Assumptions and methodology

I take the structure of locative phrases proposed in Svenonius (2008) as the basis for my investigations: Path–p-Deg-Loc-AxialPart-DP, where the presence of Path distinguishes directive expressions from locative ones, and Deg, Loc, and AxialPart are only present in a subset of locative expressions.

There is evidence that structures involving p-DP and Path-p-DP are acquired earlier than structures involving AxialParts. For instance, it has been reported that English, German, and Icelandic children pass through a stage of preposition omission in their early multiword utterances, when they produce locative and directional structures lacking any overt prepositions (cf. Bowerman 1996, Slobin et al. 2011, Nicholas 2011), e.g. towel bed for ‘towel on a bed’, put table for ‘put on the table’. Similar patterns of preposition omission are reported for Russian children aged 1;10-2;4, cf. Gvozdev (1961), Leikin (1998).

In Russian examples involving preposition omission, children retain the case endings on ground DPs that are characteristic of locative and directional constructions (prepositional and accusative case, respectively).

It may be hypothesized that these patterns of preposition omission reflect a stage when children have already acquired the linguistic structures which express the most basic and abstract spatial notions, namely p and Path, but haven’t yet mastered the structures which represent finer semantic contrasts, such as Axial Part heads and the contrast between containment and support, and thus omit the linguistic material that expresses these finer notions (i.e. overt prepositions). The fact that Russian children, while omitting prepositions retain the correct case endings on the ground nouns, may suggest that they interpret these case endings as lexicalizing the p head and the Path-p complex.

In my talk I will present the results of a pilot experiment aimed at testing the structure of early locative utterances in Russian. In order to test this I have designed an elicited production experiment with three groups of monolingual children: aged 2;0-2;6, aged 2;6-3;0, and aged 3;0-3;6. The trial consists of answers to questions about 4 types of spatial configurations presented in a set of 24 picture stimuli. Two of the configurations (BEHIND and UNDER) are assumed to have an AxPart head in their structure, while two others (IN and ON) lack this head. Both Figures and Grounds are expected to be present in the very early vocabularies. Cf. examples of spatial configurations for the trial in the Appendix.

Research questions and analysis of results

1) Frequency of preposition omission
I examine whether there is a significant correlation between the frequency of preposition omission in children’s answers and a) age; b) type of the preposition (+/- AxialPart).

2) Frequency of replies
I examine whether there is a correlation within each age group between the frequency of received (relevant) replies and the type of spatial relation involved (IN, ON, BEHIND, UNDER).

3) Case marking on Ground nominal
I examine whether there is a significant correlation between the frequency of correct case marking on the Ground noun and a) age; b) type of preposition; c) presence of an overt preposition (i.e. lack/presence of preposition omission).
Appendix

Table 1. Examples of spatial configurations for the trial***:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ON</th>
<th>BEHIND</th>
<th>UNDER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IN</td>
<td>(The rooster is) in the bag</td>
<td>(The goose is) behind the house</td>
<td>(The dog is) under the table</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(The cat is) in the bucket</td>
<td>(The dog is) on the chair</td>
<td>(The rooster is) under the chair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(The dog is) on the chair</td>
<td>(The cat is) on the table</td>
<td>(The cat is) under the bucket</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(The goose is) on the table</td>
<td>(The rooster is) behind the chair</td>
<td>(The cat is) under the bucket</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* BEHIND and UNDER are reported to be the first AxialParts acquired in a number of languages (Cf. Johnston & Slobin 1979, Leikin 1998)

**The configurations with an AxPart head (BEHIND and UNDER) are used interchangeably with configurations without an AxPart head (IN and ON) thus avoiding priming effects on case inflection from the previous configuration.

References:


