

Morpheme Acquisition Order in spoken and written texts of German students learning English

Theoretical background (see also Saville-Troike & Barto 2017: 45ff and Ortega 2009: 124ff)

Brown’s 14 morphemes in First Language Acquisition

Roger Brown and his colleagues began to document the acquisition of language in children by recording their developing speech in 1962.

In 1973 Brown’s findings were published in *First Language: The Early Stages*.

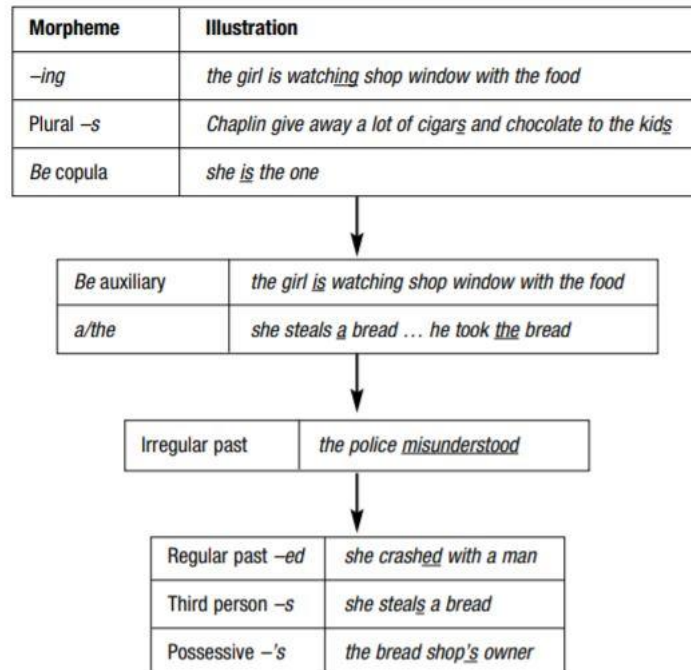
- Brown took speech samples of 3 children every 1 or 2 weeks from the time each child was about 2 years old
- Finding: 14 grammatical morphemes were acquired in a remarkably similar sequence
- Follow up studies came to the same conclusion

Order	Morpheme
1	Present progressive (verb + <i>-ing</i>)
2-3	<i>in, on</i>
4	Plural (noun + <i>-s</i>)
5	Past irregular (i.e. <i>ran, saw, went</i>)
6	Possessive (noun + <i>-s</i>)
7	Uncontractible copula (<i>is, am, are, was</i>)
8	Articles (<i>a, the</i>)
9	Past regular (verb + <i>-ed</i>)
10	Third person regular (verb + <i>-s</i>)
11	Third person irregular (i.e. <i>does, has</i>)
12	Uncontractible auxiliary (<i>is, am, are, was</i>)
13	Contractible copula (i.e. <i>I'm, she's, they're</i>)
14	Contractible auxiliary (i.e. <i>I'm going</i>)

Table 1. Acquisition order for English as a First Language, from Brown (1973), p. 281

Krashen's (1977) review shows a similar pattern for Second Language Acquisition.

Table 2: Morpheme accuracy order in SLA (from: Ortega 2009: 125).



Research questions

- 1. Does the acquisition order also work for German students learning English?
- 2. Does the acquisition order work for written and spoken language?
- 3. Is there a crucial difference between written and spoken language?

Data

- 20 recordings from 6th grade students, first year of learning English
 - 10 oral recordings of interactions with the teacher
 - 10 written texts of a grammar test

Method

- Three different morphemes were selected representing different ranks in the morpheme acquisition order and analyzed in written and spoken language from samples of German students in their first year of learning English
 - Plural -s
 - Auxiliary *do*
 - Third Person -s

Table 3: This chart details at what age the three morphemes typically emerge (Brown 1973, De Houwer 1990: 225).

Morphemes	Age of Acquisition in Months
Plural <i>-s</i>	24 – 33
Auxiliary <i>do</i>	27 – 39
Third Person <i>-s</i>	26 – 46

- An error rate was calculated to determine how well a morpheme was acquired

Results

I. Written and spoken language combined:

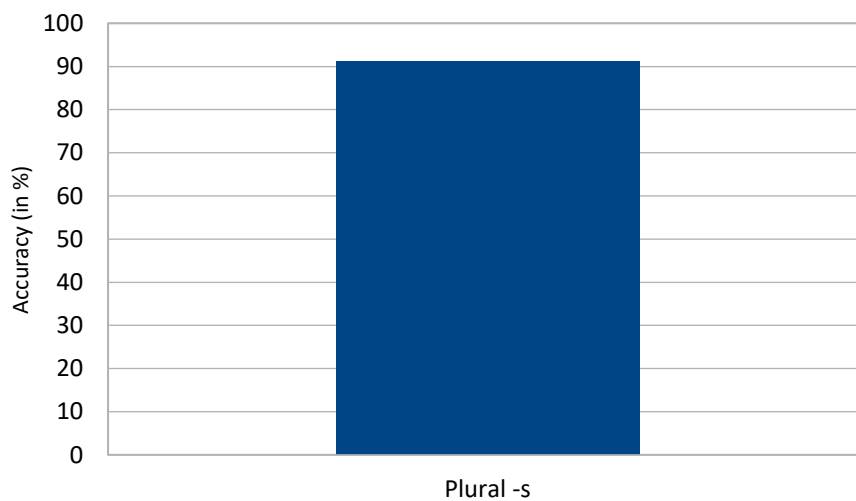


Fig. 1 Correct use of plural *-s*

The correct usage of the plural *-s* in written and spoken language combined was very high at just over 90 %.

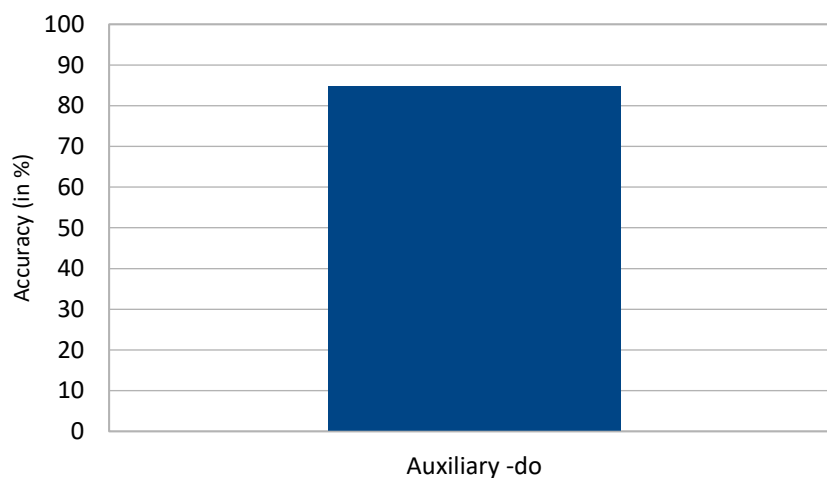


Fig. 2 Correct use of auxiliary *do*

The correct usage of the auxiliary *do* in written and spoken language was also quite high at around 85 %.

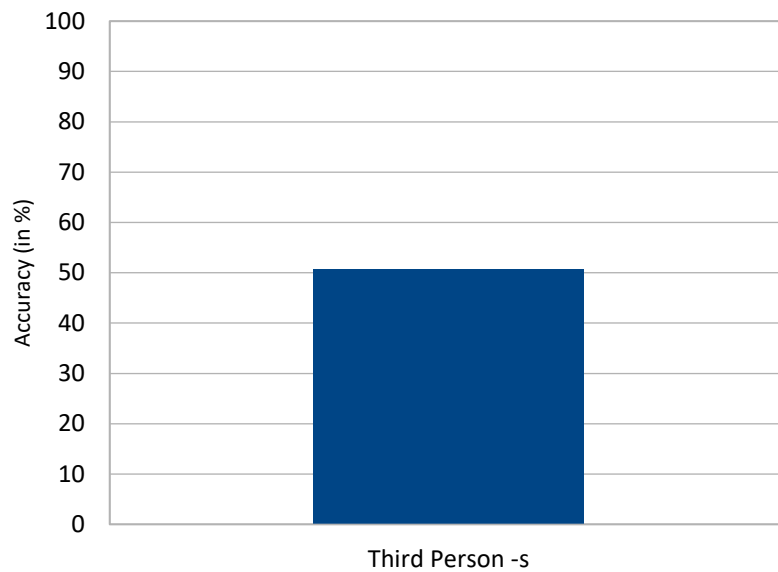


Fig. 3 Correct use of third person -s

The correct use of the third person -s was only approximately around 50 %.

