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“Hungry I Am – Breakfast I Want” On the Acquisition of Inverted Word Order in Swedish

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Abstract

In this paper, the acquisition of Swedish as a first language is compared to second language learning of Swedish. Swedish children do not seem to have any difficulties in acquiring Swedish word order rules, which are very hard to learn by second language learners. The difference between first and second language learning of inverted word order is explained, tentatively, by the difference in input to the language learner.

BACKGROUND

Today there is a lively discussion going on among researchers of language acquisition about differences and similarities between first and second language acquisition. Studies of the interlanguage used by second language learners have shown regularities in the development of interlanguage similar to developmental stages known from child language. Two areas that have been analyzed and found to be similar are negation and interrogation (e.g. Ravem 1978). In this study I will discuss an area where comparisons between first and second language learning have not yet been made, the acquisition of Swedish inversion rules.

THE ACQUISITION OF SWEDISH WORD ORDER RULES

The acquisition of Swedish word order rules presents a longlasting problem to second language learners of Swedish. One major problem is the inverted word order in declaratives. In spoken Swedish about 60% of declarative clauses have SVO word order but it is also possible to place e.g. an object or an adverbial in the first position. In that case, the verb and the subject must be inverted so that the verb always holds the second position (e.g. OVS, AVS, etc). Studies of second language learners of Swedish have shown that learners in early stages prefer the canonical word order pattern, SVO, and that they tend to keep the order S + V even when the sentence starts with an adverb or an object, e.g. OSV, ASV, etc. (Hyltenstam 1977, 1978, Hammarberg and Viberg 1979, Dahlbäck 1981, Bolander 1988a, b).

For first language learners, however, there is nothing to indicate that this should be a problem. In a study by Eneskär 1978, on the language of 250 four-year-olds and 237 six-year-olds, only 12% of the four-year-olds made one or

more errors in word order, and only 4% of the six-year-olds. Errors in morphology and use of prepositions were much more frequent. In Lange and Larsson's 1973 study of early syntactic development (1:8 years - 2:1 years), very few instances of the ungrammatical word order OSV or ASV are reported in the children's utterances (see also Lange 1974, 1975, 1976).

PRESENT STUDY

The present study deals with the syntactic development in the speech of a Swedish child, my own daughter Kristina, between 2:5 and 3 years of age. This period has not received much investigation and description in literature on Swedish child language, probably due to the fact that there are many problems associated with data collection at this age. This is a period when the child acquires the rules of grammar at a rapid speed and by the age of three most of the rules have been internalized.

Also, the speech directed to the child is analyzed in order to study if there is any relation between word order in input to the child and word order in the child's own language.

Method

The data were collected by means of monthly recordings of conversations between the child and an adult in the child's home. These data were supplemented by daily observations, when notes were taken of errors in word order. The note-taking was done most intensively during a period around 2:10 years, when the child gave the impression of actually playing with different word order patterns. At this age she also seemed to actively explore the possibilities of Swedish word order rules, thus creating many "strange" constructions.

All complete sentences uttered by the child and by the adult were transcribed and word order patterns were analyzed and calculated.

As a source for comparison, data from articles published by Lange (1974, 1975, 1976) are used.

Results

The quantitative analysis reveals that adults use inverted word order in declaratives to about the same degree as has been reported earlier for spoken Swedish, i.e. around 40% of declaratives have subject-verb inversion and 60% have SVO word order (e.g. Jørgensen 1976). Both the child in this study and the child in Lange's study have a proportion of inverted word order that is *higher* than in adult speech, about 50 %, see Table 1.

Table 1. Proportion of inverted word order in declaratives in adult speech and in child speech.

word order	Adult %	Child ¹ %	Adult ² %	Child ² %
SVO	65	49	61	52
Inversion	37	51	39	48

As was mentioned above, Kristina went through a period when she seemed to experiment with different word order patterns. At this period the number of sentences with inverted word order was striking. An example from a monologue may illustrate her word order preferences.

