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## SCENES OF THE CHILD AND MORPHEMES OF THE LANGUAGE<sup>1</sup>

This article presents analyses of Finnish child language data. The author supported the view that the so-called grammatical meanings may be associated with “lexical” meanings, especially when speaking about the acquisition of Finnish inflectional morphology. The Finnish child begins with endings which include unstressed long vowels, e.g., partitive cases in nouns and 3rd person present verb forms. This markings more iconic than grammatical in nature at first.

Scenes that a child has in his /her mind are not the same as we adults have in the same circumstances but there is something in common between these observations. The morphemes which the child uses have often much in common with the speech of the parents. We don't pay attention to the child's articulations that we do not understand. After a few trials the child will utter a word which is correct enough for the parents to understand. Morphemes are the smallest parts of speech that have meaning. Often words are indivisible. Most Finnish words, however, include suffixes which have something – in fact, very much – to do with meaning.

Traditional standard models of grammar, including generative and cognitive ones, separate in the language two types of morphemes and meanings, namely lexical and grammatical items and open class vs. closed class meanings. It follows that there are two types of acquisition. The acquisition of the meanings of grammatical items in a language is, in principle, a different sort of process than learning the meanings of lexical items. Grammatical meanings are sampled from a fixed and pre-specified list, while lexical meanings vary indefinitely.

John Lyons (1968, p. 438) pointed out that “there seems to be no essential difference between the ‘kinds of meaning’ associated with lexical items and the ‘kinds of meaning’ associated with grammatical items in those cases where the distinction between these two classes of deep-structure elements can be drawn. The notions of ‘sense’ and ‘reference’ are applicable to both.” Dan I. Slobin (1997; 1999) proposed an alternative approach for the standard model. According to him, grammatical meanings are not a privileged set of meanings. That is, there is not a pre-specified set of meanings to be mapped onto grammatical morphemes. There are “closed classes” within the “open classes.” There is great cross-linguistic diversity in the meanings expressed by comparable sets of small-class items, both

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grammatical and lexical. Therefore the learning of grammatical meanings is not different in principle from the learning of lexical meanings. All learning of meaning is based on strategic and statistical sampling of a large number of potentially relevant semantic features.

Let us look at practical Finnish questions, one “proto-morpheme” and some real morphemes, which are also frequent in the child’s speech. The first inflectional case in Finnish is partitive. Most children acquire it before 2 years of age, although the grammatical function of partitive is said to be very complicated. Thus, most Finnish grammars consider partitive as the case of object, predicative and even as the case of subject. To keep clear those distinctions between partitive and unmarked nominative is too hard for the one-year old child. However, the child’s usage of partitive case is correct. The child’s speech can be based neither on grammar nor on his/her memory. He /she must somehow connect partitive usage to reality instead.

So the partitive cannot be grammatical because the child has not yet a grammar so strict. It is possible that cases do not differ fundamentally from each other, all being semantic in nature. It is easier for the small child to obtain just semantic descriptions and perhaps semantic relations. He/she has a rough overview concerning each case morpheme. Later on, at the age of two, however, his/her scene is open over the use of partitive case.

What is the child’s overview? It is the scene, which may be called **non-entirety**, that is – partiality of the object or process depicted, up to full negation, – atelicity, ongoingness, imperfectivity of object as well as process (Toivainen, 1980, pp. 128-129, 135; 1986, pp. 453-458; 1997, pp. 94-96, 101; Slobin, 1985, pp. 1188).

What is **non-entire** in partitives used by one-year old Finnish children? Half of our random sample, 12 children, used (63) partitives before 2 years of age (Toivainen, 1980, pp. 128-131); every fourth case suffix created a long vowel with terminal stem vowels *a* or *ä*, e.g. *kala-a* ‘fish’, *leipä-ä* ‘bread’. Most of these are just substantive words referring to partiality. Some other words, however, were in partitive for a NEGATIVE context, e.g. (1)

(1)

C: *e o-k koija-a tü-*

A: *ei ole-k koira-a tä-ssä*

NEG.V be-NEG.PRES dog-NEG.PARTIT here(-INESS)

‘Here is not a / the dog.’

(2) *tää-llä ei ole koira*

here-ADESS dog:NOM

‘Here is not a/the dog but (something else).’

Here (1) we see that non-entirety is in its extreme form: non-existence with the partitive form means that there is no positive information, as opposed to the nominative form, which includes a positive implication (2): although there is not a/the dog, there is however something or somebody else instead. Both types exist in the data; so the children are quite ready to make this kind of discrimination by case morphology.

## Illative

Illative is a local case which is marked in most content words by the ending long vowel + *n*, e.g. (3). Semantically, it is the case of change, meaning first of all direction where-to the process is going. In this respect it has some semantic association to the nominal partitive.

