PRESCHOOL LANGUAGE ACQUISITION OF INUKTITUT: A CASE STUDY OF ONE INUK BOY

SHANLEY E.M. ALLEN, Department of Linguistics, McGill University, 1001 Sherbrooke Street West, Montreal, Quebec, H3A 1G5

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ABSTRACT

Though cross-linguistic acquisition is an area of wide current interest in the field of linguistics, little work has been done on the acquisition of polysynthetic languages, including Inuktitut — the language spoken by some 23,000 Inuit of Canada’s Far North. The present paper will present a descriptive overview of general patterns of acquisition in the speech of one preschool Inuk boy taped at four-month intervals from between the ages of 1 year, 9 months to 2 years, 9 months in naturalistic communication situations at his home in northern Quebec. After some broad observations concerning vocabulary and sentence complexity, focus will be placed on the appearance of inflection on both standard adult and baby words, and the development of use of the inflectional system.

Key words: Inuktitut, language acquisition, northern Quebec.

RESUME

Bien que le domaine de l’acquisition inter-linguistique en soit un des plus intéressants, peu d’études ont été consacrées au problème de l’acquisition des langues polysynthétiques telles que l’inuktitut, la langue maternelle des 23,000 Inuits du nord canadien. Ce travail présentera une vue d’ensemble des étapes d’acquisition chez un enfant inuk d’âge préscolaire. Le sujet a été enregistré sur vidéocassette à tous les quatre mois de l’âge de un an neuf mois à deux ans neuf mois, dans des situations de communication spontanée chez lui au Nouveau-Québec. Des observations d’ordre général, quant à l’acquisition du vocabulaire et de la complexité des phrases utilisées seront suivies d’une discussion sur l’inflection de la phrase tant dans le parler standard de l’adulte que dans celui de l’enfant, et sur le développement des paradigmes d’inflections nominale et verbale.

Mots-clés: Inuktitut, acquisition de langage, Nouveau Québec.

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the major research question of current generative grammar is “How does the child get from a vast, complex, and imperfect language input to an implicit knowledge of the complete adult grammar, seemingly without any explicit instruction?” This is known as the “logical problem of language acquisition” (Hornstein and Lightfoot 1981). Inuktitut is a particularly useful language to study in exploring this question since it appears, at least on the surface, to be much more intricate and complex for a child to learn than many languages studied so far.

Traditionally, acquisition research has focused on major languages of the western hemisphere, such as English, German, and French; a plethora of detailed studies on many aspects of each of these is available. Since 1967, however, a portion of the acquisition community has begun to focus consciously on cross-linguistic research, resulting in a number of studies in a geographically and structurally diverse sampling of languages (cf. Slobin 1985 and references therein). Unfortunately, acquisition research in the Inuktitut languages of Canada’s Far North remains remarkably sparse. Following a structural approach, Wilman (1988) assesses frequency of morpheme use in Canadian Inuit children aged six and seven. Two studies of acquisition in West Greenlandic, a closely related dialect spoken in Greenland, are also available: Fortescue (1985) briefly describes the degree of acquisition attained by a Greenlandic boy at 2 years, 3 months while Fortescue and Lennert Olsen (in press) analyze the morphology and related factors in the speech of five Greenlandic children aged 1 year, nine months to 5 years, 2 months. Following an ethnographic approach, Crago (1988) details several aspects of the acquisition of communicative competence of four Inuit children of Nouveau Québec aged 1 year to 2 years, nine months. However, no systematic study has yet been undertaken of the acquisition of the structural aspects of Inuktitut in northern Canada at the preschool age.

Inuktitut is a morphophonologically complex language of polysynthetic structure with vast nominal and verbal inflectional paradigms. Each of these aspects, as well as many others, places it in a unique class in terms of the problems it presents for child learners. Comparison with acquisition patterns for learners of other languages of varying idiosyncracies and structures may well shed new light on various aspects of both acquisition and linguistic theory. It is evident, therefore, that the acquisition of Inuktitut is an area of research that is of both current interest and theoretical relevance. In addition, there are many practical situations in which such research usefully could be applied.