Example

(1)

Älgarna kommer och hoppar och äter maten. Älgmat äter dom. Nu äter
The elks come and jump and eat food. Elk-food eat they. Now eat

dom, titta! Delat dom har jag Kan baka bullar till älgarna. Det kan
them look! Divided them have I. Can bake rolls to the elks. That can

jag väl? Kavel hittar jag. Titta, hittat min kavel. Titta en kavel!
I or? Rollingpin find I. Look, found my rollingpin. Look a rollingpin!

Gammal deg var det. Tvätta händerna. Jag gör bullar till älgarna.
Old dough was it. Wash hands. I make rolls for the elks.

Riktiga älgar är det inte.
Real elks is it not.

Out of the 13 sentences in the monologue above, 7 are declaratives with inverted word order, 2 are declaratives with SVO word order, 2 are imperatives and 2 are incomplete sentences (with subject deleted). Although all the complete sentences can be regarded as grammatical, the text taken as a whole is characterized by too much inversion.

A closer examination of the *structural aspects* of the inverted clauses at the age of 2:10, reveals that all constituents that may be in the first position (the foundation) in adult speech, are also present in the child's speech. There are, in addition, some restrictions on which constituents may not appear in the

¹Kristina.

²These figures are calculated from data in Lange 1974, 1975, 1976.

foundation which have not yet been learned by the child at this age. This implies that Kristina at the age of 2:10 has more generous rules as to which constituents may be placed in the foundation. The following examples give an overview showing which constituents are placed in the foundation in Kristina's speech.

- | | |
|---------------------------|--|
| ADVERB | (2) Ute ska hon vara
Outside shall she be |
| OBJECT | (3) Blå strumpor har jag
Blue stockings have I |
| PREDICATIVE | (4) Hungrig är jag
Hungry am I |
| VERB (intrans) | (5) Ramlar gör den
Falls does it |
| VERB (trans) | (6) ? Nosar gör hon på mina fötter
Smells does she on my feet |
| VERB + OBJECT | (7) Äter älgmat gör dom
Eat elk-food do they |
| VERB + ADVERB | (8) Snöar hemma gör det
Snows at home does it |
| VERB + SENTENCE ADVERBIAL | (9) ? Vinkar inte gör hon
Waves not does she |

According to Jörgensen and Svensson 1986, examples 6 and 9 do not follow the restrictions on which elements can be placed in the foundation. If the finite verb is in the foundation it should not be separated from its object (6), and the finite verb should not be tied together with the sentence adverbial (9).

INVERSION IN ADULT SPEECH AND IN CHILD LANGUAGE

As was mentioned above there is variation in word order in spoken Swedish; 60% SV and 40% VS word order. The function of inversion is in most cases to mark that an adverbial or an object have been thematized and placed in the foundation position which makes a verb-subject inversion take place. Typically, children do not learn discourse skills such as referring to shared knowledge until late in their development. One example of this is when the child wrongly uses a pronoun for reference and the listener does not know whom it is referring to. Another example is when a constituent is placed as rheme in the foundation position, and it does not belong to shared knowledge, as in example 10. (Example 10 is Kristina's first utterance when she wakes up in the morning. It is not

connected with any previous discussion on meals, but could of course be interpreted as referring to general morning activities and thus to shared knowledge!)

- (10). Hungrig är jag. Frukost vill jag ha.
Hungry am I. Breakfast will I have

Commonly, the variation in Swedish word order is described by movement transformations. The topicalization transformation moves an element to the front, and then the order of subject and verb is inverted. When the main verb is moved, an additional transformation is needed, one that inserts the auxiliary *göra* 'do'. This implies that it takes three transformations to describe sentences 5-9 above.

Since this period in the child's linguistic development is usually described as a "pretransformational" period, we would prefer a grammar which could describe inversion in Swedish without transformations. A model which avoids movements of the linear structure is "Referent Grammar" (Sigurd 1987). In this grammar, the linear order of constituents is described by a functional analysis. If we take the example *Älgmat äter dom* 'Elk-food they eat', it may be analyzed into two major parts: the foundation (in this case the object) and the rest of the sentence, which is characterized as object-defective, since it contains no object. Since the foundation is treated as a separate part of the sentence and the rest of the sentence as missing precisely that part, no movement transformations are needed. (The only transformation would be the insertion of the auxiliary *göra* 'do' in a verb-defective sentence.)

