

## INPUT AND PRODUCTION IN SWEDISH CHILDREN'S ACQUISITION OF PAST TENSE

### Abstract

This thesis deals with children's acquisition of Swedish past tense both in terms of input and production. The main questions concern how children's acquisition of past tense inflection develops between the ages of 2 and 8 years, and what the relation is between the linguistic input and the children's production.

The role of input was studied using contrastive analysis of the use of past tense in child-directed adult speech and in other adult spoken and written corpora, and through analysis of adult use of past tense in interaction with children in a longitudinal database. Two methods were used to study the children's past tense production: naturalistic studies based on longitudinal data of four children between 18 months and 4 years, and an experimental study of 87 children, 4, 6 and 8-years old. Together, the experimental and longitudinal data allowed for both quantitative and qualitative analyses. Production data from the two studies was compared concerning overgeneralization of inflectional patterns at age 4.

The results of the contrastive study of language corpora approximated as input to children showed that the corpora were more similar than expected. Past tense was used to approximately the same extent in the corpus of child-directed speech as in the other corpora, possibly indicating that the input to children is not restricted to talk about the immediate context.

The analyses of the longitudinal data showed that frequency factors and phonological factors in the input have some impact on children's acquisition of past tense. However, the findings indicate that a major role of the input, in addition to frequency factors, was engaging the children in conversations about actions and events from the past, by using questions, repetition and corrections, and to encourage them to think and speak about what happens outside the immediate context.

The experimental and longitudinal results showed that one inflectional pattern almost exclusively formed the basis for overgeneralization: the pattern for the 2nd weak conjugation. In addition, the overgeneralized verbs were almost exclusively strong verbs. Three factors seem to be responsible for the direction of overgeneralizations: 1) token frequency of past tense forms from the 2nd conjugation in the input, 2) presence of the ambiguous past tense form for the 1st conjugation, and 3) phonological similarities in present tense between strong verbs and weak verbs from the 2nd conjugation.

In conclusion, various aspects indicate that development is more rapid in some phases than in others, for example, increased use of past tense morphemes and increased use of overgeneralizations around 3.5 years of age.

Mastery of past tense inflection seems not to level out until after the age of 8 for strong verbs and 2nd conjugation verbs, while verbs from the 1st conjugation were mastered already at age 6.

**KEY WORDS:** acquisition, past tense, input, longitudinal data, experimental data, overgeneralization, child-directed speech, frequency factors, phonological factors, language corpora, Swedish verb morphology

The thesis is written in English.