Acquisition Sketch Project

Meeting 15:
Morphosyntax in Child-Directed Language

11/12 February 2025

Box 6. Key areas of focus in child-directed language: Morphosyntax.

Core

(i) Do you observe any differences in the mean length of utterance? If yes, in what way?

(ii) Do you observe any morphosyntactic differences to adult-directed language? If yes, which ones?

(iii) Do you observe any repetitions and variations? If yes, which types (e.g. variation sets, formulaic utterances etc.)?

Extension

(iv) Expand on (iii): What are the structural properties of repetition and variation?

(v) Expand on (iii): What are the functions of repetition and variation? Who produces them? How does the child respond to them?

NOTE: All examples in this talk are from Inuktitut (Inuit-Yupik-Unangan family; Lee & Allen 2023)

Mean Length of Utterance

- Are there differences in the length of utterances addressed to younger vs. older children?

Utterances addressed to younger children are shorter than utterances to older children

Table 15. Average MLUm in CDS.

	1;4	1;10	2;4	2;10	3;4
MOT A	2.35	2.65	3.50	4.62	4.52
MOT B	2.50	2.86	3.22	3.62	4.28
Average	2.43	2.76	3.36	4.12	4.40

Inuktitut; Lee & Allen 2023: 163

Words addressed to younger children are shorter than words to older children

Table 23. Word length in morphemes by age in CDS.

Group	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1;4	0.42	0.32	0.18	0.03	0.04	0.01	
1;10	0.44	0.22	0.19	0.05	0.06	0.03	0.01
2;4	0.43	0.24	0.19	0.08	0.03	0.01	0.02
2;10	0.29	0.24	0.26	0.13	0.05	0.02	0.01
3;4	0.30	0.20	0.27	0.16	0.05	0.01	0.02

The number of words by age is as follows: 1;4=276, 1;10=126, 2;4=262, 2;10=375, 3;4=139.

Inuktitut; Lee & Allen 2023: 175

Typical CDL utterances at younger vs. older ages

CDL to child aged 1;4

qai-git
come-IMP.2SG.SBJ
'Come here.'

taku-guk
see-IMP.2SG.SBJ>3SG.OBJ
'Look at it.'

CDL to children aged 3;2 / 3;3

aanni-tau-tsarua-ravit.
hurt-PASS-might-CTG.2SG.SBJ
'You might get hurt.'

qausi-alu-nnik *atu-qatta-qit?*
wet-AUG-MOD.DU wear-HAB-INT.2SG.SBJ
'Did you wear wet (boots)?

Inuktitut; Defina et al. 2023: 59-60

Morphosyntactic Differences

- Are child-directed utterances essentially correct and complete?
- Do you observe ungrammatical structures, simplifications, omissions?

CDL utterances in Inuktitut are correct and complete

- 96% of verbs have inflections
- Utterances are simpler/shorter but not ungrammatical

Typical Morphosyntactic Structures

- What are the typical morphosyntactic structures?
- Do you observe preference for particular constituent orders, specific TAM morphology, specific speech acts?

More types (and tokens) of verbal inflections used in CDL as children get older

Table 16. Types and tokens of verbal inflections by age in CDS.

Group	Child	Number of Utterances	VI Types			VI Tokens		
			N	Per Utterance	Group Mean	N	Per Utterance	Group Mean
1;4	Jini	86	8	0.09		37	0.43	
	Sarah	137	11	0.08	0.09	56	0.41	0.42
1;10	Lucasi	23	6	0.26		7	0.30	
	Sarah	77	13	0.17	0.21	36	0.47	0.39
2;4	Paul	40	13	0.33		27	0.68	
	Lizzie	125	17	0.14	0.23	17	0.44	0.56
2;10	Elijah	66	14	0.21		30	0.45	
	Lizzie	174	25	0.14	0.18	101	0.58	0.52
3;4	Louisa	32	17	0.53		22	0.69	
	Lizzie	48	18	0.38	0.45	35	0.73	0.71

Inuktitut; Lee & Allen 2023: 164

Most frequent verbal inflections in CDL are …

- Imperative mood (45%), then indicative (15%)
- Intransitive (75%)
- Singular (90%)
- 2nd person subject (60%)
- Consistent with the context: mothers are typically giving commands or requests to the child

Inuktitut; Lee & Allen 2023: 164

More types (and tokens) of verbal inflections used in CDL as children get older

-lit '3PL.SBJ'			0.01		
-lagit '1SG.SBJ.2SG.OBJ'		0.02	0.01	0.01	0.02
-lagu '1SG.SBJ.3SG.OBJ'		0.12	0.05		0.04
-lakka '1SG.SBJ.3PL.OBJ'			0.01		0.02
-guk '2SG.SBJ.3SG.OBJ'	0.27		0.11	0.13	0.09
-kkit '2SG.SBJ.3PL.OBJ'	0.01		0.01	0.03	0.02

Inuktitut; Lee & Allen 2023: 164-165

More types (and tokens) of nominal inflections used in CDL as children get older

Table 18. Types and tokens of nominal inflections by age in CDS.