- (3)  
*Uuka-an.* (Katja 15 mo.)                      *Sukka jalka-an.* Mene-e. (Kirsti 16 mo.)  
 BT:out-ILL                                      sock foot-ILL go-3SG  
 ‘Outdoors.’ Standard:                      “Ulos.” ‘Sock on. There it goes.’

This association with partial and ongoing features is still clearer if we look at the illatives on nominal verb forms in the same period, (4 – 6).

- (4) *Istu-ma-an tä-nne.* (Riikka 20 mo.)  
 sit-INF-ILL here-SUBL  
 “I go sitting here.”
- (5) +*Täti, tule aja-ma-an!* (Arja 23 mo.)  
 aunt come:IMP:2SG drive-INF-ILL  
 ‘Aunt, come and drive (this)!’
- (6) *Minä mene-n kerää-mä-än.* (Katja 22 mo.)  
 I go-1SG gather-INF-ILL  
 ‘I am going to gather (them).’

The nominal verb forms refer to the future towards which the speaker or the hearer is expected to go soon.

### Indicatives: finite verbs

There are also purely verbal suffixes with long vowels. Just long *a* and *ä* exist in passive present forms, that are used in colloquial speech as first-person plural forms.

Third-person forms are used earlier, in fact, often as the first form of the Finnish verb. The 3rd person present forms have, however, 8 endings. Morphophonologically, the suffix is simple: it is a lengthening of the terminal stem vowel (see Table 1). When the child is acquiring verb forms, he/she notices that the terminal long vowel is connected with an ongoing process, and the corresponding form with a short vowel or diphthong is associated with past tense or imperative. The frequency of suffixal long vowels seems to

Table 1. The length of vowel in basic inflection of Finnish verb: present, imperative, past. Capital letters: *V* = Preceding vowel, *X* = Following consonant in the utterance.

3rd person present	Category: 2nd person imperative	3rd person past
- <i>V</i>	Ending: -( <i>X</i> )	-( <i>i</i> )
Long vowel	Short vowel (+ following consonant)	Short vowel; if not <i>i</i> , then + <i>i</i> in standard Finnish.
<i>aja-a</i> ‘drives’	<i>aja!</i> ‘drive!’	<i>ajo-i</i> ~ <i>ajo</i> ‘drove’
<i>rakenta-a</i> ‘builds’	<i>rakenna!</i> ‘build!’	<i>rakens-i</i> ‘built’
<i>piirtä-ä</i> ‘draws’	<i>piirrä!</i> ‘draw!’	<i>piirs-i</i> ‘drew’
<i>mene-e</i> ‘goes’	<i>mene!</i> ‘go!’	<i>men-i</i> ‘went’
<i>onki-i</i> ‘angles’	<i>ongi!</i> ‘angle!’	<i>onk-i</i> ‘angled’
<i>sano-o</i> ‘says’	<i>sano!</i> ‘say!’	<i>sano-i</i> ~ <i>sano</i> ‘said’
<i>astu-u</i> ‘steps’	<i>astu!</i> ‘step!’	<i>astu-i</i> ~ <i>astu</i> ‘stepped’
<i>käänty-y</i> ‘turns’	<i>käänny</i> ‘turn!’	<i>käänty-i</i> ~ <i>käänty</i> ‘turned’

Table 2. Long vowels as (stressed) stem vowels or as unstressed suffixal vowels at the age of 15 – 28 months. Finnish children (N = 22) aged 12 – 28 months, randomly selected: 50 tape-recorded samples, each about 15 minutes. All verbs and inflected nouns with sentence examples published in J. Toivainen 1980: 203-302 (revised 1999) were taken as material for the table. Frequencies of types in each sample were calculated separately from different inflectional forms or stems in each sample separately. Frequency symbols: 1 = 1 type, 2 = 2 – 7 types, 3 = 9 – 13 types, 4 = 16 – 24 types, 5 = 30 – 59 types. Capital letters *OO* = *oo* + *öö*, *UU* = *uu* + *yy*.

		<i>aa</i>	<i>ää</i>	<i>ee</i>	<i>oo</i>	<i>öö</i>	<i>uu</i>	<i>yy</i>	<i>ii</i>
Stem	1st syll	4	3	2	3	2	4	2	5
	2nd syll	3	2	2	1		1		2
Suffix	PARTIT	4	3	1 <sup>1</sup>					
	ILL + <i>n</i>	4	3	2	2		2	2	
	PRES3	5	5	5	2	1	3	2	3
	1PL + <i>n</i>	4	3						2 <sup>2</sup>
Clitic	NEG + <i>n</i>	1	2						
	POSS+ <i>n</i>	1	2						
Childish long vowels	GEN			1					
	PAST3								1
	PAST1								1
Suffixes per stems		3,8	5,0	3,5	1,0 ( <i>OO</i> )		0,9( <i>UU</i> )		0,7

<sup>1</sup> Dialectal long vowel

<sup>2</sup> Past tense only, ending *-(t)ii(n)*

be as high as, or higher, than the same long vowel in the stems of very young children. Table 2 tells us that the proportion of suffixal long vowels compared with other counterparts of the same long vowels is four times that of stems with the long vowels.