DISCUSSION

Children's manipulating with linguistic forms is well-known as regards morphology and word creation (see Weir 1970). Playing with different word order patterns has, however, not been reported before, to my knowledge. On the whole, we can say that playing with language is restricted to first language learning; second language learners seem to have lost their playfulness and are much more anxious to use correct forms, and therefore do not experiment with different word orders. Instead they tend to use canonical word order to a greater extent. This may be one factor to consider when trying to explain why second language learners have more difficulties in acquiring word order variation.

Another factor that might be of importance is the difference in input to the learners. As we have seen, children are exposed to sentences with varying word orders; about 37-39% of the sentences have inverted word order. What about input to second language learners? In a study of Swedish teachers teaching

Swedish as a second language to adult learners, it was found that the teachers use inversion to a smaller degree when they teach beginners than when they teach advanced learners (Håkansson 1987). The mean proportion of inverted declaratives was 23%, which is considerably lower than the 40% which is common in spoken Swedish. Here is a fundamental difference between speech directed to children and speech directed to adult immigrants. Would it perhaps be easier for second language learners to learn the variation in Swedish word order if they were exposed to a more varied input?

Many studies of child language have declared that children use canonical word order patterns in early stages of their development. However, most studies concern the acquisition of English, a language with a rather fixed word order (e.g. Menyuk 1969). Interestingly enough, relationships between input and output in first language acquisition have earlier been established for language-specific structures (Newport et al. 1977). They found that structures that are common to all languages developed in children's language unaffected by input, whereas language-specific structures were affected by input from the mothers. In a study of Dutch, which is a language related to Swedish, Klein (1974:33) found that the children "have a variation in word order corresponding with the range of variation heard", which means that these language-specific word order patterns are influenced by input. The relationship between input and output has not, however, been established for second language learners. Further research on language-specific structures may detect such an influence.

There are also other explanations for differences between first and second language acquisition. The nativist view postulates an abstract Language Acquisition Device which only children have access to. Clahsen and Muysken, 1986, in a study on first and second language learning of German word order, explained the differences by assuming "that children possess learning capacities specific to language, particularly the capacity to postulate an abstract underlying order, related to the surface order through 'move alpha'..." (p. 111). According to Clahsen and Muysken, the main difference between first and second language learning is that first language learners have access to LAD. They do not take any input considerations at all.

However, until we know more about this mental organ, I think it is important also to examine the language that the learner is confronted with, the input, which the learner uses as basis for hypotheses about the target language.

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Referents in the Grammar

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INTRODUCTION

Hearing an utterance like (1), (and understanding Swedish), one may wonder two things:

- (1) Lena såg Bosse första gången i Köpenhamn
 Lena saw Bosse first time-THE in Copenhagen

a) Who saw whom? An unmarked intonation would indicate unmarked word order, i.e. that the first NP is the subject and that the second one is the object. If the first NP is stressed however, that could mean that a marked word order is used and that the first NP is the object.

b) Who are Lena and Bosse? This is a completely different question, which does not seem to have anything to do with the first one. The first one concerns grammar, the second one everyday life knowledge.

Is it generally so, that the identification of the grammatical function for a NP is a grammatical question, while the identification of a referent of a NP is not?

Of course, the exact identification of an expression with a specific referent is much more a question of context than one of grammar, *but*

1) the means for referential identification can be of grammatically different kinds, and

2) the grammatical means for referential identification can interact with other parts of the grammar.

If the sentence above is changed just a little, such an interaction can be illustrated.

- (2) Hon såg Bosse första gången i Köpenhamn
 she saw Bosse first time-THE in Copenhagen
- (3) Henne såg Bosse första gången i Köpenhamn
 her saw Bosse first time-THE in Copenhagen