DERIVATIONAL MORPHOLOGY IN ENGLISH, SPANISH, AND FRENCH PRESCHOOLERS

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BACKGROUND AND AIDS

We investigated the acquisition of nominal derivations in three typologically different languages: English, French, and Spanish. We assessed the productions by preschool children in a sentence-completion task. Although inflectional morphology has been extensively explored in both typical and atypical development, derivational morphology has not received the same degree of attention (van den Bergh, 2003), especially from a cross-linguistic perspective (Duncan, Casalis, & Cole, 2009). A full awareness of derivational processes does not seem to be attained until at least year 4 (approx. 5-8 years of age) and it continues developing until adolescence (Tyler & Nagy, 1999).

Language typology and morphological development

Linguistic theory has been claimed to determine the development of morphological marking, with morphologically rich languages showing an advantage in the rate of development over languages with poorer morphology (e.g., Dressler, 2007), whereas (Dressler, 2005) argues that, within the same language, differing typologies may exist, since it is not necessarily the case that inflectional morphology and derivational morphology are equally rich – and, even within inflectional NP and VP morphology can differ in richness and complexity. In addition, derivational processes usually coexist with other word-formation processes. In English, for example, although derivation is absent, zero-derivation and compounding are extremely productive and have been found to precede derivation (e.g., Clark, 1993). By contrast, Romance languages, like Spanish and French, normally resort to derivation, while other types of word-formation strategies are less frequent. We investigated whether such language-specific differences affected English, French, and Spanish children's strategies in generating derivations on an oral production task.

Derivation in LI populations

Research attempting to profile the inflectional morphology deficit of the SLI population is abundant, but studies dealing with derivational morphology are rare. The findings regarding derivational morphology in SLI have been contradictory, with some studies finding no difference in production, while others maintaining that it develops normally (see van der Lely, 2003 for a review). A further aim of this study was to explore the production of derivatives contrasting subgroups of children with low-light skills – based on their performance on an inflectional morphology task (1.25-SDs from Mean) – and control subgroups, in each language. Specifically, we asked whether these potentially LI children – with poor inflectional morphology awareness – differed from their typically developing (TD) peers in terms of derivational morphology awareness.

Research questions

1. Do children have language-specific strategies for producing agent and locative derivatives?
2. Do these strategies differ between children at-risk for LI and TD children?

RESULTS

The Spanish and, particularly, French participants showed some advantage in their production of the correct derivatives relative to English participants (Figure 1). Moreover, children in the three language groups differed in the types of errors they committed: while English children generally resorted to producing a compound form to convey the required meaning – that is, agent or doer – French and Spanish children had a completely different strategy, which involved producing an alternative (sometimes, unconventional) derivative (Figure 2).

In analyses contrasting the low-language skills subgroups and controls on derivational morphology awareness (i.e., overall accuracy) we found that, in the English sample the TD and LI-at-risk subgroups did not differ in the proportion of correct responses, whereas very large differences were observed for the same contrast in the French and the Spanish groups (Figure 3). Importantly, however, all three LI-at-risk subgroups within each language did not differ from their TD peers in the types of errors they committed.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

Productivity of derivational morphology in a given language seems to affect the rate and, especially, the pattern of its development, as shown by the markedly different strategies used by our groups of participants: English children mostly resorted to compoundation, while Spanish and French children prefer some kind of derivation. LI-at-risk subgroups within each language followed the same strategies as their TD peers. However, derivation (as well as inflection) seems to be negatively affected in the Spanish and French-at-risk group, the difficulties of their English counterpart do not appear to be equally severe. There are several possible interpretations of this finding.

• The overall worse performance of the English participants could be limiting the potential for a group (TD vs LI-at-risk) effect.
• Age: although all children were matched for schooling (Reception Year), the English participants were slightly younger. Future analyses should control for possible interactions with age, since it could be the case that differences between low-language skills and TD children only become evident later (van den Bosch & Deflor, 1990).

• An alternative explanation is that the extent to which the development of derivational morphology is affected in children with LI might vary as a function of language. That is, derivatives may become more apparent among LI speakers of languages in which derivations are the main and most productive means of word formation – e.g., Spanish or French – than in a language like English in which word-formation rules rely strongly on derivational processes.

Interpretations of these findings are only speculative at this point, especially considering that our samples are constituted by, in particular, English TD children only.

REFERENCES


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