

The acquisition of inflectional morphology: child L1 and child L2 Dutch

Elma Blom & Daniela Poliřenská

University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam Center for Language and Communication
<http://home.hum.uva.nl/variflex/>

Questions

Grammatical gender in Dutch may be characterized as a “vulnerable” feature. Are child L2 learners of Dutch, that is, children who start late, still able to acquire gender inflection in Dutch or does gender inflection draw the line between child L1 and child L2 learners?

Linguistic variables

Gender agreement is encoded in Dutch through free inflection (definite determiners) and bound inflection (attributive adjectival inflection)

- (1) **de** hond ‘the dog’ common gender
 het paard ‘the horse’ neuter gender

- (2) een **grote** hond ‘a big dog’ common gender
 een **groot** paard ‘a big horse’ neuter gender

Our focus:

- Omission of definite determiners
- Errors with definite determiners (free inflection)
- Errors with attributive adjectival suffixes (bound inflection)

Method & Procedure

Experiment: elicited production, sentence completion task

Subjects

	Mean age	Length of exposure in months	N
child L1 young	3,6	42	24
child L1 old	5,5	65	25
child L2 young	5,6	18	8
child L2 old	8,0	48	8

Selection criteria:

- normally-developing children
- child L1: monolingual Dutch home-situation
- child L2: (i) non-Dutch home situation, (ii) Turkish or Moroccan L1, (iii) Dutch from the age of 4 (primary school)

First results

1. Omission of definite determiners in child L2 Dutch is frequent, drops as a function of development, but remains above the monolingual level.

	Omission rate of definite determiners (%)
child L1 – young	5 (27/485)
child L1 – old	3 (14/542)
child L2 – young	37 (101/270)
child L2 – old	20 (68/337)

$\chi^2 = 12.38$ (p is less than or equal to 0.001), significant change

2. Errors with definite determiners. Child L1 and child L2 learners make the same types of errors (i.e. overgeneralization of common *de* in neuter contexts). The error rate in child L1 Dutch drops significantly, in contrast to child L2 Dutch.

Types of errors with definite determiners:

- *de* with neuter nouns = “de-substitution”
- *het* with common nouns = “het-substitution”

	de-substitutions	het-substitutions
child L1 – young	67% 16/272	2% 3/186
child L1 – old	23% 74/315	13% 27/213
child L2 – young	95% 109/115	0% 0/54
child L2 – old	89% 161/180	4% 4/89

3. Errors with adjectival inflection. Child L1 and child L2 learners make the same types of errors (i.e. overgeneralization of the inflected adjective to contexts that require the bare adjective). The error rate in child L1 Dutch drops significantly, in contrast to child L2 Dutch.

Types of errors with adjectival suffixes:

- inflected adjective in contexts that require bare adjective = “schwa substitutions”
- bare adjective in contexts that require inflected adjective = “zero substitutions”

	schwa-substitutions	zero-substitutions
child L1 – young	65% 57/104	0% 1/245
child L1 – old	23% 27/117	1% 5/345
child L2 – young	85% 89/105	7% 15/228
child L2 – old	78% 98/125	8% 25/315

4. Parallel development of bound and free inflection? The acquisition of bound inflection (definite determiners) does not precede the development of the free inflection (adjectival suffix), or vice versa. In this respect, child L1 and child L2 Dutch are similar.

Conclusion

There are various similarities between the acquisition of gender inflection in child L1 and child L2 Dutch: both learner groups make the same types of errors and in both groups bound and free inflection pattern alike. However, whereas the child L1 learners show a clear drop of errors, the child L2 learners do not.

Discussion

Do child L2 learners fossilize in the default stage (i.e. extensive overuse of the definite determiner *de* and inflected adjectives ending on schwa), or do they finally catch up with the child L1 learners after a long period of exposure to Dutch? A study conducted on 8 Moroccan child L2 learners of Dutch tested at the age of 15-16 indicates the following:

- Bound inflection: extensive overgeneralization of the inflected adjective, only 9% of the adjectives is correctly marked with a zero-suffix (10/111).
- Free inflection: 64% (36/56) of the neuter nouns is preceded by the neuter definite determiner *het*.

The above observations, in turn, suggest that:

- Child L2 learners do not acquire Dutch gender inflection anymore.
- Child L2 learners show a developmental dissociation between gender encoding in bound inflection and free inflection.

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For further information, please do not hesitate to contact us:

Elma Blom
w.b.t.blom@uva.nl

Daniela Polišenská
d.polisenska@uva.nl

This research has been made possible with a grant (360-70-110 from the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO)).