

Acquisition Sketch Project

Meeting 17: Syntax in Child Language

8/9 April 2025

Box 11. Key areas of focus in child language: Syntax.

Core

- (i) Is the two-unit stage best characterized as two-word or two-morpheme?
- (ii) What types of word combinations are used at different ages? Is there any evidence for stages of development? Are there any patterns in the types of words combined? In the order of words in word combinations? In the function of the combinations?
- (iii) What word orders are used for expressing the verb and its arguments – e.g. SV/VS, OV/VO, AOV/AVO/VAO? What orders are most frequent? Does this change with age?
- (iv) What syntactic constructions are used? Is there evidence for development or stages? Select a few structures that are most relevant for the language and/or that show developmental patterns, for example nominal structures, verb types, syntactic functions, valency alternation, early constructions, later constructions.

Extension

- (v) For one or two structures that are particularly salient in the language (and where there is enough data available), do a more systematic analysis.
- (vi) How are arguments realized (lexical NP, demonstrative, pronoun, null form)? Does this differ for subject vs. object? Does this change with age?
- (vii) Is the form of argument realization (lexical, demonstrative, pronoun, null) associated with accessibility of the referent?
- (viii) Is there a relationship between argument realization and production of gestures?

(i) Two-Unit Stage

Is the two-unit stage best characterized as two-word or two-morpheme?

1 word = 1 morpheme

paipai!

byebye

‘Bye-bye!’ (Jini 1;4)

1 word = 6 morphemes

av-unnga-a-kainna-si-gama.

there-ALL-arrive.at-for.a.while-INCP-CTG.1SG

‘Should it get anchored here?’ (Elijah 2;9)

2 words = 2 morphemes

hai

anaana

pay.attention mother

‘Look, mommy!’ (Lucasi 2;0)

2 words = 6 morphemes

Ittu-mut qai-qu-jau-gavit.

Ittuq-ALL.SG come-want-PASS-CTG.2SG

‘You were called for by Ittuq.’ (Elijah 2;9)

Two-word stage?

Table 43. Words per utterance at each age in children's speech.

Group	1 Word	2 Words	3 Words
1;4	1.00		
1;10	0.91	0.09	
2;4	0.88	0.11	0.01
2;10	0.80	0.15	0.05
3;4	0.52	0.38	0.10

The number of utterances at each age is as follows: 1;4=70, 1;10=175, 2;4=265, 2;10=414, 3;4=312.

One-word utterances predominate at every age

Two-word utterances present by 1;10

Three words is maximum even at 3;4

Two-morpheme stage?

Table 42. Word length in morphemes by age in children's speech.

Group	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1;4	0.84	0.15	0.01				
1;10	0.68	0.23	0.07	0.01	0.01		
2;4	0.40	0.35	0.15	0.06	0.04		
2;10	0.36	0.29	0.17	0.11	0.04	0.01	0.01
3;4	0.34	0.31	0.20	0.09	0.05	0.01	0.01

The number of words at each age is as follows: 1;4=73, 1;10=198, 2;4=327, 2;10=570, 3;4=441.

One-morpheme words predominate till age 1;10, then less than 50%

Two-morpheme words present at 1;4

Number of morphemes per word increases gradually with age

Examples of Two-Unit Stage

Verb root with inflection

qai-git
come-IMP.2SG.SBJ
'(You) come here'. (Jini 1;8)

Noun root with modifier/case

kisa-ra
anchor-ABS.1SG.SG
'My anchor.' (Elijah 2;9)

Demonstrative with case

u-na
this.one-ABS.SG
'This one'. (Lucasi 1;9)

Locative with case

ma-ani
here-LOC
'(At) here.' (Jini 2;0)

Rarely – two separate words

auka Siasi
no Jessie
'No, Jessie.' (Sarah 1;11)

iqaluk uvaa-
fish bleed
'The fish is bleeding.' (Tumasi 2;1)

(ii) Word Combinations

What types of word combinations are used at different ages?

Is there any evidence for stages of development?

Are there any patterns:

- In the types of words combined?
- In the order of words in word combinations?
- In the function of the combinations?

Types of Combinations, Stages of Development

Table 44. Distribution of two-word utterances in children’s speech.

	1;4	1;10	2;4	2;10	3;4
Apposition		1.00	0.40	0.31	0.41
Adverbial			0.30	0.22	0.15
Subject-complement			0.13	0.19	0.12
Argument			0.17	0.28	0.31
Subordinate clause					0.01

The number of two-word utterances at each age is as follows: 1;4=0, 1;10=16, 2;4=30, 2;10=64, 3;4=74.

