

# THE EMERGENCE OF MORPHOLOGY - A CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH

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**A)** For us linguists who deal with the acquisition of morphology in the hope of obtaining in this way new insights into the nature of morphology and of offering psycholinguists and psychologists new problems of common interest, there exist fundamental questions such as:

a) How can we explain that young children appear to acquire very different morphological systems in similar ways?

b) Should we, therefore, assume a sizable number of innate, specifically morphological principles of universal grammar (UG)? Such solutions are best known from work inspired by generative grammar. The most radical solution is embodied in the "strong continuity hypothesis" (Poeppel & Wexler 1993, Dittmar & Penner 1998), whereby the principles and constraints of UG are latent from the beginning and unfold in the acquisition of the respective internal language. UG provides constraints and triggers parametrized choices. Both external modularity (grammar vs. other cognitive modules) and internal modularity (e.g. syntax vs. morphology vs. phonology) are then considered to be innate (cf. Nølle & Adam 1999)

c) But how then can we account for the great time lags in the emergence of morphological structures across languages? Not just in regard to languages with very complex morphologies, such as Russian, where the acquisition of morphology takes longer than, e.g., in Italian. On the contrary, as Slobin (1997) has insisted, children start

earlier to acquire the rich inflectional morphology of Turkish than the very poor inflectional morphology of English.

d) And why is then "innate" morphological grammar nearly absent in certain isolating languages? This distinguishes morphology radically from other components or modules of grammar: there is and there can be no language without syntax or without segmental phonology or without prosodic phonology, but a language without any morphological grammar is easily conceivable.

e) However, if we take the opposite position and negate innateness of morphology, how then can we explain the many similarities in the acquisition of morphology in apparently all languages independent of their specific structures, and how can we explain the similar structural principles, that seem to be at work in the acquisition of morphology? And finally, how can we explain the fundamental similarities of target morphologies, despite of their enormous dissimilarities?

**B)** An international attempt to answer these basic and many derived questions is represented by the "Crosslinguistic Project on Pre- and Protomorphology in Language Acquisition" organized in behalf of the Austrian Academy of Sciences (cf. Dressler ed. 1997a, Dziubalska-Koaczyk ed. 1997, Gillis ed. 1998, Bittner et al. 2000). The aim of this project is to compare the acquisition of morphology in about 20 languages by