- Krashen's and Brown's expected morpheme acquisition order seems to apply in the context of German students learning English.

II. Comparison of written and spoken language

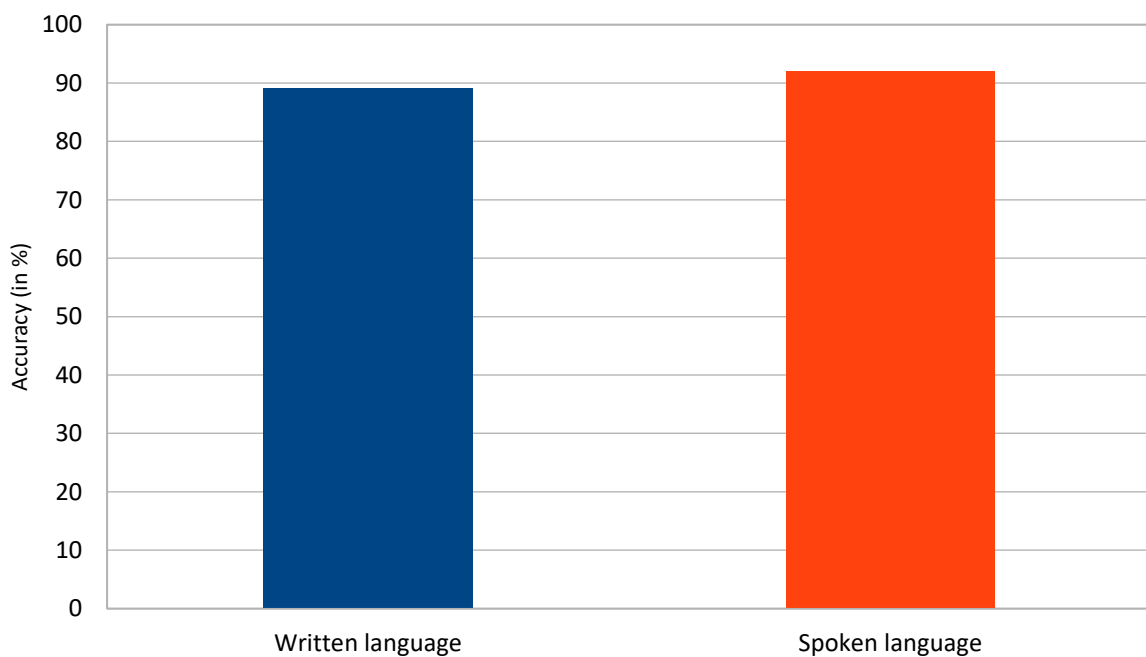


Fig.4 Correct use of plural -s in written and spoken language

The correct use of the plural -s was nearly the same for written and spoken language.

