

## The influence of Number specification on the acquisition of Case in early Russian

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This paper reports the results of a spontaneous speech study on the interaction between the acquisition of Number and Case in early Russian. While **singular** Case endings are adultlike and abundant before age 2 (cf. also Babyonyshev, 1993), correct **plural** non-nominative forms are rare. Inspired by Müller (1994) and Hoekstra and Hyams (1995), we argue that this is due to the underspecification of the Number head.

We investigated structural, inherent, and lexical Cases in the spontaneous speech of three monolingual Russian-acquiring children between the ages of 1;8-2;6. The results show almost flawless Case morphology in the singular, but failure to use plural Case morphology correctly between the ages 1;8-2;0 (Stage I) and to a lesser extent from age 2;1-2;6 (Stage II): In Stage I the children score 96% correct on structural Cases, 92% on inherent Cases, and 90% on lexical Cases in the **singular**, but 0% on structural accusative and genitive, and 33% on inherent Cases and lexical Cases in the **plural**, substituting the target Case endings with Nominative endings. In Stage II, the children again show very high percentages of correct performance on all Cases in the **singular**, namely 98% on structural Cases, 92% on inherent Cases, and 94% on lexical Cases, and somewhat higher success rates with **plural** nouns, namely 20% on structural accusative and 17% on structural genitive, 80% on inherent Cases, and 68% on lexical Cases. However, even at age 2;6 the children are far from adultlike. Most plural Case errors (90% in Stage I and 63% in Stage II) consist of substitution by default nominative forms, evenly divided between plural and singular.

Close examination of the children's plural forms suggests that plural is initially not productive: in Stage I, (a) the numbers of plural forms are extremely low (183 pl vs. 1978 sg forms); (b) 65% of plural nouns represent rote-learned forms such as pair-wise/plural body parts ('hands', 'fingers'), footwear ('boots'), plural non-count nouns ('money' - pl in Russian), etc.; (c) almost none of the plurals occur in their singular forms in the same transcripts.

On the basis of these observations, we propose that the nominal Num head is initially underspecified, namely, it represents [+singular] only (cf. Müller, 1994). Furthermore, inspired by Hoekstra and Hyams (1995), we argue that an underspecified nominal Num head blocks Case licensing in the plural in early Russian. In particular, we assume that in adult language a DP-internal Case-chain between N and D needs to be established. This chain is mediated by the Num head. If the Num head is specified as [+singular] only, it breaks the chain in the case of a plural noun. Consequently, the Case feature cannot reach the DP node, and therefore cannot be licensed. We propose that in order to avoid crashing of the DP young children's grammars assign default Case in such situations, which is Nominative in Russian. When the noun is singular, underspecified Num does not break the Case-chain as it is [+singular], thus yielding forms correctly marked for Case.

In Stage II, plural gradually becomes productive: (a) the numbers of plural forms slightly increase (261 pl vs. 1703 sg forms); (b) only 45% of the plural word forms belong to allegedly rote-learned word groups described above; (c) increased numbers of nouns occur in both singular and plural in the same transcripts. All these factors point to gradual development towards targetlike mastery of plural forms, i.e. acquisition of the specification of Number.

To sum up, unproductive plural marking indicates an underspecified Number head, which in turn blocks correct Case licensing in early Russian plurals, resulting in incorrect default Nominative forms. The development of the full specification of Number allows for more and more correct Case endings in the plural over time.

## References

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