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# eL2-children with Specific Language Impairment - The acquisition of case in Prepositional Phrases

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## Abstract

This longitudinal study investigated the acquisition of case in locative prepositional phrases (PPs) in early second language learners (eL2) of German with typical development (TD) and with Specific Language Impairment (SLI), in order to identify potential indicators of eL2-SLI. Monolingual children with SLI have been found to show difficulties up to age 8 with lexical case but not with structurally assigned case. In locative PPs, which assign lexical dative case in German (e.g. Abraham 2001) (cf. example (1)), rates of correct case marking are especially low; omissions of the determiner and/or of the preposition as well as case substitutions are the major error types attested (Clahsen 1991, Eisenbeiss, Bartke & Clahsen 2006). Therefore, case marking in PPs could help disentangling SLI from TD development in eL2 as well.

Based on the spontaneous speech corpora of four children, Schönenberger et al. (2013) indeed report case to be problematic in eL2-SLI. However, the few existing studies on eL2-TD children's case marking in German have shown that case marking in locative PPs is still not target-like at age 10 and that the error patterns resemble MON-SLI (Gutzmann & Turgay 2011, Marouani 2006). To date, it is thus unclear whether case marking in PPs, which is severely impaired in MON-SLI, may also indicate SLI in eL2 or whether the acquisition is delayed both in eL2-TD and in eL2-SLI. As no detailed analyses of error and developmental patterns have been reported for eL2-SLI, it is open how eL2-learners with SLI acquire case in locative PPs and whether they show persistent difficulties in this domain. This study addresses the following research questions: (Q1) Do eL2-TD and eL2-SLI children differ in the acquisition of case in locative PPs regarding error frequency and error types? (Q2) Do eL2-TD and eL2-SLI children differ regarding their development over time?

22 eL2-TD (at T1: 03;7 years) and 11 eL2-SLI children (at T1: 07;1 years) participated in four test rounds within a two year interval (T1-T4). All children had an age-appropriate nonverbal IQ. The eL2-SLI children were diagnosed by a language therapist as language-impaired and all performed below 1SD in  $\geq 2$  subtests of a standardized test (LiSe-DaZ, XXXX & Tracy 2011). Using an elicited production task, 246 utterances were elicited that contained locative PPs like (1). These were coded for (non-)target case marking and omission/presence of determiner and preposition.

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Regarding error frequency (Q1), the eL2-SLI children produced significantly more errors than the eL2-TD children at T3 and T4 (T3:  $\text{Chi}^2(1) = 31,2$   $p < .001$  and T4:  $\text{Chi}^2(1) = 5,5$   $p < .05$ ) (Table 1). The error types are similar for both groups. However, regarding the development over time (Q2), the eL2-SLI group showed persistent difficulties when compared to the considerably younger group of eL2-TD children. Regarding individual mastery, only one eL2-SLI child performed target-like (i.e. 3/3 items correct) at T4, while 13 eL2-TD children are at ceiling, see (2) and (3) for illustration.

This is the first study to show that eL2-SLI children exhibit persistent difficulty with the acquisition of case in locative PPs. Unlike structural case assignment in indirect dative objects, which is problematic for eL2-TD and for eL2-SLI children (XXXX in prep.), case marking in locative PPs is a promising indicator of SLI in eL2 children for German. Further research is required to investigate whether this holds for other languages with overt case marking as well.

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## Examples

(1) Das Eichhörnchen sitzt...? - auf dem Baum

The squirrel sits...? - on theDAT tree

(2) eL2-TD: Child 2119: Responses across T1 to T4

Baum (3;11) - in den Baum (4;5) - in dem Baum (4;10) - auf dem Baum (6;0)

tree in theAKK tree in theDAT tree on theDAT tree

(3) eL2-SLI: Child 2175: Responses across T1 to T4

Baum (7;2) - Baum (7;8) - ein Baum (8;3) - in den Baum (9;3)

tree tree aNOM tree in theAKK tree