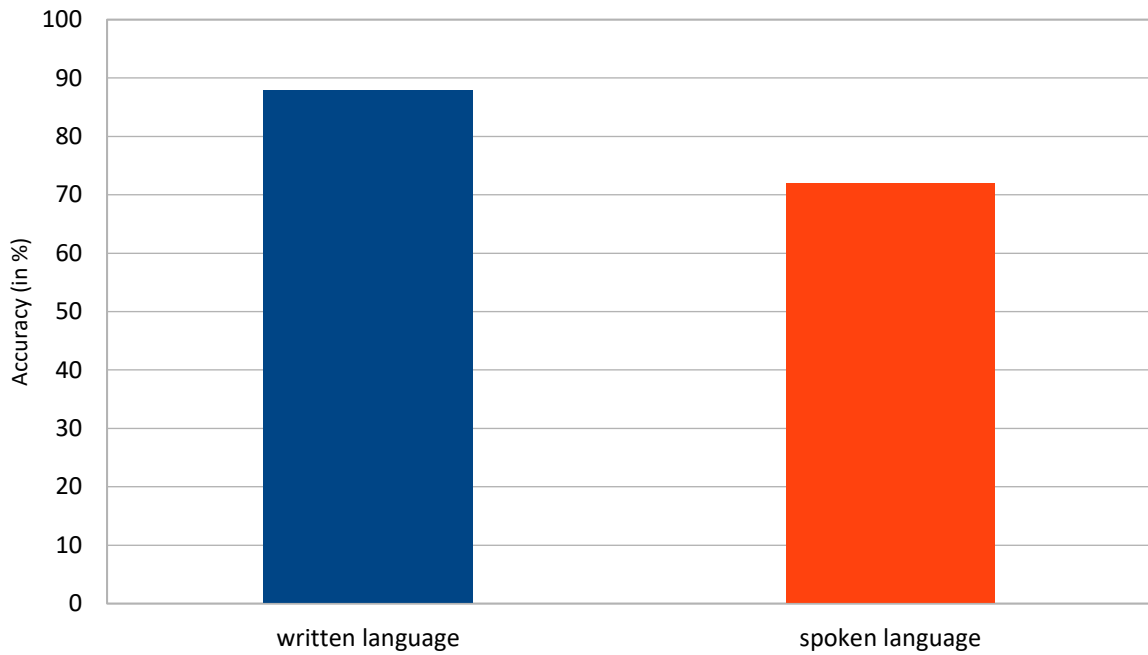


Fig. 5 Correct use of auxiliary *do* in written and spoken language

The use of auxiliary *do* was correct in 88% percent of the cases in written language and 72% in spoken language.

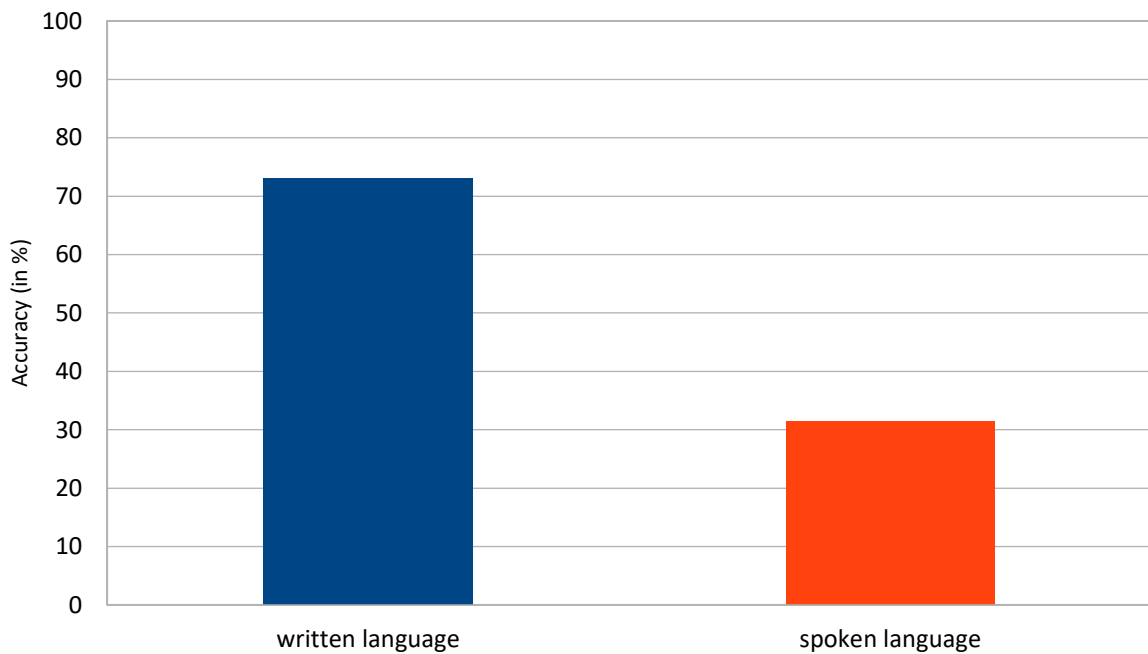


Fig. 6 Correct use of third person *-s* in written and spoken language

The correct use of the Third Person *-s* was 73% percent in written and 31 % in spoken language.

