

Forskerkurs ved UiT, 15.-19- oktober

Language Acquisition

As human beings we have an amazing ability to acquire language. However, this ability is not constant over time; while all normally developing children acquire their native language, or native languages, quickly and with ease, this is not generally the case with adults learning a second language. The overall aim of the course is to compare language acquisition in different situations, such as (i) the acquisition of a native language (L1), (ii) the simultaneous acquisition of two languages in childhood (bilingual acquisition) and (iii) in the acquisition of a second language in adulthood. Consequently, the course will be made up of three mini-courses which serve to address each of these topics while at the same time providing interesting points of contact with the acquisition situations dealt with in the other two mini-courses.

Mini Courses:

1. Topics in L1 Acquisition (Sergey Avrutin, Utrecht)

This mini-course seeks to familiarize the student with current issues in research on child language development. The speed and uniformity with which children acquire their native language, despite enormous variation in the linguistic input, is a truly amazing phenomenon to both linguists and developmental psychologists. Some researchers believe that part of children's success lies in the availability of a genetically given language faculty that allows humans to attain the adult grammar along narrowly prescribed developmental paths. Others view language development as acquisition of a particular cognitive skill. We will discuss some classical and more recent findings in language development in various linguistic areas: phonology, morphology, syntax, and discourse. The experimental results will be discussed from two different perspectives: development of linguistic knowledge in children vs. maturation of their processing capacity. In order to further contribute to this debate, a comparison will be made between normally developing children and agrammatic adult Broca's aphasics who (in many cases) exhibit performance similar to that of normal children.

2. Bilingual acquisition (Natascha Müller, Wuppertal)

The course provides an introduction into early child bilingualism. The starting point will be the debate on language separation and language influence. The main focus of the course will be to define when and why language influence and language separation are manifested in child data. It will be shown that interface domains are susceptible to language influence. The grammatical domains to be discussed are determiners, pronouns, finite verb placement among others. The language combinations are French-German, Italian-German, Spanish-German and French-Italian. The data come from a new longitudinal study which collects not only data from bilingual children in Germany but also from bilingual children with the same language combinations in the Romance countries. Language separation and language influence will be discussed in relation to other manifestations of bilingual development, language dominance and code-switching / code-mixing.

3. Adult second language acquisition (Antonella Sorace, Edinburgh)

Despite recent advances in research on adult second language (L2) acquisition, much remains unknown about the actual limits of L2 development. Unlike child first language (L1) acquirers, L2 learners vary considerably in their end state – the linguistic abilities at which they “plateau” – and most do not achieve an end state that is comparable to that of L1 acquirers. However, there are people who start acquiring a second language in late adolescence and adulthood and who become virtually indistinguishable from native speakers. Do these very able learners attain the same type of mental representations of grammatical knowledge that monolingual speakers attain? Do they apply the same processing strategies in using their knowledge? Very advanced end state grammars are the ideal testing ground for theories of L2 acquisition that assume a ‘representational deficit’ in learners’ grammatical competence, and more generally for determining whether and to what extent the L2 competence is constrained by Universal Grammar. The picture that is beginning to emerge from recent research is one in which some aspects of grammar are fully acquired, whereas others – typically those requiring the efficient coordination of syntax and other cognitive domains – exhibit indeterminacy and optionality even at the near-native level. Where can one draw the dividing line between what is acquirable and what is not? What is the interplay of residual L1 influence and inefficient processing abilities in determining L2 speakers’ difficulties with particular structures? This course addresses some of these questions and looks at recent studies on the nature of end state grammars, with particular reference to the acquisition of syntax and its interfaces.

Lecturers:

Sergey Avrutin is Assistant Professor at the Utrecht Institute of Linguistics. He received his PhD at the Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences at MIT (Cambridge, MA). The title of his dissertation was "Psycholinguistic Investigations in the Theory of Reference". Dr. Avrutin worked as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Pennsylvania. From 1995 through 2000, he was an Assistant Professor at Yale University. Dr. Avrutin is currently affiliated with Utrecht University where he is the leader of the project "Comparative Psycholinguistics". Dr. Avrutin's main interests are language acquisition and language disruption, specifically investigations of linguistic capacity of normally developing children and speakers with language impairment (aphasia).

Natascha Müller is professor of linguistics and Romance languages at the Bergische Universität Wuppertal. She received her Ph.D. (1992) as well as her Habilitation (1999) from the University of Hamburg, where she also worked for many years on various research projects on bilingual acquisition and multilingualism. Müller is the author of five books and numerous articles, mainly on bilingual acquisition of German and a Romance language. Her work focuses on a wide range of topics, e.g. gender and number within the DP, subject and object omissions, word order (V2 and OV/VO), aspects of the pronominal system as well as more general questions such as cross-linguistic influence.

Antonella Sorace (Laurea, University of Rome; MA, University of Southern California; PhD, University of Edinburgh) is Professor of Developmental Linguistics at the University of Edinburgh. Her research focuses on a number of interrelated questions that bring together linguistics, experimental psychology and cognitive science, and her research achievements span different sub-fields of scientific enquiry.

In the field of bilingual language development, she is particularly well known for her studies of exceptionally talented ("near-native") adult second language speakers; for her research on the changes ("attrition") that take place in the native language of advanced second language speakers; and for her investigation of simultaneous bilingual first language acquisition in early and late childhood. She is also internationally known for her contribution to theoretical language typology, especially for her research on constrained variation at the lexicon-syntax interface, which she has investigated in many languages, and her studies of gradience in natural language.

Program:

15-19 October 2007

	Monday October 15	Tuesday October 16	Wednesday October 17	Thursday October 18	Friday October 19
09-11	Avrutin	Sorace	Müller	Avrutin	Workshop
11-13	Müller	Avrutin	Sorace	Müller	
13-14	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
14-16	Sorace	Müller	Avrutin	Sorace	Workshop/ Discussion