

Morphology in Child and Adult Learners' Spoken Language Comprehension

Harald Clahsen

Potsdam Research Institute for Multilingualism, University of Potsdam, Germany

Language acquisition research has traditionally focused on the development of linguistic knowledge in spoken and written language production. Successful acquisition of linguistic knowledge, on the other hand, presupposes the ability to comprehend and process the linguistic input the language learner is exposed to. While most previous psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic research on language comprehension has focused on mature speakers in their native language (L1), several recent experimental studies have also examined the mechanisms that language learners employ during comprehension. In this talk I will present results from some of our recent experimental studies on morphologically complex words in child and adult learners' spoken language comprehension.

My focus will be on two morphological phenomena. Study 1 examined verb inflection in German (specifically past participle formation) using cross-modal lexical priming experiments. Study 2 examined plurals inside compounds in English using eye-movement monitoring during listening as well as acceptability judgements. We tested both mature and child L1 speakers as well as advanced adult second language (L2) learners, L1 Russian speakers for study 1 and L1 German speakers for study 2.

I will make two main arguments, firstly, that morphological processing in both the L1 and the L2 can best be understood in terms of a lexical (i.e. word-specific) storage/retrieval system plus a grammatical system of (rule-like) computations (*dual system hypothesis*), and secondly, that the division of labour between these two systems is substantially different in child L1 and adult L2 learners. While developmental changes in children's performance on morphologically complex words are attributable to lexical learning and advances in lexical retrieval, L2 performance in this domain indicates a reduced sensitivity to morphological structure and analysis relative to L1 processing, and greater reliance on non-structural (e.g. lexical) information sources during language comprehension instead (*shallow-structure hypothesis*).