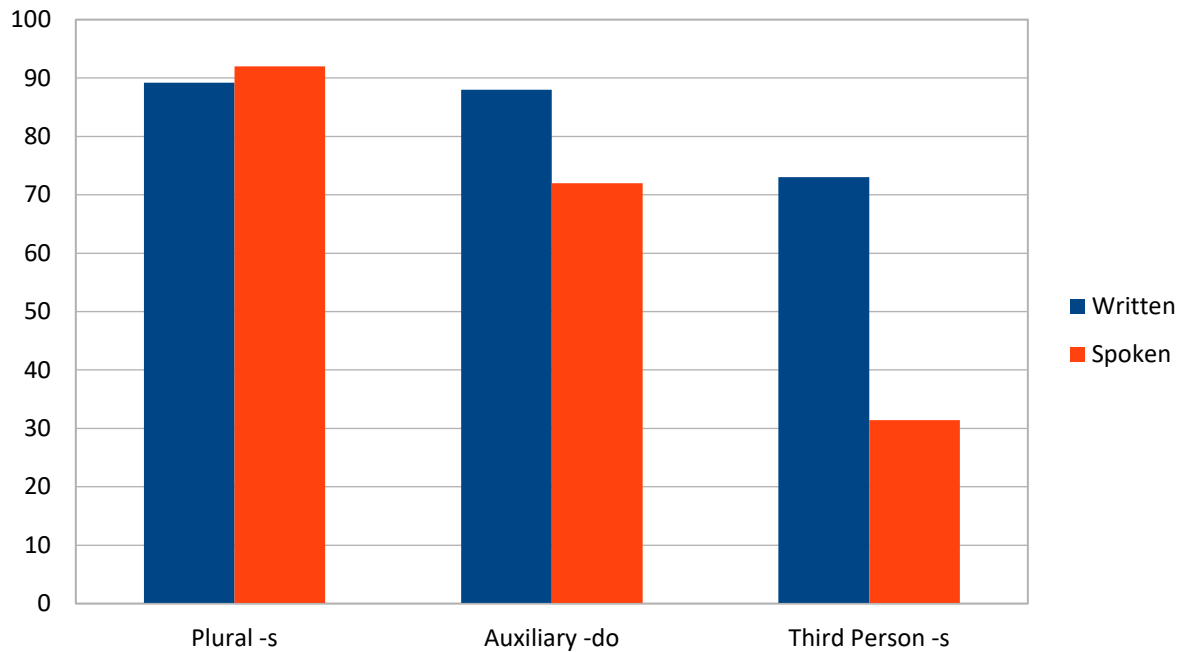


Fig. 7 Correct use of written and spoken language according to the individual morphemes

- Brown's morpheme acquisition order and the acquisition order in SLA seem to be correct both for written and spoken language
- However, crucial differences in the error rate between spoken and written language for auxiliary *do* and third person *-s* can be found
 - Possible reasons for this deviation:
 - In pencil and grammar tests performers can focus on form and have time to think about specific expressions
 - Little processing time in oral speech

Conclusion

1. The morpheme acquisition order applies to German students learning English
2. The morpheme acquisition order applies to written and spoken language
3. There is a crucial difference between written and spoken language

The results of this project, however, must be considered with caution. The amount of data may point in one direction, but ten participants for each category are not enough to get significant results. Another aspect is that only 3 morphemes were analyzed. For further and significant outcomes, more participants should be investigated, and all morphemes should be analyzed.

References

Brown, R. (1973). *A first language: The early stages*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

De Houwer, A. (1990). *The Acquisition of Two Languages from Birth: A Case Study*. Cambridge University Press.

Krashen, S. (1977) Some issues relating to the Monitor Model. In H. D. Brown, C. Yorio and R. Crymes (Eds.) *On TESOL '77: Teaching and Learning English as a Second Language: Trends in Research and Practice*. Washington: TESOL. pp. 144-158.

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