

**Are relative clauses derived from main clauses?
Evidence from an elicited imitation experiment in German**

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This study investigated the role of verb placement, V2 vs. verb-final (V-fin), in the acquisition of German relative clauses (RCs). In German RCs, the verb usually occupies the final position (1a). However, under specific conditions, so-called integrated V2 structures (iV2) as in (1b) are licensed (Gärtner 2001a/b).

- | | | |
|---|---|--------------|
| (1) <i>Hier gibt es zwei Frauen,</i>
Here is there two women | a. <i>die den Präsident getroffen haben</i>
who the:ACC president met have | V-Fin |
| | b. <i>die haben den Präsident getroffen</i>
who have the:ACC president met | iV2 |
- “There are two women that met the President.”

Acquisition studies have argued that iV2 structures are the first RC-like structures used by children up to the age of 4 (Diessel & Tomasello 2005, Brandt et al. 2008). The structures reported to be produced by the children are mainly of the type in (2).

- (2) *Die Biene, die holt ein Mittagessen*
the bee PRON:FEM gets a lunch
“The bee that/she is getting lunch” (Brandt et al. 2008)

Importantly, they do not meet all licensing conditions for iV2 structures. The conditions are as follows (cf. Gärtner 2001 a/b): (a) the predicate in the main clause must be presentational/existential, (b) the antecedent must be indefinite and specific, (c) the iV2 must be introduced by the *der/die/das*-pronoun; (d) the iV2 structure cannot be center-embedded; (e) the iV2 must be prosodically integrated in the main clause. Whereas V-fin RCs are subordinate clauses, iV2 structures are treated as main clauses coordinated to the clause containing the presentational/existential predicate (cf. (3)) (Endriss & Gärtner 2005, a.o).

- (3) [CoordinateP [CP1 ... DP_i ...] [Coord [CP2 Demonstrative_i V ...]]] (de Vries 2006)

It is unclear whether iV2 structures are indeed the first RCs in children’s production. In order to address this issue, we developed a picture-supported delayed-imitation task testing 3- to 5-year-old monolingual German-speaking children (Age 3 N=19; Age 4 N=23; Age 5 N=15) and 21 adults. The experiment comprised 24 test items, which differed in verb placement only: 12 V-fin items (4a) and 12 V2 items (4b).

(4) Example test items with picture

- | | | |
|---------------------------------|---|--------------|
| <i>Hier gibt es einen Mann,</i> | a. <i>der ein gefährliches Krokodil eingefangen hat</i> | V-Fin |
| | b. <i>der hat ein gefährliches Krokodil eingefangen</i> | iV2 |
- “Look, there is a man who caught a dangerous crocodile”



All stimuli met the conditions for licensing iV2 listed above (a-e) and licensed V-fin as well. Children's responses were analyzed according to how often verb placement of the test item was repeated and how often it was changed (V2 > V-fin and V-fin > V2). The adult controls performed at ceiling in both conditions. Children repeated V-fin RCs more often correctly than iV2 structures at all ages (Table 1). The difference was significant at age 3 ($\chi^2(1)=15.25$, $p<.001$) and at age 5 ($\chi^2(1)=21.38$, $p<.001$). Moreover, children changed iV2 structures into V-fin RCs more often than V-fin RCs into iV2 (Table 2). The odds of verb placement changes were 3.8 (Age 3) and 4.2 (Age 5) times higher in iV2 structures than in V-fin RCs.

Table 1: Correct repetitions by condition (%)

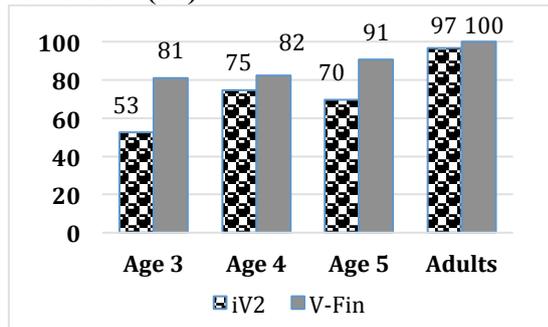
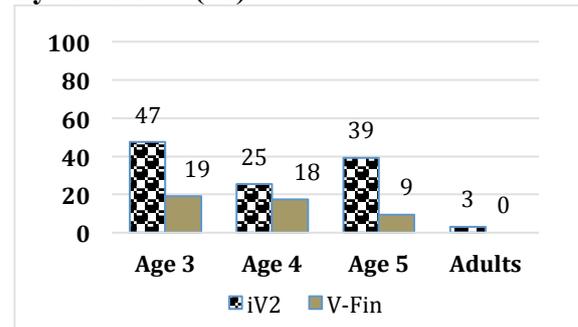


Table 2: Repetitions with Verb-Change by condition (%)



In sum, our experimental results reveal a robust preference for V-fin RCs over iV2 structures and a clear tendency to change the verb placement from V2 to V-fin, especially in the youngest group of children. These findings are inconsistent with the results in Brandt et al. (2008) and, moreover, challenge the coordination analysis for iV2 structures (cf. (3)). We propose that iV2 structures are a subtype of subordination and children parse them as subordinate clauses, activating the canonical V-fin word-order for such clauses. Future research is needed to integrate these findings into the general acquisition path of V-fin and iV2 RCs.

Selected references

- Brandt Silke, Diessel Holger & Michael Tomasello. (2008). The acquisition of German relative clauses: A case study. *Journal of Child Language* 35. 325-348 the topic of topic-comment. *Lingua* 115: 691-710.
- Gärtner Hans Martin (2001b). Are there V2 relative clauses in German? *Journal of Comparative German Linguistics* 3: 97-141.