

THE USE OF PERSONAL PRONOUNS IN THE UNTUTORED ACQUISITION OF GERMAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE¹

Conny Bast
Universität zu Köln

Abstrak

Bagaimana pembelajar secara mandiri menguasai pronomina persona dalam bahasa Jerman sebagai bahasa asing? Apakah ada perbedaan cara pemerolehan kemampuan antara orang dewasa di satu pihak dengan anak-anak dan remaja di lain pihak? Inilah fokus permasalahan dalam penelitian ini.

Data-data dikumpulkan melalui pengamatan yang intensif selama 1½ tahun, kemudian dideskripsikan dan dianalisis dengan program CLAN (MacWhinney 2000).

Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ada persamaan dan perbedaan dalam pemerolehan kemampuan mengkategorikan varian-varian gramatikal pronomina persona dalam bahasa Jerman sebagai bahasa asing. Tidak ada perbedaan yang signifikan antara orang dewasa di satu sisi dengan anak-anak dan remaja di sisi lain. Oleh sebab itu asumsi bahwa faktor umum dalam pemerolehan pronomina persona harus ditolak.

Kata kunci: pemerolehan bahasa Jerman sebagai bahasa asing, pronomina persona

A. Introduction

1. The Background of Problems

The reasons behind the fact that children are normally more successful in acquiring a second language than adults are much discussed in second language acquisition (e.g. Birdsong 1999, Singleton & Lengyel 1995). The controversial question is whether the ability to acquire languages differs fundamentally between children and adults, or whether age related factors of other variables which may have an impact on language acquisition can explain the observed differences in the acquisition. The positive influence of

childrens' motivation to become a member of the surrounding (speech) community is discussed as well as the communicative aspects of language to achieve a certain goal for adults (Klein 1984). In order to gain insight into this question, the existence of an age factor for second language acquisition must be studied in detail. If such a limitation exists, the aspects of the acquisition process which are affected must be further examined.

I will show that the hypothesis "the younger the better in the long run" (Singleton 1995:3) does not hold for all areas of the German morphosyntax

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system, especially not for the acquisition process of personal pronouns in the untutored acquisition of German as a foreign language.

2. Focus of Research

The focus of research of this paper is the Germany system of personal pronouns. German personal pronouns distinguishes between two numbers (singular and plural), three genders (masculine, feminine and neuter) and four cases (nominative, genitive, dative, accusative). Every personal pronoun carries information on case and number. Gender is only marked on the pronouns for third person singular and not for plural (see Eisenberg 1986, Hentschel & Weydt 1990). There is no gender marking for the first and second person. Some pronouns are homonymic, but most of them are different. This makes the acquisition both more difficult and easier as the number of forms to be memorized are quite high but there are only some forms which are homonyms, see Table 1. As personal pronouns in the genitive case are only used in archaic German they are not mentioned in this paper.

3. The Aims of the Research

It is the aim of this research to show that for the grammatical categories of the noun phrase, especially for personal pronouns, it is not the age of a learner which plays a major role in second language acquisition. Therefore the existence of an age factor in second language acquisition has to be rejected.

4. Theoretical Background

It is a much disputed discussion on whether the biological age of a learner plays an important role for untutored language acquisition or not. Lenneberg (1967) postulates that the critical period until which language acquisition is still possible, ends with the beginning of puberty because the brain loses its plasticity and is no longer able to adapt to other languages. Therefore only children who have not yet entered puberty would be able to learn a second language successfully. Lenneberg's theory has already been proven to be wrong by Bongaerts, Planken & Schils (1995) who were able to show that also adult learners are able to achieve near-native competence in a second language. Nevertheless the fact remains that

Table 1: German Personal Pronouns

		1. Person	2. Person		3. Person		
					Masc.	Fem.	Neut.
SG	NOM	ich	du	Sie	er	sie	es
	DAT	mir	dir	Ihnen	ihm	ihr	ihm
	ACC	mich	dich	Sie	ihn	sie	es
PL	NOM	wir	ihr	Sie	sie		
	DAT	uns	euch	Ihnen	ihnen		
	ACC	uns	euch	Sie	sie		

All personal pronouns can be used to express deictic information, those of the third person can also express anaphoric information.

children are normally more successful in acquiring a second language than adults. The question one has to ask is whether it is the *age* of the learner which is the major

factor behind success or failure of language acquisition or whether there are other factors which might be even more important than the age of the learner. Those other factors might be the amount of immersion of the learner, the willingness to learn another language and to adapt to a new society, the familiar background etc. Therefore a study had to be conducted which studied the acquisition process of learners who vary in age but do not differ significantly in regard to the other factors. The results will show whether it is the age which plays a major role or not.

