**6. Onset of grammatical contrasts in the child’s development**

In this chapter, the child’s grammatical development in the pre-morphological stage, i.e., in the stage in which grammatical categories have not yet been acquired, will be briefly illustrated. The focus of our attention will be first syntactic relationships, their formal aspects and semantic content that the child attempts to convey. Some formal manifestation of first grammatical categories may be present, but it is not presupposed that in the pre-morphological stage the child is aware of the functions embedded in inflectional endings, although he may use some of them actively. During the very first period of speech development, a child acquiring an inflected language must acquire a set of different operations (Voeikova, 1997: 37):

1) stem/inflection division (model of form)

2) use of the same stem with different inflections (model of paradigm)

3) use of different stems with the same inflections (model of grammar class)

The description of grammar in the pre-morphological stage and the transition to the protomorphological stage, when grammatical categories are acquired, will help us understand the interrelationship between the pragmatic and grammatical dimensions at the beginning of language development.

**6.1. First syntactic relations**

Syntagmas first appeared in the target child’s oral productions at the age of 1.11 (one year, 11 months), i.e., the age at which the active vocabulary of the child reached 50 lexemes. Among the first syntactic relationships were syntagmas denoting the quality of some subject (predication), all examples in chapter 6 were taken from diary records:

1.11.9

/ja:jI ɲam/ target form: jahody jsou ňam

strawberries-shortened form + yummy (probable interpretation: strawberries are good)

1.11.23

/mI gaŋgI/ target form: Myslík je gauner

name of the child-shortened + punk-simplified form (probable interpretation: I (Myslík) am a punk)[[1]](#footnote-1)

Possession also appears among the first syntactic relationships:

1.11.23

/kaxŋ mam/ target form: kaši mám

porridge-simplified form + have-1sg. (probable interpretation: I have a porridge)

1.11.13

/ba:ba va, ba:ba IʧI/ target form: babička má lva, babička má tygříka

granny-nom. sg. baby talk + lion-acc. sg., granny-nom. sg. + tiger-simplified form (probable interpretation – assertive utterance: granny has a lion, granny has a tiger; directive utterance: granny, give me a lion, give me a tiger is also possible)

In different contexts, the child used the same syntagm to express (most probably) change of possession: granny gave me a lion, granny gave me a tiger. The first usage of the accusative in its primary function (direct object) appeared; however, it cannot be concluded that the child was aware of its function, he used the accusative form *lva / lion-acc. sg.* as a base form at this age as well:

\*MOT: *co to je?*

what is it?

\*MYS: *(l)va*

lion-acc. sg.

Similarly, it cannot be assumed that 1sg. in verbs had been acquired, although it appeared in the child’s oral production (*mám / I have*). The documentation illustrates that the child used the form of 1sg. more or less arbitrarily. Nevertheless, the first syntactic relationships that appeared in the pre-morphological stage suggest that the verbs *být / to be* and mít */ to have* will be among the first conjugated forms acquired, as supported by subsequent development in the protomorphological stage. Similarly, nominative and accusative singular of nouns, which appear as base forms in the pre-morphology, will be among the first nominal categories acquired.

In the first period, the wh-question also appeared; the form could be interpreted as an omission of the verb *být / to be*:

1.11.26

/kam IʧI/ target form: kde je tygřík?

where (to) + tiger-simplified form (probable interpretation: where is the tiger? where did you put the tiger?)

To summarize, among the very first syntactic relationships were possession, expressed by the verb *mít / to have*, which could also be omitted; and verbonominal predication, also with the omitted copula *být / to be*. This development suggests that the nominative expressing the subject or the nominal part of the verbonominal predicate and accusative expressing a direct object will be the first nominal categories acquired. With respect to verbs, the development in the pre-morphological stage suggests that forms of auxiliaries will be acquired sooner than forms of lexical verbs.

**6.2 Nominal categories: number**

The first plural forms appeared with several nouns; however, the child used only plural forms of these words, not singular forms:

1.10

/popI/ target form: ponožky

socks-simplified form

1.11

/ja:jI/ target form: jahody

strawberries-simplified form

1.11

/bambojI/ target form: brambory

potatoes

It is therefore presupposed that these forms were rote-learned and that the child had not yet acquired the contrast between singular and plural. The first contrastive forms started to appear at the age of two, although the child used only one universal overgeneralized ending:

2.0.12

/pIma/target form: plena

nappy-nom. sg. feminine

2.0.12

/pImI/ target form: pleny

nappies-nom. pl.[[2]](#footnote-2)

1.9.9

/mɛ:ma/target form: medvěd

bear-nom. sg. simplified form

2.1.15

/mɛ:mI/ target form: medvědi

bears-nom. pl.

2.1.0

/haha/ target form: šašek

clown-nom. sg. simplified form

2.2.2

/haʃI/ target form: šašci

clowns-nom. pl.

2.2.0

/paha/ target form: prase

pig-nom. sg. simplified form

2.2.2

/paʃI/ target form: prasata

pigs-nom. pl.

In the subsequent period, the child formed plurals analogically using the universal (overgeneralized) ending, which is the most frequent plural ending in Czech (-i/y).[[3]](#footnote-3) Similar findings were documented by Pačesová (1979).

2.2.5

/maʃI/ target form: mroži

walruses-nom. pl. masculine animate

2.2.5

/pɛʃI/ target form: psi

dogs-nom. pl. masculine animate

2.2.5.

/haɲI/ target form: sloni

elephants-nom. pl. masculine animate

At the age of two years and one / two months, the child began to understand number as a grammatical category. This claim is supported by the fact that the child started to count objects and used first numerals, although mostly incorrectly; the form /ʃIʃI/(target form: čtyři) */* fourwas used to denotate any number bigger than one:

2.1.8

/ʃIʃI ka:kI/ target form: čtyři králíci

four rabbits but can mean two or more rabbits

2.1.10

/ʃIʃI vamI/ čtyři zvířata

four animals but can mean two or more animals

**6.3 Nominal categories: case**

At approximately the same age, i.e. two years and one or two months, another contrastive form started to appear, namely, the contrast between the nominative and accusative cases. The child began to distinguish a direct object from a subject of an utterance.

At the age of 2.1.24, the first masculine forms occurred; no feminine and neuter nouns were used in the accusative:

/pua/ Winnie the Pooh-acc. sg. versus nom. sg. form /pu:/

/vama/ animal-acc. sg. versus nom. sg. form */vam/* (however, the target form *zvíře*, which is neuter, has the same form in the nominative and accusative)

/boba/ bobík-acc. sg. (name of baby food) versus nom. sg. form /bob/(simplified form)

The first accusative form of a feminine noun occurred at age 2.3.18, when the child commented on the fact that a grandfather repaired a broken lamp:

/ɟaɟa jampu / target form: děda (missing verb) lampu

grandpa-nom. sg. simplified form + lamp-acc. sg.

The first occurrences of grammatical contrasts signal the transition to the protomorphological stage. However, during the first half of the third year, the use was still sporadic and occurred only with some nouns; thus it cannot be claimed that the protomorphological stage had fully started.

**6.4 Nominal categories: gender**

At the same age, two years and two months, a pre-concept of gender was manifested in overgeneralization. In Czech, a consonant ending is typical for masculine nouns and is rare in feminine nouns. The most frequent feminine ending is –a, although some feminine nouns have a consonant ending. The child used those feminine nouns that end with a consonant in modified form, adding the most typical feminine ending –a. This tendency to overgeneralize has been described in previous studies (Pačesová, 1979).

2.2.26

/mIʃa/target form: myš

mouse-nom. sg. feminine

Similarly, the child modified feminine nouns ending with –e, which is less frequent than the ending –a:

2.2.26

/kaʃa/ target form: kaše

porridge-nom. sg. feminine

The general label /vam/, which the child used for all animals of all genders (most probably a simplified form of *zvíře*, modifieddue to difficult pronunciation), began to be used only for masculine and neuter nouns at the age of two years and two months. Animals of feminine gender were labelled as /vama/; again, the most frequent feminine nominative singular ending was added. Thus it appears that at age 2.2, pre-concepts of all nominal categories started to appear: gender (contrast between masculine / neuter and feminine nouns); case (contrast between nominative and accusative in masculine nouns); and number (contrast of singular and plural in nominative). Nevertheless, all categories were used unsystematically and inconsistently, with the nominative singular of all used nouns as the prevalent base form.

**6.5 First forms of verbs**

At the same age of two years and two months, the first inflected verbs started to appear. The 3rd person present tense active became a base form (due to its frequency) used for a long time universally for all three persons, i.e., to refer to the speaker (the child himself), the listener or other people or animals.

2.2.24

/ka:va tɛka:/ target form: kráva trká

cow-nom. sg. feminine + butt-3sg. present

2.3.1

*/ma:ma maj*ɛ/ target form: máma myje

mother-nom. sg. feminine + wash-3sg. present

2.3.23

/fɛʃ bIka:/ target form: fleš bliká

flash dics-nom. sg. feminine + blink-3sg. present

2.3.25

/kIk dɛ/ target form: kluk jde

boy-nom. sg. masculine animate + go-3sg. present, referring to himself

However, most utterances contained no verb, e.g., at age 2.3.17, the child produced a following narration of a story he knew from a magazine:

/pIʃa ɟafI, capa jau, mImI ma:pa/

target form: pes (missing verb) dveře, ťapa jau, Mimi (missing verb) náplast

dog-nom. sg. simplified + door-pluralia tantum simplified, paw-nom. sg. feminine + ouch, Mimi-proper name in nom. sg. + plaster-nom. sg. simplified

content:

A dog injured his paw pinching it in the door; the paw ached; his friend Mimi put a plaster on it.

