures (see below for more details).

Below, we will first describe the structures that were examined in this study – *wh*-questions and topicalized sentences, and we will present the Relativized Minimality (RM) approach as an explanation for the comprehension pattern of movement derived sentences found in children acquiring language (cf. Belletti et al., 2012; Friedmann et al., 2009). Then, we will describe the types of morphological information used as cues in this study – case and gender. We will refer to data concerning *wh*-questions and topicalized sentences as well as case and gender in language acquisition. This is followed by a description of our methodology and an overview of our results. The paper finishes with a discussion of the results.

1.1. *Wh*-questions and topicalized sentences

Object *wh*-questions and topicalized sentences have in common that the order of the arguments is non-canonical, i.e., it deviates from the canonical (or default) order of subject–verb–object (for the languages under discussion¹). It is assumed that these types of sentences can be derived from the canonical order by moving a constituent, here the object DP, over the verb to the first position of the sentence (see 1 and 2 for examples in German and in Hebrew, respectively. The arrow indicates the movement of the object). The constituent that was moved from its original position leaves a trace, which is connected by a chain to its new position, to enable theta-role assignment.


(1) Object *wh*-question: *welchen*Hund_i beißt *die* Katze *t_i*?



which_{MASC-ACC} dog bites the_{FEM-NOM} cat *t_i*?

'Which dog is the cat biting?'


Topicalization: *den*_{ACC} Drachen_i fesselt der Bär_{NOM} *t_i*



the_{ACC} dragon_i ties the_{NOM} bear *t_i*

'It is the bear that ties the dragon'


(2) Object *wh*-question: *et* eize kelev_i ha-xatul noshex *t_i*?



ACC which dog_{MASC} *i* the-cat_{MASC} bites_{MASC} *t_i*?

'Which dog is the cat biting?'

Topicalization: *et* ha-drakon_i kosher ha-dov *t_i*



ACC the-dragon_{MASC} *i* the-bear_{MASC} ties_{MASC} *t_i*

'It is the bear that ties the dragon'

¹ We abstract away from the canonical position of the verb in German, which has been argued to be base-generated in the final position (see e.g. Thiersch, 1978; Koster, 1975). This does not affect our discussion of the order of subject and object though.

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