Group	Child	Number of Utterances	NI Types			NI Tokens		
			N	Per Utterance	Group Mean	N	Per Utterance	Group Mean
1;4	Jini	86	3	0.03		9	0.10	
	Sarah	137	1	0.01	0.02	1	0.01	0.06
1;10	Lucasi	23	3	0.13		3	0.13	
	Sarah	77	5	0.06	0.10	12	0.16	0.14
2;4	Paul	40	4	0.10		5	0.13	
	Lizzie	125	9	0.07	0.09	27	0.22	0.17
2;10	Elijah	66	11	0.17		30	0.45	
	Lizzie	174	20	0.11	0.14	51	0.29	0.37
3;4	Louisa	32	4	0.13		7	0.22	
	Lizzie	48	8	0.17	0.15	13	0.27	0.24

Inuktitut; Lee & Allen 2023: 169

Most frequent nominal inflections in CDL are …

- Absolutive case (50%)
- Singular (90%)
- Possessive inflections more frequent at 1;4 and 1;10 (>70%)
- Non-possessive inflections more frequent by 2;4 (>60%)

Inuktitut; Lee & Allen 2023: 169

More types (and tokens) of nominal inflections used in CDL as children get older

Table 19. Nominal inflections at each age in CDS.

Case	Inflection	1;4	1;10	2;4	2;10	3;4
Absolutive	*-Vk* 'DU'			0.03		
'plural'	*-it* 'PL'		0.31		0.19	
	-ga '1SG.SG'				0.06	
	-kka '1SG.PL'				0.01	
'your'	*-it* '2SG.SG'	0.80	0.08	0.06	0.09	0.05
	-tit '2SG.PL'				0.01	
'his/her'	*-nga* '3SG.SG'		0.38	0.03	0.07	0.05
	-Vngik '3X.DU'				0.01	
	-ngit '3X.PL'	0.10		0.03	0.04	0.05

Inuktitut; Lee & Allen 2023: 170

Subjects and objects are typically omitted (realized only in inflection)

Table 24. Subject realization by age in CDS.

	1;4	1;10	2;4	2;10	3;4
Null subject	0.96	0.96	0.97	0.89	0.98
Overt subject	0.04	0.04	0.03	0.11	0.02

The number of verbs at each age is as follows: 1;4=81, 1;10=28, 2;4=58, 2;10=90, 3;4=74.

Table 25. Object realization by age in CDS.

	1;4	1;10	2;4	2;10	3;4
Null object	0.78	0.83	0.86	0.79	0.69
Overt object	0.22	0.17	0.14	0.21	0.31

The number of transitive verbs at each age is as follows: 1;4=23, 1;10=6, 2;4=22, 2;10=24, 3;4=13.

Inuktitut; Lee & Allen 2023: 177

Word order follows default patterns

- Default word order is SOV, flexible for information structure
- CDL shows:
  - No utterances with both S and O
  - Subject: 100% SV, 0% VS
  - Object: 89% OV, 11% VO

Inuktitut; Lee & Allen 2023: 177

Repetitions and Variations

- Do you see exact repetitions? Formulaic utterances? Variation sets?
- How common are they?
- What are their functions?
- Who uses them?
- Do you observe any age-related differences?

Mothers use some variation sets

- Sequence of utterances with lexical overlap that highlight segmentation

maani amaalirli.
ma-ani amaaq-liq-li
here-LOC carry.piggyback-POL-IMP.3SG.SBJ
'Let it be carried on your back here.'

atii amaalirit.
atii amaaq-liq-git
initiate carry.piggyback-POL-IMP.2SG.SBJ
'Come on, carry it on your back.'

MOT: *pallartuq!*
pallaq-juq
trip-PAR.3SG.SBJ
'She tripped!'

ijukkartu.
ijukkaq-juq
fall-PAR.3SG.SBJ
'She fell.'

CHI: *palla.*
trip
'Fell.'

Inuktitut; Lee & Allen 2023: 167

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Questions and Discussion

Good luck in writing up the CDL morphosyntax section!