

Overgeneralizing word order: The acquisition of embedded V2 optionality

An important part of acquiring a language is ‘discovering’ the appropriate syntactic analyses underlying potentially complex word-order patterns. For example, learners of V2 languages (e.g. German, Norwegian) must learn the different operations that govern verb movement in matrix and embedded clauses. Previous studies of V2 languages have shown that children do not succeed immediately at learning the right word order generalizations in their languages: they often overextend the V2 word order to contexts where it is disallowed (Håkansson and Dooley Collberg 1994; Heycock et al. 2013; Schönenberger 2001; Waldmann 2014; Westergaard and Bentzen 2007). This kind of overgeneralization raises the question: How do children ‘correct’ their misanalysis to arrive at the more restrictive end state grammar?

The challenge of learning V2-word order generalizations may be even more acute in Mainland Scandinavian languages such as Norwegian, which allow optional V2 in certain embedded contexts (EV2 order). The availability of EV2 in the adult language is typically argued to be related to discourse-pragmatics ((1)-(2)) (Hooper & Thompson 1973, Wiklund et al. 2009). For example, EV2 is generally allowed in the complement of assertive verbs such as *seie* (‘say’), but normally not in presupposed complements, such as *angre på* (‘regret’). Further, clause-type is also relevant: EV2 is always ungrammatical in relative clauses. Thus, to attain adult-like competence, children must learn a number of subtle generalizations that vary as a function of structural and non-structural cues.

We investigated word order in productions elicited from Norwegian children aged 3-5 in order to determine whether those children transit through an intermediate stage where they overgeneralize EV2. The larger goal was to potentially contribute to understanding how children use various cues to either (i) avoid overgeneralization, or (ii) move from a period of overgeneralization to an adult grammar with more fine-grained word order distinctions.

Our study uses a within-participant elicited-production design, comparing participants’ word order in three contexts: *i) assertive* complement clauses that allow EV2, *ii) presupposed* complement-clauses (EV2 blocked) and *iii) relative* clauses. 32 Norwegian children (3;10-5;9) and a control group of adults (N: 19) participated in two production tasks. Both tasks involved the experimenter telling an illustrated short story. After each story the participant was asked a question designed to elicit a response containing an embedded clause: either a *that*-clause (task 1; a shy puppet task with prompts adapted from Westergaard et al. (2014)) or a relative clause (task 2 modeled after Novogrodsky and Friedmann (2006)’s ‘Which child would you rather be’-task).

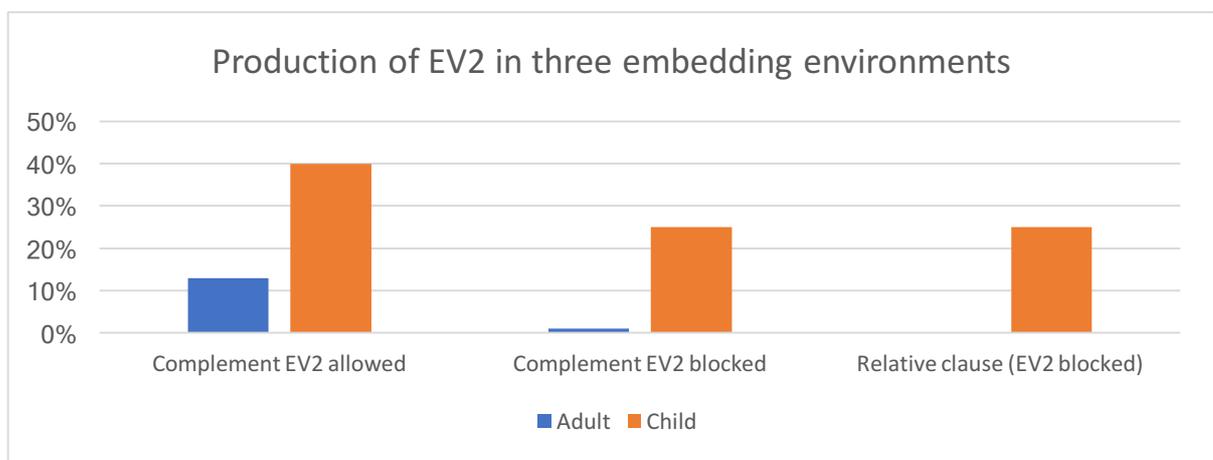
Our results show that children overgeneralize, by using EV2 in all three contexts. Children produce EV2 roughly 40% of the time in *assertive*-complements. In relative clauses (3) and *presupposed*-complements, EV2 is used roughly 25% of the time. In comparison, adults never produce EV2 in relative clauses, rarely in presupposed complements and most often in the assertive complements (see figure 1). Thus, children use EV2 also where the target language does not. Overgeneralization of the optional EV2 creates a classic learnability puzzle: children risk falling into a “superset trap” (Biberauer and Roberts 2009) where no input will disconfirm their analysis that EV2 is permitted in presupposed and RC complements. Nevertheless, it appears that children do eventually succeed in the task (the different proportions of EV2 across constructions suggest that the children do distinguish between the environments already). We will discuss various proposals for the process of EV2 acquisition in light of these findings.

Target (Adult) Language Productions:

- (1) Han sa at han (kunne) ikke (kunne) synge i bryllup-et. [Assertive Clause]
he said that he (could) NEG (could) sing in wedding-the
'He said that he could not sing at the wedding.'
- (2) a. Han angret på at han (*hadde) ikke (hadde) sunget [Presupp. Clause]
he regretted on that he (had) NEG (had) sung
'He regretted that he had not sung.'
- b. Han som (*ville) ikke (ville) klippe hår-et [Relative Clauses]
*he who (*wanted) NEG (wanted) cut hair-the*
'He who didn't want to cut his hair.'

Non-target like child production:

- (3) Den som ville ikke dra hjem. [Child Production of EV2 Relative]
the.one who wanted NEG go home
'The one who didn't want to go home.'



References

- Biberauer, T. and I. Roberts (2009). The return of the subset principle. In *Historical Syntax and Linguistic Theory*, eds. P. Crisma and G. Longobardi. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Hooper, J. and S. Thompson (1973). On the applicability of root transformations. *Linguistic Inquiry* 4, 465–497.
- Heycock, C., A. Sorace, Z. S. Hansen, and F. Wilson (2013). Acquisition in Variation (and Vice Versa): V-to-T in Faroese Children. *Language Acquisition* 20(1), 5–22.
- Håkansson, G. and S. Dooley Collberg (1994). The preference for modal + neg: An L2 perspective applied to Swedish L1 children. *Second Language Research* 10, 95–124.
- Novogrodsky, R. and N. Friedmann (2006). The production of relative clauses in syntactic SLI: A window to the nature of the impairment. *Advances in Speech–Language Pathology* 8(4), 364–375.
- Schönenberger, M. (2001). *Embedded V-to-C in child grammar: the acquisition of verb placement in Swiss German*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic.
- Waldmann, C. (2014). *The Acquisition of Neg-V and V-Neg Order in Embedded Clauses in Swedish: A Microparametric Approach*. *Language Acquisition* 21(1), 45–71.
- Westergaard, M. and K. Bentzen (2007). The (non-)effect of input frequency on the acquisition of word order in Norwegian embedded clauses. In *Frequency effects in language acquisition. Defining the limits of frequency as an explanatory concept*, eds. I. Gülzow and N. Gagarina, 271–306. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Wiklund, A.-L., K. Bentzen, G. H. Hrafnbjargarson, and T. Hróarsdóttir (2009). On the distribution and illocution of V2 in Scandinavian that-clauses. *Lingua* 119(12), 1914–1938.