In this narration, the absence of any verb is obvious, however, some nominal categories appeared. The lexeme denoting door exists in Czech only in plural form and belongs to pluralia tantum. The child seemed to be aware of the necessity to use the plural form, although he used the incorrect plural ending (overgeneralization of final –I); the case cannot be distinguished, and the form used by the child /ɟafI/ only distantly resembles the target form *dveře*. The nominative plural has the same form as the accusative plural in most nouns (feminine, neuter and masculine inanimate). Interestingly, the child also used the non-existent singular form /ɟafa/ to mean one door; he chose to give it a feminine gender ending, and in fact, the lexeme *dveře* belongs to the feminine pluralia tantum.

The accusative singular of feminine nouns had not been fully acquired yet, and the child used the nominative as a base form, however, in this case, the form of nominative and accusative singular is identical /ma:pa/  *náplast / plaster*. The level of acquisition of nominal categories was still low; however, the first grammatical concepts started to form.

Only three months later, more grammatical forms started to appear, namely, past participles suggesting that a category of verbal tense was likely to develop in the subsequent period:

2.6

/mɛ:ɟi:ka sundalI/

teddy bear-acc. sg. masculine animate + take down-past participle plural

(neighbours took off the teddy bear from the window)

In the previous example, the past participle has the same form as the past preterite. However, we assume that the child used only the past participle because, apart from the 3rd person singular and plural, the auxiliary is needed to form the past tense, and at this stage of development, the child was not able to use auxiliaries yet; his speech remained telegraphic. The development of verbal categories became most apparent with the verb *být / to be*, of which the child used several forms; at two years and five / six months, the following forms were recorded: 3sg. present tense negated /nɛɲI/ *is not*, 3sg. past tense feminine /bIla/ *(she) was*, 3sg. future tense /budɛ/ *will be*. At this stage, the child also started to use negation. The infinitive was used in a directive function:

2.6.22

/vozIt kuka mamIŋka/ target form: vozit kluka maminka

drive-inf. + boy-acc. sg. masculine animate + mummy-nom. sg. (mummy should drive a boy)

The occurrence of new grammatical categories suggests that the pre-morphological stage had ended, and the child had moved to protomorphology. Since 2.8, the development has been audiorecorded, and data have been quantified.

**6.6 Adverbial relations**

At 2.3, the child started to express local relationships. However, the usage of inflectional endings of nouns remained inconclusive, and verbs were mostly missing:

2.3.4

/pua kabI/ target form: Pú je v krabici

Pooh-acc. sg. (used as a base form) + box-simplified form (Pooh is in the box)

2.3.10

/Iva pIʧ/ target form: Iva je pryč

Iva- proper name nom. sg. + away (Iva is away)

In the pre-morphological stage, adverbial relations were mostly expressed without any prepositions; however, fixed prepositional phrases appeared occasionally, most probably rote-learned:

2.5.5

/mi:ʃa paku/ target form: míša z parku (preposition missing)

teddy bear-nom. sg. diminutive + park-gen. sg. masculine inanimate (teddy bear from the park)

2.5.8

/kɛ:m a capI/ krém na ťapy (uses lexeme ťapa, which refers to paw)

cream-nom. sg. masculine inanimate + preposition simplified + paw-acc. pl. feminine

(cream for hands)

2.5.9

/kapkI a aɲca/ target form: kapky na auta

drop-nom. pl. feminine + preposition simplified + car-acc. pl. neuter (rain drops falling on the cars)

2.5.26

/jɛkI a pufI/ target form: léky do pusy

pill-acc. pl. masculine inanimate + preposition simplified + mouth-gen. sg. feminine

(pills into the mouth)

The use of phrases containing prepositions foreshadows the protomorphological stage in which grammatical categories will be acquired and the child will be able to express various syntactic relationships. The age between 2.5 and 2.7 can be considered a transitional phase between pre-morphology and protomorphology when pre-concepts of first morphological contrasts appear but are not used systematically. In the following chapters, the acquisition of individual grammatical categories in the protomorphological stage will be described in detail. The protomorphological stage lasted in the target child from 2.8 till 3.6, characterized by an increase in contrastive forms and the occurrence of miniparadigms (MPs).

1. The child exhibited a tendency of being proud of being naughty and disliked being called a good boy [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. These forms are interpreted as nominative; however, we cannot be sure that a different case, e.g., the accusative, was not intended because the forms of nom. pl. and acc. pl. are the same. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There is no difference in the pronunciation of i and y; the difference is only orthographic. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)