The present paper offers a preliminary analysis of longitudinal acquisition data from one preschool Inuk boy as a first step in providing a basis for future and more detailed analysis. The descriptive analysis herein
is based on production data from one Inuk boy named Jaaji, from the ages of one year, nine months to two years, nine months. These data were collected by videotape in natural family communication situations over the period of a year, at four-months intervals. Each taping session comprised five hours of videotape, half of which was transcribed and analyzed. The taping took place at Jaaji’s home in Kangirsuk, Nouveau Québec, approximately 1,000 miles north of Montreal on the west coast of Ungava Bay. The settlement functions primarily in Inuktitut, and all the conversation among Jaaji’s family takes place in Inuktitut.

GENERAL OVERVIEW

The following is a general overview of Jaaji’s language development throughout the duration of the study. First, some general information concerning the structure of Inuktitut will be provided. This is followed by a discussion of the concept of “productivity” of morphemes and its relationship to acquisition. Finally, Jaaji’s language abilities at various ages will be discussed and illustrated.

Structure

Inuktitut is an Eskimo-Aleut language encompassing several mutually-intelligible dialects and spoken by some 23,000 Inuit in northern Canada. Typologically, it is noted for its highly polysynthetic nature and consists of a nominal or verbal root followed by from 0 to 8 or more morphemes corresponding to Indo-European independent verbs, auxiliaries, deverbals, denominals, adverbials, adjectivals, and so on; then an obligatory inflectional suffix; and finally optional enclitics. A couple of sample words illustrate these characteristics. Nominal elements may include a variety of modifiers suffixed to the root, as in example (1):

(1) illukutaaraalukkut
    illu-kutaaq-raalu-k-kut
    house-long-big-VIDALsg
‘through the big long house’ (Dorais 1986:15)

This word begins with the root noun, followed by two adjectival modifiers and completed by a singular vialis inflection. Verbal elements typically show a greater degree of polysynthesis:

(2) Illujuaraalamuualursiinnginamalittauq
    illu-jaqu-raluq-mut-ur-lauq-sima-ngnit-nama-
    littauq
    house-big-very-ALLsg-go-PAST-PERF-NEG-1sS.CAUS-but.also
‘but also, because I never went to the really big house.’(Dorais 1986:8)

A nominal root modified by two adjectival morphemes and completed by a Case ending begins the word, followed by denominal, tense, aspect, and negation markers, then verbal inflection containing modality and agreement information, and finally an enclitic.

In English, omitting words in sentences is not permitted if a grammatical sentence is to be retained. However, since so much information about subject, object, and other elements is already encoded in the morphemes on the verb in Inuktitut, it is quite common in that language to have sentences in which redundant independent lexical noun phrases are omitted. Sentences, then, tend to consist only of one or more verbal clauses and such additional independent elements as locatives, question words, adjectivals, adverbials, and demonstratives. Even though few sentences contain the complete combination of overt subject, object, verb, and other modifiers, it is nevertheless generally accepted that Inuktitut word order is basically subject - object - verb (Fortescue 1984: 93 and others).

Lexicalization and Productivity

One of the great difficulties in any study of acquisition is to determine the point at which the child begins using a morpheme or structure productively. When does he/she stop repeating memorized, imitated forms and start devising ways of putting elements together to form his/her own novel utterances? The concepts of “lexicalized form” and “productive use” are important to understand and to define when discussing acquisition, since the goal is to determine the structures the child has mastered, whether consciously or not, rather than merely the lexical items he can say. In polysynthetic languages such as Inuktitut, this difficulty is multiplied due to the large amount of morphology allowing many more productive morphemes per word than in other language types.

Lexicalization means that the child treats as one indivisible unit what the adult or linguist would treat as divisible. One common example is the request for tea (3a) and its shortened form (3b):

(3a) Tiitumajunga
    tii-tuq-guma-junga
    tea-consume-want-1sS.INDIC
‘I want to have some tea.’ (3b) Tiitq.
    tii-tuq
    tea-consume
‘(I want) to have some tea.’

In the eyes of the linguist both (3a) and (3b) are morphologically complex forms as indicated in the second line of each example, especially since the morpheme -tuq is used productively with a variety of bases, including various food and drink items and vehicles used for transportation. However, this phrase is used so commonly that it is certainly a syntactically simple form treated as one unit in the eyes of the child.

