Mastering the syntax-morphology interface in child L2 German
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From a cross-linguistic perspective, the acquisition of German sentence structure is a challenging task due to the asymmetric distribution of the finite verb in main and subordinate clauses. It is known that, in particular, adult L2 learners of German have great difficulties with regard to verb placement and the correct realisation of finiteness/agreement inflection. With regard to child L2 learners and the question whether child L2 acquisition is more like adult L2 acquisition or more like L1 acquisition, existing studies looking at the syntax-morphology interface point into different directions (Schwartz 2004, Meisel to appear). However, recent case studies conducted with children exposed to German as an early second language, i.e. with an age of onset between 3-4;5, suggest that the acquisition of both verb placement and agreement morphology follows very much the pattern familiar from children acquiring German as their first language and from simultaneous bilinguals (Rothweiler 2006, Thoma & Tracy 2006, Tracy & Thoma submitted). Regardless of their L1 and often in spite of non-optimal conditions of exposure, fast learners require less than a year (some as little as six months) for converging on the target. This suggests that at least with respect to the link between finiteness/agreement inflection and V2 effects, they outperform adult L2 learners.

In the present study we systematically examine the structural position and the morphological form of the finite verb using an elicited production task. We will show that our cross-sectional study with 121 children aged 3-7 acquiring German as a second language supports the above claim concerning the parallelism between the acquisition of German as a first and as an early second language for both the emergence of the functional projections IP/CP (main clauses) and CP (subordinate clauses) and subject-verb-agreement/finiteness.

We demonstrate that over half of the children with less than 10 months of exposure to German have already acquired the structural format of main clauses; a small percentage even produces subordinate clauses. For almost all children assessed after 31 months of exposure target-conform subordinate clause patterns are fully productive (Schulz et al. 2008).

Currently, we are also collecting data from a small group of adult L2 learners with heterogeneous acquisition scenarios in order to find out how they differ from our child L2 data with respect to mastery of the syntax-morphology interface.

Our quantitative and qualitative analyses are based on pilot versions of the language test LiSe-DaZ (“Linguistische Sprachstandserhebung – Deutsch als Zweitsprache”, cf. Schulz & Tracy in prep.), which assesses both children’s comprehension and production abilities. In this talk we focus on the elicited production data.

References
