

The Acquisition Of Lithuanian Morphotactics: The Study Of Typically Developing Children And Children With Developmental Language Disorder

Laura Kamandulyte Merfeldiene (Vytautas Magnus University)

The aim of the present study is to test the Strong Morphotactic Hypothesis (SMH), according to which speakers use morphotactic consonant clusters as morphological boundary signals (Korecky- Kröll et al. 2014). It is hypothesized that morphotactic clusters will be better retained during production than phonotactic clusters due to the function fulfilled by a morpheme.

Research into the morphotactics of the Lithuanian language was started in 2006 during the traineeship of the author at the University of Vienna and in cooperation with prof. W. U. Dressler (supervisor of “The Crosslinguistic Project on Pre- and Protomorphology in Language Acquisition”). The analysis of the corpus of a Lithuanian child (1;8-2;8) and a pilot experimental study of a small sample (3;0-7;0) revealed that morphotactic clusters are acquired by children earlier than phonotactic clusters (Kamandulytė 2006, Kamandulytė-Merfeldienė 2015). In addition, the results obtained allowed to formulate an unexpected hypothesis that the production of morphotactic clusters is more complicated in children with DLD (developmental language disorder) than in typically developing (TD) children. Thus, the aim of this paper is to investigate the production of morphotactic (occurring across morpheme boundaries, e.g. žais-ti [play-INF]) and phonotactic (occurring within morphemes, e.g. vaist- as [medicine-NOM.SG]) consonant clusters in TD children and children with DLD and to test the hypothesis that TD children produce morphotactic consonant clusters more easily than phonotactic clusters.

The study is based on experimental data collected from 80 TD Lithuanian children (4;5-6;5) and 80 Lithuanian children with DLD (4;5-6;5). Children with DLD (without other developmental disorders) were identified by a speech language therapist at the Pedagogical Psychological Service.

The research is based on the results of the repetition task that consisted of 32 sentences with target word with a consonant cluster in the middle of each sentence. The repetition task included the following consonant clusters that can occur both within morphemes and across morpheme boundaries: št, mt, ks, ls, nk, sk, kt, and st.

This study explores the impact of morphology on the acquisition of phonotactics. The findings suggest that TD children process morphotactic clusters more accurately than phonotactic clusters because morphotactic clusters have the function of co-signalling the existence of a morphological rule. In contrast to TD children, for children with DLD prototypical morphotactic clusters are the most difficult as the morphology acquisition in these children is particularly delayed and they are not sensitive to morphological information which is carried by morphotactic clusters.