

Adjectival semantics in acquisition – Data from production & comprehension

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In this talk, I will present empirical data from monolingual German-speaking children addressing the acquisition of different gradability and dimensionality properties in adjectives.

In a longitudinal spontaneous speech analysis of one child between 2;00 and 2;11 years, we investigated the relation between gradability and dimensionality properties of adjectives and their order of emergence in the productive lexicon. The results show that gradability and dimensionality play a role in predicting children's first adjectives.

Since the use of the respective adjectives does not necessarily imply an adult-like interpretation, we tested preschool-children's interpretation of different gradable adjectives (GA). Interpreting GAs requires a standard of comparison to evaluate whether the property denoted by the adjective holds of an individual. How the standard is determined depends on the scale-type of the GA (Kennedy & McNally, 2005): For relative GAs (=RA, e.g. *big/small*), which refer to open scales, the standard is determined relative to a comparison-class and is located around the midpoint of the scale. Absolute GAs (=AA, e.g. *clean/dirty*) refer to closed scales; the comparison-class is irrelevant for their interpretation and the standard is always one of the endpoints of the scale. Two research questions were addressed:

(Q1) Do children determine different standards for AAs and RAs?

(Q2) Does change of the comparison-class, i.e. of the modified noun, influence the interpretation of RAs and AAs?

Our findings indicate that children interpret GAs with respect to a standard of comparison, which however differs for AAs and RAs. Our results provide first evidence that linguistically encoded comparison-classes do not influence the interpretation of AAs but of RAs.