Examples of Word Combinations

Apposition (no syntactic relationship)

<i>qai-git</i>	<i>ataata</i>
come-IMP.2SG	father
'Come (with me), Dad.' (Sarah 1;11)	

Subject-complement (no verb needed)

<i>u-na</i>	<i>uvanga</i>
this.one-ABS.SG	I/me/mine
'This one is mine.' (Paul 2;6)	

Adverb + verb

<i>ma-ani</i>	<i>kisar-sima-laur-li?</i>
here-LOC	anchor-PERF-POLITE-IMP.3SG
'Should it get anchored here?' (Elijah 2;9)	

Examples of Word Combinations

Subject + verb, object + verb

<i>u-na</i>	<i>atu-li-ruk</i>
this.one-ABS.SG	use-POLITE-IMP.2SG>3SG
'Use this one.' (Lizzie 2;6)	

Main clause + subordinate clause

<i>tigumia-kainna-ruk</i>	<i>taa-nngi-nagu</i>
hold-for.a.while-IMP.2SG>3SG	acquire-NEG-CTM.Xx>3SG
'Take it for a while but don't keep it.' (Louisa 3;3)	

(iii) Word Orders

What word orders are used for expressing the verb and its arguments?

- SV/VS, OV/VS, AOV/AVO/VAO?

What orders are most frequent?

Does this change with age?

SV/VS and OV/VO Word Order by Age

Table 50. Subject word order by age in children's speech.

	1;4	1;10	2;4	2;10	3;4
SV			1.00	1.00	0.50
VS					0.50

The number of clauses with overt subjects at each age are as follows: 1;4=0, 1;10=0, 2;4=4, 2;10=69 3;4=2.

Table 51. Object word order by age in children's speech.

	1;4	1;10	2;4	2;10	3;4
OV			1.00	1.00	0.69
VO					0.31

The number of clauses with overt objects at each age are as follows: 1;4=0, 1;10=0, 2;4=2, 2;10=6, 3;4=13.

Examples of OV and VO Order

Object + verb

<i>piipi-ga</i>	<i>qai-lau-ruk</i>
baby-POSS.1SG>3SG.ABS	come-POLITE-IMP.2SG>3SG
'Bring my baby.' (Lizzie 2;10)	

Verb + object

<i>auka</i>	<i>atsa-langa-jagit</i>	<i>ta-atsu-minga</i>
no	take.away-FUTURE-PAR.1SG>2SG	EXTERNAL-that.one-MOD.SG
'No, I will take that one away from you.' (Lizzie 3;2)		

(iv) Syntactic Constructions

What syntactic constructions are used?


Is there any evidence for development or stages?

Select a few structures that are most relevant for the language and/or that show developmental patterns – for example:

- Nominal structures
- Verb types
- Syntactic functions
- Valency alternation
- Early constructions
- Later constructions

For Inuktitut, this is covered in the morphology section

(vi-viii) Argument Realization

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- vi. How are arguments realized (lexical NP, demonstrative, pronoun, null form)?
Does this differ for subject vs. object?
Does this change with age?
 - vii. Is the form of argument realization (lexical, demonstrative, pronoun, null) associated with the accessibility of the referent?
 - viii. Is there a relationship between argument realization and production of gestures?

Patterns of Argument Realization

Table 46. Subject realization by age in children's speech.

	1;4	1;10	2;4	2;10	3;4
Null subject	1.00	1.00	0.90	0.92	0.98
Overt subject			0.10	0.08	0.02

The number of verbs at each age are as follows: 1;4=3, 1;10=23, 2;4=40, 2;10=118, 3;4=115.

Table 47. Object realization by age in children's speech.

	1;4	1;10	2;4	2;10	3;4
Null object	1.00	1.00	0.90	0.63	0.65
Overt object			0.10	0.38	0.35

The number of transitive verbs at each age are as follows: 1;4=3, 1;10=14, 2;4=20, 2;10=16, 3;4=37.

Patterns of Argument Realization

Earliest and most frequent – no arguments realized

\emptyset \emptyset *asiuji-jara*
 $\emptyset(I)$ $\emptyset(it)$ lose-PAR.1SG>3SG
'(I) lost (it).' (Elijah 2;9)

Subject realization rare – 5% of utterances with verb

una *napi-sima-juq*
this.one-ABS.SG break-PERF-PAR.3SG
'This one is broken.' (Paul 2;6)

Object realization rare – 23% of utterances with transitive verb

piipi-ga *qai-lau-ruk*
baby-POSS.1SG>3SG.ABS come-POLITE-IMP.2SG>3SG
'Bring my baby.' (Lizzie 2;10)

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Questions and Discussion

Good luck in writing up the
syntax section!