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Sommario/riassunto

Language acquisition is a developmental process. Research on
spontaneous processes of both children learning their mother tongue
and adults learning a second language has shown that particular stages
of acquisition can be discriminated. Initially, learner utterances can be
accounted for in terms of a language system that is relatively simple. In
studies on second language acquisition this learner system is called the
Basic Variety (Klein and Perdue 1997). Utterance structure of the Basic
Variety is determined by a grammar which consists of lexical structures
that are constrained, for example, by semantic principles such as "The
NP-referent with highest control comes first" and a pragmatic principle
such as "Focus expression last". At some point in acquisition this
lexical-semantic system is given up in favour of a target-like system
with morpho-syntactic features to express the functional properties of
finiteness, topicality, the determiner system, etc. Insights into how this
process evolves may also provide an answer to the question of why it
takes place. Within this functional perspective on language acquisition
research focuses on questions such as the following. 1. What is the
driving force behind the process that causes learners to give up a
simple lexical-semantic system in favour of a morpho-syntactic
functional category system? 2. What is the added value of morpho-
syntactic properties of inflection, word-order variation, definiteness
and agreement? 3. Why is it that in cases of specific language
impairment it is mainly morpho-syntactic properties of the target
language that are affected?