The next question to ask is whether there are grammatical areas of the new language which are easier to acquire than others. Therefore it will be the acquisition process of personal pronouns in German as a second language which will be looked at very closely in this paper. Does the acquisition progress of personal pronouns differ for adults and children / adolescences?

B. Method

The data used for this research was taken from a longitudinal study on German as a foreign language and was analysed as part of the project "Deutsch als Zweitsprache der Altersfaktor (DaZ-AF)" (German as a foreign language the age factor, see footnote 1.). This study is a longitudinal case study and compares the untutored acquisition of German by two Russian sisters. During their 18-month stay in Cologne, they were recorded once a week in free conversation with different native speakers of German, both children and adults. In this way, 65 hours of recorded speech of each learner have been gathered.

Most of the factors which may influence second language acquisition, such as social and familiar background, length of residence in host country, amount of accessible input, are similar in both of the subjects; therefore, the main difference between the girls is their age. Data collection started 3 weeks after their arrival in Germany and covers the age range of 8 years, 7 months to 10 years for the younger learner, NAS, and 14 years, 2 months to 15 years, 7 months for the older learner, DAS. This means if there is a critical period for language acquisition declining at puberty, the younger learner would still be within this period while the older one wouldn't.

Each session was recorded on tape and transcribed according to the convention of the CHILDES programmes (MacWhinney 2000, Stephany/Bast 2001). Whenever there are citations from the corpus in the paper, the original form has been retained, including the transcription conventions. The data was analysed with the CLAN tools (MacWhinney 2000).

There are only very few studies which deal with the acquisition of the grammatical categories of the noun phrase in untutored acquisition of German as a foreign language. All studies which mention the acquisition of personal pronouns can be seen in Table 2. Only Wegener (1995) deals exclusively with the acquisition of the grammatical categories in the noun phrase. The other studies only barely mention the progress of acquisition of the noun phrase but put their emphasis on other grammatical problems i.e. concentrate on the verb phrase. The lack of data makes the comparison with the above mentioned study somewhat difficult in some parts.

Table 2: Studies on the Acquisition of Personal Pronouns in Untutored German as a Foreign Language

children		adolescence		Adults	
Wegener (1995)	PL ² , RUS, TR	Kuhberg (1990)	PL, TK	Klein & Rieck (1982) (HDP-Projekt)	I, E
				Ahrenholz (2003)	I
				Skiba & Dittmar (1992)	PL

The above mentioned study is exceptional in several ways. First of all it is the first study of its kind to compare learners who are similar in many ways, e.g. have the same familiar and social background, the same length of stay in the host country etc. but only differ in age. It is also the first study which analyses the acquisition process in a very detailed way, because there has not yet been a research which was conducted every week over a period of 1 ½ years. This gives us the chance to look into the acquisition process in great detail and to catch every detail of change.

C. Result and Discussion

Let us now look at the course of acquisition for personal pronouns in untutored German as a foreign language. As already mentioned, the German pronouns system differs

between number, case and gender marking. Therefore each category will be regarded separately.

1. Number Marking

As can be seen in Table 3, the marking of number is similar for both learners. Table 3 indicates the respective months in which a certain pronoun has been acquired. Both girls distinguish between forms marking a singular like *ich* (I) and *er* (he) and *wir* (we) which marks a plural form. The number of personal pronouns used to mark number in different contexts increase in the course of time. All personal pronouns are used correctly for singular and plural in the respective contexts. This means that both learners do not use singular pronouns for plural contexts and vice versa, and therefore there are no overgeneralized forms.

