

This thesis investigated the acquisition of restrictive and appositive interpretations of relative clauses in German-speaking children between the age of 3 and 6 in three experiments.

The theoretical background shows that restrictive relative clauses are semantically less complex than appositive ones. This assumption is supported by observations from a typological overview on the semantic functions attested across languages. It is shown that the existence of appositive relative clauses implies the availability of restrictive readings in a given language. Furthermore, restrictive readings may be favored due to the functioning of general processing principles. Previous research on the acquisition of relative clauses demonstrates that the acquisition of the semantic functions of relative clauses is an understudied area. In contrast, the acquisition of syntactic aspects of relative clauses is well documented. Relative clauses start to be produced in the third year of life and can be interpreted target-like between the age of 4 and 8 depending on their structure. Which semantic interpretation children assign to relative clauses at this age, however, is still an open question.

Based on the formal background and insights from previous studies, three experiments were designed: two picture selection tasks and one acceptability task. The crucial aspect of the experimental design constitutes the interaction of an ordinal number word and the interpretation of the relative clause in sentences like "Take the third car(,) that/which is red". The scope of the ordinal number reveals whether the relative clause had been attached restrictively at the NP-level or whether it had been attached higher up at the DP shell resulting in an appositive interpretation.

The results of the experiments demonstrate that 4- to 6-year-old German-speaking children and adults prefer restrictive readings over appositive ones. This preference is found within the group data and is mirrored by the results of an individual analysis. In addition, while the majority of children has acquired restrictive readings at the age of 4, appositive interpretations are mastered only by about half of the children between age 4 and 6. Interestingly, 3-year-old children show a different pattern than their older peers. Appositive but not restrictive interpretations seem to be available to these children. Although the results may be taken as evidence that appositivity is acquired before restrictivity in relative clauses by German-speaking children, I propose the contrary. Based on assumptions about the complexity of restrictive and appositive derivations, I argue that the appositive interpretations observed at the age of 3 do not result from a target-like syntactic and semantic representation. I propose that 3-year-old children do not yet identify relative clauses as nominal modifiers. Instead, they are derived from an incorrect attachment of the relative clause higher up in the syntactic tree.

The results of the three experiments are the first to show that neither a prototypical unintegrated prosodic contour nor the presence of a lexical marker, the discourse particle "ja", or a visual context biasing for appositivity led to an increase of appositive interpretations in the children's groups. Adults, in contrast, were sensitive to the presence of the discourse particle and the cues from the visual context. As for children, the prosodic format of the relative clauses did not systematically change the interpretation preferences of adults.

The proposed acquisition path may not be specific to German. Instead, it is predicted to hold cross-linguistically and may also be transferred to the interpretation of adjectives.

Moreover, the assumptions on how children integrate relative clauses during comprehension may be generalized to other types of subordinate clauses.