

The acquisition of Croatian morphonotactic and phonotactic consonant clusters

This paper will present the early periods of the development of word-initial morphonotactic and phonotactic consonant clusters from emergence to mastery. The focus is on two questions: A) Are homophonous morphonotactic or purely phonotactic clusters acquired earlier? B) Is date of emergence or date of mastery more important for answering question A? C) Which caveats have been so far overlooked in answering these questions?

The distinction between morphonotactic and purely phonotactic consonant clusters has been introduced by Dressler & Dziubalska-Kołaczyk (2007) and from then onwards analysed for many languages in various perspectives (also beyond acquisition, cf. Dressler et al. 2021). This distinction is defined as morphonotactic clusters being due to a morphological operation, most often morpheme combination, as in E. */in+ed* vs. purely phonotactic consonant occurring within a lexically stored morpheme, as in E. *kind*.

Our data of three longitudinal corpora of spontaneous interaction between children and their main caretakers have been collected for the Croatian Corpus of Child Language (Kovačević 2002). The data have been recorded, transcribed and coded according to the methodology of the international project CHILDES (MacWhinney 2000). The methodology of analysis is that of the Crosslinguistic Project on Pre- and Protomorphology in Language Acquisition (see the last volume: Mattes et al. 2022). We have chosen to investigate word-initial consonant clusters, because these show a much higher variety and frequency than word-final clusters and are the easiest to analyse.

Our answer to question B is that mastery is more important than emergence, our answer to question A is that morphonotactic clusters are earlier acquired than homophonous purely phonotactic ones. The unsettled questions and caveats are: How about word-medial Croatian consonant clusters which are also frequent and show much variety? Do our results hold only for single clusters or also for classes of clusters (e.g., fricative + stop)? Which single clusters among these cluster classes are first mastered? Since mastery is defined as the exclusively correct production of clusters, what is the critical mass of examples over which period of acquisition for being certain of mastery?

We will give at least initial answers or propose plausible possible answers in the hope of stimulating a fruitful discussion.

References:

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