

# Constructions and grammatical categories: Do rules facilitate language acquisition?

Heike Behrens  
University of Basel

**Keywords:** Acquisition, case, Keyword3

The morphological category of «case» is well established in linguistic theory, yet subject to language- and item-specific spell-out, such that it is a very heterogeneous morphological category (Eisenbeiss et al. 2010). In German, four cases are distinguished as overarching categories governing nominal inflection, with the genitive becoming rare and construction-specific, and the more frequent and more varied dative showing a long developmental trajectory with error patterns ranging well into school-age (Szagun 2019). The morphological realization of case differs between different types of determiners, pronouns and adjectives, as case-marking correlates with gender, number, and (in)definiteness. The acquisition research on German has focused on the acquisition of case within particular part-of-speech categories like personal pronouns or nouns, where a distinction between structural, verb-governed and versus lexical case as required by prepositions is made. From an input-driven and constructivist approach, we do not expect rule-based acquisition of structural case across constructions, such that the global question “when do children acquire ‘case X’?” is a misconception. In line with usage-based and Radical Construction Grammar (Croft 2001) proposals I will argue that overt case marking starts from construction- and lexically-specific islands, e.g., case-marked pronouns with certain verbs, or case-marked determiners with certain prepositions. In a second step, I will investigate the types of evidence needed to conclude that case is an “abstract” category within formal and functional network structures (Diessel 2019).

The analyses are based on longitudinal and morphologically annotated corpora of six German children (age range 1;11-7) and their input with a total of 3.5 million words, 850000 of which are produced by the children. The presentation focusses on the emergence of the dative (with a total of 161000 words in dative contexts, of which 33500 in the children’s data). It will first be shown that lexical prepositional case, for example, develops in an item-specific fashion with just a few prepositions initially, before it is extended to other prepositions and more variable instantiations of the dative object. Second, regarding structural case, analyses of the few high frequency verbs requiring the dative (like *give/take*) show that the object is often realized by unmarked proper nouns or a limited set of personal pronouns. Hence, the child is confronted with a system of vast variation regarding possible instantiations of the dative, but complexity reduction by proper nouns and pronouns, which are less variable case and gender marked determiners.

Regarding the topic of the theme session the following conclusions can be drawn: Case-marking is prolific across constructions and highly variable in its instantiation. This makes chunked-based learning of verbs plus case-marked pronouns/determiners highly unlikely, especially when one takes the morphologically even more variable pre-nominal adjectives into account. Likewise, rule-based explanations are unlikely because of the variable spell-out of case. In line with usage-based acquisition theory and exemplar models (Ambridge 2020a, 2020b), extended trajectories of item-specific patterns with local generalizations are expected. At the same time, the variability observed in the prenominal slots will foster abstraction, leading to uncertainty and high error rates in which affix to choose.

## References

- Ambridge, Ben. 2020a. Abstractions made of exemplars or 'You're all right, and I've changed my mind': Response to commentators. *First Language* 40(5-6). 640-659.
- Ambridge, Ben. 2020b. Against stored abstractions: A radical exemplar model of language acquisition. *First Language* 40(5-6). 509–559.
- Croft, William. 2001. *Radical Construction Grammar: Syntactic Theory in Typological Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Diessel, Holger. 2019. *The Grammar Network*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Eisenbeiss, Sonja, Bhuvana Narasimhan & Maria Voeikova. 2010. The acquisition of case. In Andrej Malchukov & Andrew Spencer (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Case*, 369-383. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Szagun, Gisela. 2019. *Sprachentwicklung beim Kind: Ein Lehrbuch*, 7 edn. Weinheim/Basel: Beltz.