Productivity, on the other hand, means that the child has at least subconsciously recognized a certain morpheme as having a particular function of its own in the word-building processes of a language. If an English-speaking child uses the form brought instead of brought, or if he uses the plural marker -s on ten different nouns when referring to two or more objects, we would say that he is using the past or plural morpheme in a pro-
ductive way since it is obvious that he is creating his own new forms rather than repeating memorized forms. In real transcripts of child language such clear indications of productivity rarely occur. Therefore, I will adopt the following criteria of productivity (following Fortescue and Lennert Olsen, in press):

(4) Criteria of Productivity

1. The morpheme in question is wrongly attached to its stem in terms of correct rules of phonology or morphology.

2. The morpheme in question appears in the transcription on at least two different stems, and preferably with two stems of phonologically different types so that two allomorphs of the morpheme must be produced.

3. The stem appears, with a different morpheme attached in the same place, elsewhere in the transcript.

The first criterion is obviously the most clear and strong, with the second and third following in that order.

Acquisition Patterns

Jaaji at 1 year, 9 months

During the first taping session at 1 year, 9 months of age Jaaji spoke in mostly one-word utterances (MLU=1.3). His most complex sentences were typical greetings as in (5) and statements of possession as in (6):

(5) Anaanai
   - anaana-ai
   - mother-hi
   - ‘Hi, Mommy.’

(6) Uutaup? Uutaup?
   - uuta-up uuta-up
   - rhoda-ERGsg rhoda-ERGsg
   - ‘Rhoda’s? Rhoda’s?’

It is significant that (5) is one of his earliest two-morpheme combinations to be productively acquired since heavy stress is placed by adults on the acquisition of appropriate greeting routines among young Inuit children (Crago 1988: 179 ff). At this age, Jaaji produced many more nouns than verbs, and his vocabulary focused mainly on animate beings (people and animals), food, and the enactment of personal desires. His vocabulary was almost completely limited to nouns and verbs, with only two noun and no productive verb inflections, one demonstrative word, one location word, and no question words.

Inuktitut also has a set of baby words that appear in the speech of and to young children up to about age three to three-and-a-half (Crago 1988: 160-161). They are phonologically simpler than, though not necessarily phonologically similar to, their adult counterparts, and may be suffixed with a variety of suffixes and inflections that can be rather complex. At 1 year, 9 months baby words were quite prevalent in Jaaji’s speech, appearing in approximately 18 per cent of his utterances. They included aloo ‘white person’, amaama ‘drink by sucking’, amu ‘go to bed’, apa ‘clothes’, apaapa ‘food’, apu ‘gone, no more’, atai ‘go out’, imii ‘drink water’, lulu ‘puppy’, uuva ‘bleeding’, and uuvu ‘truck’. Each of these appeared without any inflections, except imii which appeared once with an imperative inflection but in what is likely a lexicalized rather than productive form for Jaaji.

Jaaji at 2 years, 1 month

By the second taping session at 2 years, 1 month, Jaaji’s sentences were slightly longer, averaging just under two morphemes per utterance (MLU=1.9). However, his vocabulary had increased dramatically in this four-month period. In fact, his repertoire of verb “types” increased from 11 to 44, and the total number of verbal inflection “types” increased from 2 to 34. His noun repertoire also increased slightly, and in terms of proportional usage it begins to be more broadly spread among categories other than animate beings and food. Affixes of tense and aspect begin to appear occasionally, as do lone question words. Demonstratives and location words are quite common, and also appear unaffixed. Typical utterances are as in (7) - verb root with tense and inflection - and (8) - noun root with adjective and inflection:

(7) ‘HAANTA-langavitaa? haanta-langavitaa
   - honda-FUT-1pS.INTER skidoo-toy-my(1SgABS)
   - ‘Are we going to ride the ‘Honda’?’

(8) Sikituuqnguaraa! sikituuq-nguar-qa
   - My toy skidoo?’

As indicated in these examples, almost all nominals and verbal vacuums appear with appropriate Case and modality inflection respectively. There are a few instances of verbs without inflection:

(9) Amaamaliurtau
   - amaama-liuq-jau
   - drink by sucking-make-PASSIVE majuq
   - ‘Somebody make me climb.’
   - something to drink’.