Table 3: Personal Pronouns, Acquisition of Number Marking

	Mon. 1	Mon. 2	Mon. 3	Mon. 4	Mon. 5	Mon. 6	Mon. 7	Mon. 10
older learner Dascha SG	ich, du, er	es, mir			mich, ihm		dir	
older learner Dascha PL	wir			Uns				
older learner Dascha SG + PL	Sie							
younger learner Nastja SG	ich, er	du, mir	dir	es, mich	dich	ihm		
younger learner Nastja PL	wir				ihr			
younger learner Nastja SG + PL	sie							ihr

²The abbreviations indicate the learners' mother tongue of the different studies. PL = Polish, RUS = Russian, TK = Turkish, I = Italian, E = Spanish

Both learners distinguish between forms marking a singular entity and those marking a plural entity right from the beginning of their second language acquisition. Their course of acquisitional concerning number marking differs from those of the children in the study of Wegener (1995) and also from those of the adults in the study of Klein & Rieck (1982) as can be seen in Table 4.

singular as well as for 3. person plural instead of *ihnen* (them). According to Wegener this attributes to the fact that the ending *en* is normally omitted in spoken language. Therefore overgeneralizations can be found in the utterances of all second language learners regardless of their age; both at the acquisition process of children as well as in the acquisition process of adults. This can be judged as evidence

Table 4: Overgeneralization of nNumber Marking (Personal Pronouns)

Study	child / adul	tovergeneralization	context
DaZ-AF	younger learner Nastja	no	—
DaZ-AF	older learner Dascha	no	—
Klein & Rieck (1982)	adults	yes	ich ? SG + PL
Wegener (1995)	children	yes	ihm ? SG + PL

The adult learners of Klein & Rieck (1982) overgeneralize the personal pronoun *ich* (I) in plural contexts which means that they use the pronoun *ich* (I) for singular as well as for plural entities. The plural pronoun *wir* (we) cannot be found in the data. The children whose acquisition process is described in Wegener (1995:349) produce an error in number marking when they use the personal pronoun *ihm* (him). The pronoun *ihm* (him) is used for 3. person

against an age factor in language acquisition.

2 Case Marking

The learners of this study, DAS and NAS, acquire the marking of case of personal pronouns in dependence of the structure of arguments. At first both of the girls use personal pronouns which refer to a subject like *ich, du, er, sie, wir* (I, you, he, she, we), see examples 1-6:

1. *DAS : *ich hat [*] seine [*] name [*] zu hause . (DAS01-02)³*
(*DAS : I had his name at home.)
2. *DAS : *er is(t) ein lehrer für erdkunde und für sport . (DAS01-03)*
(*DAS : he is a teacher for geography and physics education.)
3. *DAS : *wir lernen insekten . (DAS01-03)*
(*DAS : we learn (about) insects.)
4. *NAS : *ich mache hausaufgabe . (NAS01-01)*
(*NAS : I do homework.)
5. *NAS : *er & g kauft lampe [*] [: lumpen] . (NAS01-02)*
(*NAS : he buys lamp.)

³DAS stands for the older child, NAS for the younger child. The first two numbers indicate the length of stay in Germany, indicated in months, the next two number indicate the respective recording session.

6. *NAS : und wir malen. (NAS01-01)
(*NAS : and we draw.)

These personal pronouns are never chosen for objects but exclusively refer to subjects. The next forms to be acquired by both learners are forms like *mir, dir, uns* (me, you, us), which follow certain prepositions like *mit*⁴ (with) or which are used as indirect objects in a sentence, see examples 7 - 10.

you, he). This means that they are never used to refer to a subject. The learners therefore distinguish a 2 case system in which on the one hand are forms that refer to a subject and on the other hand forms which can never refer to a subject but only to an object.

Forms like *mich, dich, ihn* (me, you,

7. *DAS : kannst du mir geben bitte. (DAS02-04)
(*DAS : can you please give me this.)
8. *DAS : sie kann nicht uns französisch machen. (DAS04-14)
(*DAS : she cannot teach us French.)
9. *NAS : Marco willt [*] [: will] sitzen mit mir und Pascal willt [*] [: will] sitzen mit mir. (NAS02-05)
(*NAS : Marco wants to sit beside me and Pascal wants to sit beside me.)
10. *NAS : jetzt ich kann mit dir spielen. (NAS03-10)
(*NAS : now I can play with you.)

