

Preface

**Finite options: how L1 and L2 learners cope
with the acquisition of finiteness¹**

CHRISTINE DIMROTH and INGEBORG LASSER

The question of how L1 and L2 learners acquire finiteness has attracted considerable attention from linguists and psychologists over the past 20 years. This research is motivated by studies of verbal inflection and verb placement in corpora from children and adults learning English, French, and Italian, as well as certain V2 languages (Dutch, German, Swedish, Norwegian). These studies have centered upon a central theme: why do children and adults learning certain languages use verbal inflections so unreliably at first?

A considerable amount of work has been done in relation to the acquisition of finiteness, yet there still appear to be more open questions than reliable answers. This may be due to the fact that many researchers have worried about what distinguishes nonfinite learner utterances formally from finite ones, without having a clear understanding of the determining characteristics of finiteness (but see Klein *i.p.*, who assumes that finiteness relates the propositional content of an utterance to its topic component).

In studying the acquisition of finiteness, the authors in this issue have tried to take into account how semantic aspects of finiteness (functions) relate to finite expressions (forms). From a cross-linguistic perspective it becomes clear that the expression of finiteness is not only a matter of morphology and syntax, but also of the lexicon (adverbs, particles). Furthermore, even in languages where the expression of finiteness typically involves morphosyntactic means (such as verb placement or inflectional morphology), other elements may contribute to the expression of finiteness, or it may remain unexpressed. These observations lead to two general conclusions: (a) there is no one-to-one relationship between finite semantics (functions) and finite expressions (forms), and (b) there is no obvious sense in which one can say that finiteness is “obligatory” in adult languages.

The discussion on the acquisition of finiteness has been dominated by the idea that a learner who is able to use a certain morphological finite

form productively should be expected to use it in all obligatory contexts (cf. Wexler 1984 for L1 acquisition). The fact that for many learners this is not the case has been interpreted to mean that there is a phase during which the formal marking of finiteness is optional. This idea focuses on the finding that learners frequently do not express finiteness at all. However, it is shown in this issue that in the early acquisition stages of the languages reported on (German, Dutch, English, and French), learners may rely on lexical means (such as adverbs and certain particles) as well as other utterance-structuring factors (such as word order and intonation) when expressing functions of finiteness. We also find that learners frequently do not express finiteness at all, but in light of the fact that adult languages do not mark finiteness obligatorily, we interpret the deviant behavior of learners differently.

Under the assumption that the languages of the world can use means other than morphosyntax for the expression of finiteness, and given that the marking of finiteness can be suppressed in target languages, the behavior found in learners with respect to finiteness marking is less surprising and more interesting at the same time. The fact that learners don't always mark finiteness grammatically as would be adequate in the target does not imply that the expression of finiteness is genuinely optional. A different interpretation of the scenario would be to say that learners know that the function of finiteness lies mainly in relating a propositional content to a topic, but they do not know for every case the means by which this relation is expressed or whether it has to be expressed at all. Note that languages such as German and Dutch, which typically require a finiteness marker of some sort in a sentence, also permit sentences in which such markers are absent. Under specific conditions, mature speakers leave out finiteness markers, which results either in verbless utterances or in utterances containing only a nonfinite and no finite verb. Nonfinite sentences can take on discourse functions that have been neglected in previous acquisition literature. For example, one finds nonfinite sentences in which speakers comment on their actions or express desires. The following two instances are from everyday dialogues:

- (A) (native adult Dutch; from Jordens 1990: Appendix).

Even washandje pakken.

just washcloth take-*inf*

'I am taking the washcloth.'

- (B) (native adult German, from Lasser 1997)

Ach, nur ein bisschen in der Ecke sitzen.

oh only a little in the corner sit-*inf*

'I just want to sit in the corner a little bit.'

On the basis of such examples, it is assumed in this issue that utterances in which finiteness is not expressed, but which may nevertheless receive a finite interpretation, are a part of the target language that (some) learners are acquiring. Under such assumptions, a mature grammatical system must be able to generate such nonfinite sentences as well.

