

## ASSESSMENTS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

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### THE ACQUISITION OF FUNCTIONAL CATEGORIES IN HUNGARIAN AND IN ENGLISH BETWEEN THE AGES OF 18 AND 30 MONTHS

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First language acquisition covers an intensive period of development. At the age of 1, children can only babble, however, two years later they are able to produce adult-like sentences and they do so without any instruction or effort. Our aim is to discuss first language acquisition before the age of 30 months from a syntactic point of view. The development of two syntactically different languages, i.e. English and Hungarian will be analysed and compared with a special emphasis on functional categories and their emergence. In the acquisition literature, the period between the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 24<sup>th</sup> month is often referred to as the telegraphic stage (Brown & Fraser, 1963). Radford's (1993) claim is that all utterances produced by children at this stage are purely thematic, thus these sentences have a lexical categorial status, i.e. they consist of projections of the primary lexical categories (nouns, verbs, adjectives and prepositions). At the following stage (24<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> month) the nonthematic system comes into operation, whose constituents belong to functional categories (i.e. determiners, auxiliaries, complementisers and their projections). Functional elements are generally phonologically and morphologically dependent. They are generally stressless, often clitics or affixes, and sometimes even phonologically null. According to Radford's (1993) maturational view, certain universal principles might be (genetically) programmed to come 'on line' at different stages of maturation. The functional categories are supposed to emerge around the age of 24 months, while lexical categories at the age of 20 months. The Hungarian language has more verbal inflections and hence the language provides more data on the acquisition process to work with. English has less verbal inflections and is more irregular. Therefore, if linguistic concepts do not mature, we might expect Hungarian children to start showing evidence of the knowledge of inflections earlier than English children do. We followed the grammatical development of eight children, 5 Hungarian and 3 English. The corpuses were collected by making audiotape recordings of children's spontaneous speech behaviour in a natural setting to build up a comprehensive picture of the overall linguistic development at a given stage. The corpuses are freely available and can be downloaded from CHILDES (Child Language Data Exchange System). In our study we analysed approximately 2,300 utterances. The results show that both in English and in Hungarian functional categories emerge later than lexical categories. In Hungarian the acquisition of the topic phrase and the functional phrase was preceded by the inflectional system. The Hungarian children acquired the I-system earlier than the English children, before the age of two. In English, the first element belonging to the inflectional system appeared only after the second year of age. In three-word sentences, the complements show random word order in early child grammar.