The forms *mir, dir, uns* (me, you, us) are used in opposition to forms which mark a subject like *ich, du, er* (I,

his) are only acquired after the other forms are already in frequent use. They refer to direct objects (examples 11 - 16):

11. *DAS : dann diese [*] für ist das okay für mich oder nicht. (DAS05-18)
(*DAS : then this for is this ok for me or not)
12. *DAS : und liebt er dich ? (DAS10-38)
(*DAS : and does he love you?)
13. *DAS : vielleicht(t) Schröder ist auch gut, ich kenne ihn nicht so gut. (DAS11-44)
(*DAS : maybe Schröder is good as well, I do not know him that well)
14. *NAS : ich glaube auch das sie sieht nur mich. (NAS04-13)
(*NAS : I also think that she can only see me)
15. *NAS : ich kann nicht dich sehen. (NAS05-16)
(*NAS : I cannot see you)
16. *NAS : aber &n da war ein junge, der ist hier, ich habe ihn nicht so gut gemalt . (NAS06-22)
(*NAS : but there was a boy, this one here, I did not draw him very well)

⁴In German certain prepositions impose a special case on the following object. I.e. the preposition *mit* requires an object in a dative form.

At this point the learners distinguish between forms which refer to a subject, forms which refer to a direct object and forms which refer to an indirect object. This means the learner system of Dascha and Nastja consists of three different categories with different forms of personal pronouns which can be used. The course of acquisition of the two girls is similar to that of the learners of other research projects, see Table 5:

marking there is also convincing evidence against the existence of an age factor which is relevant for second language acquisition. Both the young learners described in Wegener (1995) as well as the adult learners described in Skiba & Dittmar (1992:344) acquire the marking of case in the same course of acquisition as the Dascha and Nastja. The acquisition process of the second language learners described in Klein &

Table 5: Course of Acquisition of Case Marker (Personal Pronouns)

research project	Child/adult	Course of acquisition
DaZ-AF	Nastja (younger L.)	NOM > DAT > ACC
DaZ-AF	Dascha (older L.)	NOM > DAT > ACC
Wegener (1995)	children	NOM > DAT > ACC
Skiba & Dittmar (1992)	adults	NOM > DAT > ACC
Klein & Rieck (1982)	adults	NOM (only <i>ich/du/er</i>)

All subjects of earlier research projects (Wegener (1995) for children, Klein & Rieck (1982) and Skiba & Dittmar (1992) for adults) first acquire nominative forms which refer to a subject, like *ich* (I) and *du* (you), followed by *er* (he). Except for the subjects of Klein & Rieck the learners also acquire the personal pronouns *sie* (she) and *wir* (we). The oblique forms in the dative case for the first and second person, i.e. *mir*, *dir*, *uns* (me, you, us) are acquired after the forms referring to a subject. The last forms to be acquired are the forms in the accusative case *mich* (me) and *dich* (you).

I can therefore show that concerning the acquisition of case

Rieck (1982) on the other hand stops at a very early level.

3. Gender

The acquisition of gender marking for both Dascha and Nastja is similar in some areas but different in others. Similarities can be found when they refer to a human or to an animal whose natural gender is known to them. In those instances the chosen pronoun is always correct, even from the very beginning of the acquisition of the second language on, see examples 17- 20 (the relevant referent will be mentioned in brackets):

17. *DAS : nein er (= der Vater) ist in Amerika. (DAS01-03)
 (*DAS : no, he (= the father) is in America)
18. *DAS : sie (= Sophia) ist oder zu hause oder in die [*] schule. (DAS01-02)
 (*DAS : she (= Sophia) is at home or at school)

19. *NAS : er (= der Mann) &g kauft lampe [*] [: lumpen] . (NAS01-02)
 (*NAS : he (= the man) buys a lamp)
20. *NAS : und sie (= Kimberly) malt # pferd . (NAS01-01)
 (*NAS : and she (= Kimberly) draws a horse)

While the reference of humans or well known animals does not pose any problems the difficulties arise when the girls want to talk about inanimate entities or about animals whose natural gender is not known or which do not act

as main characters in a story they tell the interviewer. The older learner Dascha transfers a noun's gender information from her mother tongue Russian into German, see examples 21 and 22:

