

# The Development of Children's lexical skills: a cross-linguistic investigation

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## Background

• Previous claims of a universal noun bias in children's early lexical development (Gentner 1982) have been challenged by acquisition studies of Mandarin and Korean (Tadif 1996, Kim, McGregor and Thompson 2000).

• In addition, recent studies of children learning European languages did not find strong support for the noun bias hypothesis either (Bassano 2000, Kauschke and Hofmeister 2002).

• However, experimental studies of pre- and early school-age children report higher accuracies in the naming of nouns over verbs (Kauschke and Stan 2004) and higher accuracies of naming transitive over intransitive verbs (Davidoff and Masterson 1995/96)

*Is there a universal bias in children's naming of noun and verb pictures?*

## Aims

• To compare the naming accuracy of children with different first languages, English and German, in a picture naming task for different ages.

• To compare children's naming accuracy of nouns and verbs.

• To assess whether differences in the naming of transitive and intransitive verbs occur in both linguistic groups.

## Methodology

### Subjects

- 62 children, 31 English monolingual and 31 German monolingual
- 3 age groups: nine 4-5 year-olds, eleven 5-6 year-olds and eleven 6-7 year-olds
- There were 15 girls and 16 boys

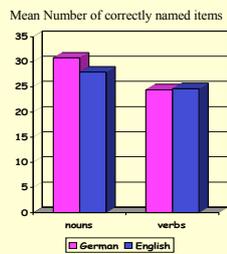
### Materials

- 72 pictures, black and white drawings: 36 noun pictures, 36 verb pictures
- Due to name agreement problems, 2 nouns and 7 verbs differed in the sets across languages



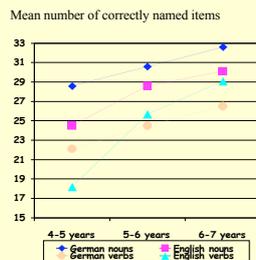
## Naming Accuracy for nouns and verbs

### 1. Nouns vs verbs



- No difference in overall naming accuracy across languages
- The German children are significantly better at naming nouns than the English children
- Significant difference nouns > verbs for all children

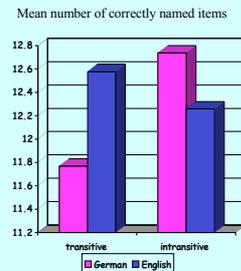
### 2. Developmental patterns



- Developmental increase in the naming accuracy of nouns and verbs
- the youngest and oldest German children are better than equivalent English children on nouns
- Oldest English children better than German children on verbs

## Naming Accuracy for transitive and intransitive Verbs

### 1. Transitive vs intransitive verbs



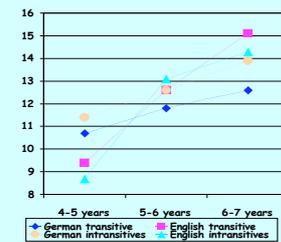
• There is a cross-linguistic difference in the accuracy of transitive and intransitive verbs

• German: intransitive > transitive

• English: transitive > intransitive

### 2. Developmental patterns

Mean number of correctly named items



• There is more development in verb accuracy in the English children compared to the German children

• The oldest English children are significantly better on transitives than age-equivalent German children

## Differences English-German

- Word Order: English is an SVO language, German is underlyingly SOV, the order of noun phrases in German is more flexible than in English
- Case marking: English has case-marking only on pronouns, German has case-marking on articles, adjectives, nouns and pronouns
- Davidoff & Masterson (1995/96) argue that transitive verbs are closely associated with objects, this is true for English acquisition but it seems not for German

## Conclusion

- There is a noun advantage in children's picture naming for both languages
- Cross-linguistic differences show a higher accuracy for nouns in German children and a higher accuracy for verbs in the older English children
- Different patterns in the accuracy of transitive and intransitive verbs can be linked to the structural properties of the languages: In English, transitive verbs are associated with objects in a VO pattern, in German this is not the case, resulting in a higher accuracy of intransitive verbs
- This suggests that the grammatical properties of verbs have an effect on their retrieval

## References

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