Cracking the cluster: the acquisition of verb clusters in Dutch

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A curious property of Standard Dutch is that it allows both the orders MOD-INF (the 1-2 or ascending order) and INF-MOD (the 2-1 or descending order) in sentences like (1).

(1)

			1	**2**		**2**	**1**
	(…)	dat	ik	**wil**	**slapen**	/	**slapen**	**wil**
		that	I	want	sleep.INF		sleep.INF	want

'(…) that I want to sleep.'

That the two orders may co-exist follows from assuming these verbs form a so-called verb cluster, as originally proposed by Evers (1975). Due to verb raising, this group of verbs at the end of the clause becomes impenetrable by phrasal material: the verb(s) in the complement domain of the highest verb move(s) upwards, forming a cluster with the higher verb(s). These clusters consist of two or more verbs of various types.

Though verb clusters in West-Germanic have been a topic of interest for decades (cf. Wurmbrand 2005 for an overview), the acquisition of these clusters has remained largely unexplored. Since 2-1 orders are claimed to be more frequent in spoken Dutch (cf. Zuckerman 2001, Coussé, Arfs & De Sutter 2008, De Sutter 2009, Stroop 2009), one might intuitively predict 2-1 orders to be a recognizable default from the start. However, we claim that 1-2 orders are the default verb cluster order in Dutch and argue that they are crucial for cluster acquisition: put simply, how is a child supposed to distinguish 2-1 verb clusters from standard OV word order? Hence, we propose an acquisition pathway that moves through three stages, namely an 'OV'-stage, a 1-2-stage, and a mixed stage, at which point adult-like behavior is achieved. In addition, we show this pathway first applies to MOD-INF clusters but is quickly expanded to all cluster types. To support these claims, we discuss three experiments in which a total of 120 preschoolers and kindergartners participated.

The proposal described above has three advantages. First and foremost, it solves a fundamental learnability problem. Second, it explains the attested differences between cluster production by preschoolers and by kindergartners. Finally, our approach strongly suggests that clusters follow one general syntactic rule rather than several construction-specific ones, allowing for a more unified analysis of verb clusters.

References

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