21. *DAS : und wie heisst sie [*][= Frosch, im Russ. feminin] ? DAS04-15
 (*DAS : and what is her [= frog, feminine in Russian] name?)
22. *DAS : Musée_D'Orsay ist ein er [*] kost [*] [: kostet] nicht wie musej@r [= Museum,imRuss. maskulin]. (DAS04-14)
 (*DAS : Musée D'Orsay is a he [= museum, masculine in Russian] does not cost like a museum)

This strategy is mostly correct, but sometimes also incorrect. Nevertheless nearly all personal pronouns that she uses come to be correct up to the end of the recording period (18 months). Her younger sister Nastja seems to have memorized the gender of those nouns

which appear in her input very frequently because nearly no mistakes can be found. With unknown nouns she uses the personal pronoun *er* (he) as a default form as can be seen in examples 23 and 24:

23. *NAS : und # ich weiss nicht, aber ich glaube wenn dieses tier möchtet [*] schlafen oder [//] er [*] [= Schildkröte, im Russ. feminin] hat angst. (NAS04-13)
 (*NAS : I don't know, but I think when this animal wants to sleep or he [= turtle, feminine in Russian] is frightened)
24. *NAS : aber er [*] [= Boot, im Russ. FEM, Schiff = NEUT] schwimmt nicht so am Rhein der für das gucken . (NAS06-20)
 (*NAS : but he [= boat, feminine in Russian, ship = neuter in Russian] does not swim in the river Rhein to look)

Until the end of the research period there are nearly no instances of personal pronouns in NAS' speech which are marked incorrectly for gender. The acquisition process concerning gender marking of the two girls

described in this study can be compared to the course of acquisition of other subjects. As Table 6 shows there are differences but also some common ground between the relevant studies.

Table 6: Acquisition of Gender Marking (Personal Pronouns)

Research project	child/adult	natural gender	gender inhuman N
DaZ-AF	younger learner Nastja	Yes	yes
DaZ-AF	older learner Dascha	Yes	yes
Ahrenholz (2003)	adult (Franca)	Yes	no data
Wegener (2000)	children	yes	yes (pl/rus), no (tk)
Kuhberg (1990:32)	children	yes (pl),no (tk)	yes (pl), no (tk)
"Pidgin-Deutsch" (1977:55)	adults	No	no

Franca, the adult Italian learner described in Ahrenholz (2003) chooses the correct gender forms for the third person singular from the very beginning. Whenever she refers to a person whose natural gender is clear to her, she never makes a mistake in gender marking. This result correlates with the results from the DaZ-AF project.

The children described in Wegener (2000) on the other hand choose the personal pronouns *er* (he) and *sie* (she) for both genders. Over a long period of time they do not distinguish verbally between different genders. The form which they prefer is *sie* (she). Only after several months of acquiring German as a foreign language, in case of the Turkish learners only after four years, the natural gender of a person seems to gain influence in marking different genders with more than one gender marking. These findings do not correlate with the results from the DaZ-AF research.

Up to the end of his acquisition process of German the Turkish learner described in Kuhberg (1990:32) finds it difficult to use the correct gender marking of personal pronouns. The form he prefers is *er* (he). The Polish girl which is also described in Kuhberg on the other hand always uses the correct gender marking. Most of the learners described in HDP ("Pidgin-Deutsch" (1977:55) can only use *er* (he) so that a differentiation in

gender is not possible.

It can be seen that the marking of gender of personal pronouns as well as the marking of number and case does not attribute to an age factor in second language acquisition.

D. Conclusion

The results show that there are different but also similar approaches in the acquisition of number, gender and case markings of German personal pronouns. The differences in the acquisition process do not exist between adults on the one side and children on the other side. Therefore the existence of an age factor for language acquisition will be rejected. The upcoming question is how much the course of acquisition in untutored German as a foreign language influences the language learning ability of students studying German. Do the students learn the number, gender and case marking of personal pronouns in German according to the way they are taught or do they follow the course of acquisition as it has been shown for untutored learning? Are there similarities or differences between the different acquisition processes? Does the age of a learner have an influence on the acquisition process in language learning if it does not in untutored language acquisition? These questions will have to be answered in another

detailed research conducted on students of German as a foreign language.

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