Taking into account some of these general aspects of finiteness and acknowledging that language-specific differences exist in the domain of finiteness marking (even between closely related languages), it seems even less plausible that the acquisition of finiteness consists of moving from a stage where finiteness is genuinely optional to one where it is obligatory. As an alternative, the papers herein assume that the learners' knowledge on how to mark finiteness grows gradually and what we see in their production data is a reflex of that. This involves the idea that the acquisition of finiteness follows a step-by-step path. During the acquisition process learners pick up from the input the circumstances under which finiteness markers are required and those under which they can be left out. They also learn which finiteness marker should be used when. On their way to the target, learners come up with intermediate solutions. Such an account is more compatible with the pool of acquisition data that exists today. For one, the cross-linguistic as well as the individual variation found in learners' production data is consistent with such an account. At the same time, the general properties found in these data are still accounted for (e.g. gradual decrease of nonfinite utterances, qualitative properties with respect to verb types, etc.).

The next question then is, what guides this process during which learners proceed from a state in which they use finite markers to a low degree to one in which they use them to a higher degree? Admittedly, there won't be one simple answer to this question. Thus, the purpose of this issue is relatively humble: (1) to show that such an alternative approach to the acquisition of finiteness is indeed promising, (2) to indicate some possible paths that learners might follow, and (3) to specify the most immediate issues that require investigation in order to arrive at more complete accounts of the acquisition of finiteness.

The contribution by Rosemarie Tracy contains a specific proposal for a type of learning mechanism that would permit such step-by-step acquisition in principle. Ingeborg Lasser's paper motivates why a great amount of language-specific knowledge is presumably relevant for the acquisition of finiteness. The articles by Peter Jordens; Katrin Lindner; Christine Dimroth; and Clive Perdue, Sandra Benazzo, and Patrizia Giuliano present detailed L1 and L2 acquisition data indicating that there are indeed several steps to be taken for learners before they behave like adult native

speakers with respect to finiteness marking. The authors present evidence that learners' utterances can be semantically finite without this being shown in a target-like morphological or syntactic reflex. Some L2 learners (Dimroth and Perdue et al.) as well as language-impaired children (Lindner) may ultimately come only part of the way. In addition, Jordens demonstrates that finite and nonfinite forms have different functions in L1 acquisition from early on. For untutored L2 acquisition, where the nonfinite phase often extends over a long period with otherwise quite complex utterances, Dimroth and Perdue et al. show that the acquisition of finiteness entails a major reorganization of utterance structure that has far-reaching consequences, for example for the stepwise integration of scope-bearing elements, such as particles and negation. Despite the different time courses found in L1 and L2 learners, one conclusion to be drawn from these papers is that there are striking parallels between L1 and L2 acquisition with respect to finiteness.

The results presented in this issue raise a range of new questions calling for investigation. An obvious one is whether the parallels found between child L1 and adult L2 acquisition are coincidental or whether they can be accounted for in a principled fashion. Another question concerns the specific reasons for why learners produce nonfinite utterances to a larger extent than mature speakers do. Under the view taken here, one could entertain several hypotheses. For instance, it has been said that children often use infinitival utterances when expressing desires. One might hypothesize that when the utterance function is to express a desire, learners are unsure how to relate a hypothetical situation to a topic (using Klein's terminology). On a more general level, we would like to know what learners (children as well as adults) need to know about the rules of information distribution in the target language before they can relate the propositional content of an utterance to its topic component. And how do children and adults acquiring languages in which semantic finiteness is not expressed through verbal morphology progress on their way to learning about the different finite interpretations?

We hope that our collection of articles provides new perspectives on some well-studied issues in the domain of the acquisition of finiteness. We would be glad if the works presented here inspire our readership to further investigate how learners acquire the devices for expressing finiteness.

*Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics,
Nijmegen
University of Potsdam*

Note

1. All contributions were originally presented at the 2000 Annual Meeting of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sprachwissenschaft in Marburg, Germany, as part of a Workshop entitled "The Concept of *Finiteness* in Language."

References

- Jordens, Peter (1990). The acquisition of verb placement in Dutch and German. *Linguistics* 28: 1407–1448.
- Klein, Wolfgang (i.p.). On finiteness. In *Semantics Meets Acquisition*, Veerle Van Geenhoven (ed.). Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Lasser, Ingeborg (1997). Finiteness in adult and child German. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, City University of New York. (Available through Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen, or through the author.)
- Wexler, Kenneth (1984). Optional infinitives, head movement and the economy of derivations in child grammar. In *Verb Movement*, David Lightfoot and Norbert Hornstein (eds.). Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.