This iconicity of long vowels is not relevant in the long run. Length may be some kind of protomorpheme in child language. The child is always communicating by utterances that are approximations, if the correct form does not exist in the child's mind. He/she may not be sure if there is any exact pattern at all. In the beginning it is probably easy to see the Gestalt of long lasting, continuing, infinite, partial, when there seems to be a long vowel as a common icon for all this non-entirety. So most partitives and illatives, as well as third-person present and passive forms, may be interconnected. After some months more accurate generalizations are possible. At the same time there appear more and more contradictory instances against long vowel theory, e.g. passive past tense with regular long vowel *men-tiin* 'go-PASS:1PL.PAST', definite persons of verb *mene-n* 'go-1SG'.

### Other scenes in early morphemes

Some children begin already before 2 years of age to speak about him/herself by using the first-person suffix and pronoun, and some months later second person forms as well. It is clear that these children can differentiate between 'me' and 'you'.

The past tense suffix is very easy to acquire. Some children use it at 18-20 months of age when they are talking about a time that is clearly separated from the moment of speaking.

Soon after that, some children begin to use a so-called perfect tense which is in fact the present tense (the auxiliary *on* being the same as the present form of the ‘be’ verb), but event time is pointed out by the participle form of the main verb, meaning preceding time. This is temporal taxis (Jakobson, 1957), strictly speaking, anterior taxis, because the event is connected to present time from past direction. In Finnish, you may not use the past tense for preceding time which you have not witnessed or have not been in possible position to witness it. In Finnish one cannot say “I was born” but “*Minä olen syntynyt*” ‘I have-1SG born-PP’.

Question forms come very early into the speech of Finnish children. Even polar question may appear at 21 months

- (7) *on-ko kissa, on-ko?*  
 is-Q cat is-Q  
 BT: ‘Is it a cat?’

Questions are marked morphologically, polar questions with clitic *kO* and *Wh* questions by interrogative pronoun which is inflected in cases, e.g.

- (8) *Mikä?* ‘What?’, *mi-tä* ‘wh-PARTIT’, *mi-ssä* ‘wh-INESS’ (= ‘where?’)

Some other cases of nouns refer to possession, first of all genitive, e.g.

- (9) *Minu-n* ‘I-GEN’ (= my)

Also Finnish adessive is said to refer to possession, but the habitivity is in this case temporary in nature,

- (10) *Minu-lla on kirja*                      *Minu-lla on sinu-n kirja-si.*  
 I-ADESS have book                      I-ADESS have you-GEN book-POSS.SUFF:2  
 ‘I have a/the book.’                      ‘I have your book (with me).’

Locality becomes three-dimensional with adverbs and with groups of local cases:

- (11) Static                      Motion to                      Motion from  
*tuossa*                      *tuonne, tuohon*                      *tuosta*  
*tuolla*                      *tuonne*                      *tuolta*  
*täällä*                      *tänne*                      *täältä*  
*siellä*                      *sinne*                      *sieltä*

Soon these cases are used also with nouns (except sublative with *-nne*; instead, mainly illative or allative in noun stems are used). At that point the child begins to understand three-dimensional locality. First, in any case, when communicating with others he/she tries to organize his/her environment in terms of those relations. He/she has not only ‘here’ and ‘there’ but also the third dimension in Finnish as well as e.g. in Japanese. Local cases may also be divided into three-dimensional groups, which are semantically transparent: two series of local cases corresponding to the English prepositions: “in vs. on”, including the three meanings of the prepositions “in / from / to”.

## Summing up

The child thinks in terms of those relations that are marked in the language. He/she is “thinking for speaking” (Slobin). The child cannot communicate in a way that is not known in the language; that is only possible for a very short time.

The child acquires highly frequent morphemes of the language, e.g. adverbs for ‘here’, but also frequent suffixes. Suffixes cannot be copied from adult speech; they may be agglutinated to new words at the age of 20 months at the latest. Clever errors are evidence of this process.

If there are subsystems in the adult language, they are acquired rapidly although the frequencies of the structures are low.

Relations of the world are acquired in the language if they are marked by the morphemes in the language analogically.

Complexity is not a barrier if the morpheme is frequent enough, e.g. Finnish 3rd person present.

Children differ from one another and take separate paths in learning their first language. This is seen in Finnish which offers various relevant morphemes to be used in similar primitive scenes.

### Abbreviations

1	First person	NOM	Nominative
3	Third person	PARTIT	Partitive
A	Adult	PAST	Past
ADESS	Adessive (Finnish 'on')	POSS	Possessive
BT	Baby talk	PL	Plural
C	Child	PRES	Present
ILL	Illative	Q	Question
INESS	Inessive	SUBL	Sublative
INF	Infinitive	V	Verb
NEG	Negative		

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