

The acquisition of noun-modifying clauses in Japanese: A comparison with Korean

Although many studies investigated the acquisition of relative clauses (RCs) of postnominal RC languages, not many studies investigated prenominal RCs. Ozeki & Shirai (2004) compared Japanese RC acquisition with that of English (Diessel & Tomasello 2000), and showed that Japanese RCs develop very differently from English RCs. Still, what is lacking in this area is an “intra-typological approach” (Slobin 1997), where the effect of subtle differences in structures is investigated by comparing the acquisition of typologically similar languages. To fill this gap, we compare RC acquisition in Japanese and Korean.

One major difference between Japanese and Korean RCs lies in morphology. In Korean, RCs require tense-aspect forms different from matrix clauses, whereas in Japanese, there are no such formal differences. That is, Korean overtly marks RCs, which makes them morphologically complex, whereas Japanese does not mark RCs explicitly, rendering them morphologically simpler. Slobin (1978) suggests that a structure is acquired early if its form-meaning relationship is simple or if it is not formally complex. However, oftentimes overt marking of form-meaning relationships results in formal complexity i.e., they are in a trade-off. This study investigates how these variables of simplicity vs. overt marking affect acquisition processes.

Longitudinal conversational data from three Japanese children (0;11-3;11) from CHILDES (MacWhinney 2000) are analyzed, which were compared with data from three Korean children (Kim 1987). We found:

- (1) In Korean, adjectives as predicates emerge late (1;9-1;11), but soon after adjectival noun-modification and verbal modification (RCs) emerge simultaneously (1;9-2;1), whereas in Japanese adjectives as predicates emerge much earlier (1;2-1;5), followed by adjectival noun modification (1;7-1;9), and finally RCs emerge around the same time as Korean children (1;10-2;2).
- (2) In Korean, the head nouns of early RCs are always *kes* ‘one/thing’, and lexically determinate head nouns appear a few months later. In Japanese the head nouns of early RCs include not only indeterminate head nouns such as *mono/yatu* ‘thing’, *no* ‘one’, or *tokoro* ‘place’ but also lexically determinate heard nouns.
- (3) Korean children’s RCs do not modify the subject noun in the matrix clause (except in existential sentences), which according to Kim is because in children’s discourse subject NPs tend to express given information and therefore RCs are not necessary. Japanese children use many RCs whose head noun is matrix clause subject.
- (4) Many of Korean children’s early RCs have the function of characterizing what is visible to the child, whereas Japanese children’s RCs refer to what is not present.

Kim suggests that formal similarity between adjectival modification and RCs, and overt marking of RCs are the reason RCs emerge quite early, together with adjectival modification in Korean. This is consistent with the finding in (1), since in Japanese, whose verbs and adjectives are formally quite distinct, RCs emerge much later than adjectival modification. The findings in (2) to (4), however, show that in Japanese once RCs emerge, children can use them freely, which we suggest is due to formal simplicity in Japanese RCs in that verb morphology is identical to matrix clauses.

References

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