

The early production of conditionals

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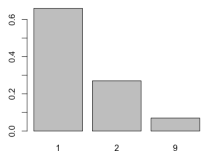
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This talk investigates whether insights into the acquisition of modal verbs can be extended to conditionals by looking at production data of monolingual German-speaking children aged 1;4 to 3;8 (Szagun 2001).

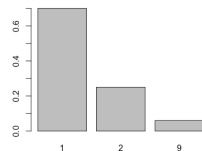
Conditional sentences of the form *if p, q* are generally assumed have a modal meaning, with the antecedent proposition *p* serving as the restrictor of the worlds quantified over in the consequent *q* (Lewis 1973; Kratzer 1986; much subsequent work). Modals exhibit *modal flavour* which falls into *root* and *non-root* varieties (Hoffmann 1966). Nonroot modals deal with possibilities stemming from the speaker's knowledge, whereas root modals deal with possibilities stemming from relevant facts in the world. Bare conditionals (those without an overt modal in the consequent) have a generic, law-like flavour (von Fintel 1997). Thus they are expected to behave like root modals. Language acquisition research shows that children acquire root modality in modal verbs before nonroot modality (Papafragou 1998).

By searching the Szagun subcorpus of the Child Language Data Exchange System for cases of children producing the word *wenn* 'if' and classifying the resulting hits as having root or nonroot modality, it is shown that German monolingual children productively use root modality, especially deontic modality, before age 3;8. Conditionals with nonroot modality are also produced, albeit not productively. The figures should be read as follows: root modality – 1; non-root modality – 2; ambiguous cases – 9. The acquisition of conditionals follows the same pattern as the acquisition of modal verbs.

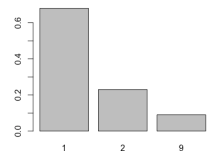
Rel. frequency of root modals, age 2;5 - 2;9



Rel. frequency of root modals, age 2;10 - 3;3



Rel. frequency of root modals, age 3;4 - 4;0



References: • von Fintel, K. (1997): Bare plurals, bare conditionals, and *only*. *JoS* 14:1-56. • Papafragou, A. (1998): The acquisition of modality. *M&L* 13:370-399. • Szagun, G. (2001): Learning different regularities. *First Language* 21:109-141.