However, such constructions are common in adult speech, and therefore do not constitute real errors of omission for the child. The opposite phenomenon, inflections without roots, is discussed below. By 2 years, 1 month baby words appeared in less than 3 per cent of Jaaji’s utterances. They included aataa ‘dangerous’, aloo ‘white person’, amaama ‘drink by sucking’, apaapa ‘food’, atai ‘go out’, and iihii ‘scary’. In almost every instance they now appear with affixes following:

(11) Ataigumajunga
    - atai-guma-junga
    - go.out-want-1s8.INDIC
    - ‘I want to go out.’

(12) Ihiiraalu?
    - iihii-raalu
    - scary-very
    - ‘Is it very scary?’
ACQUISITION OF INUKTUT

The adult word for atai, which is ani, appears at this age, but only in the phrase aniinnuaq ‘go out to play’, which is likely a lexicalized phrase in the child’s vocabulary and not morphologically complex.

Jaaji at 2 years, 5 months

Jaaji’s speech at this age was characterized by the gradual appearance of new vocabulary and the increasing use of and competence with various word-internal and inflectional affixes. Thus, both words and sentences increased in length in terms of morphemes (MLU=2.3). There were virtually no instances of roots that occurred uninflected, including locatives (13) and question words. Demonstratives begin to appear as enclitics attached to nouns, and in sentences with other words rather than alone (14):

(13) Uilli maaniqgit
  uilli maani-it-git
  willie here-be-2sS.IMPER
  ‘Willie, be here.’

Some adverbials were beginning to appear also, including the term imaad ‘like this’ used in instructing someone by example. Use of baby words decreases to around 1 per cent, including only three words: amaama, aita, and imii. They appeared in half of the utterances with appropriate inflections, and in the other half as bare roots.

Jaaji at 2 years, 9 months

Both sentences and words are becoming longer again at this age (MLU=2.5):

(15) Kutsuk piirqajangnitiu
  kutsuk piir-qajaq-ngit-juq
  gum come-off-can-NEG-3sS.PART
  ‘Is the chewing gum stuck?’
  (lit. ‘The gum can’t come off’)

(16) Una kuukuumik imaitutusilaarqanga,
  una kuuku-mik imaittuqsi-laax-vanga
  DEMsgABS kuukuu-SECsg this kind-buy-
  FUT-2sS/1sO.INDIC
  ‘Buy me some of that kuukuu some day.’

Example (15) represents one of Jaaji’s first uses of an overt subject, correctly marked for Case, and also a first appearance of the modal verb -qaaj - ‘can’. Example (16) shows a word that starts out as an adverbial noun, then turns into a verb when the morpheme -st- is added, and is followed by tense and inflectional affixes. Virtually all nouns, verbs, and other free morphemes are properly inflected at this age. Baby word vocabulary is again only three words: uquuq ‘animal’, amaama, and aita. They appear in less than 5 per cent of utterances, and even this frequency is primarily due to Jaaji’s whining for his bottle because he is in a very cranky mood.

NOMINAL INFLECTION

Structure

Nominals in Inuktitut are obligatorily marked for Case and number, and for person and number of possessor if applicable. There are three structural Cases: ergative (ERG), absolutive (ABS), and secondary (SEC); and five Cases that are more “semantic”: allative (ALL), ablative (ABL), locative (LOC), vialis (VIAL), and equative (EQU). As is typical for ergative languages, subjects of transitive verbs take ergative Case while objects of transitive verbs and subjects of intransitive verbs take absolutive Case. In certain situations, objects may also take secondary Case. Nominals may be marked for three numbers (singular, dual, plural) and possessor marking can occur in four persons (including third person coreferential to an NP in a higher clause) and three numbers. Possessor nominals take ergative Case which doubles as genitive Case in Inuktitut.

Acquisition Patterns

At age 1 year, 9 months Jaaji’s inflectional system is practically non-existent; in fact, he uses only two overt nominal endings. By far the most predominant is the possessive marker -up (ERGsg) suffixed to the names of people, as in Aanaup It’s Anna’s. He also uses the absolutive plural marker -it (ABSPl) on two occasions, but this may not be productive since it was used both times on the same root. The fact that the other nominals in his speech are not overtly inflected does not necessarily make them incorrect in terms of adult grammar since any given single noun would likely appear in singular absolutive Case which is indicated by a null inflection.

Three new nominal inflections are added by 2 years, 1 month. The most frequent of these is the absolutive Case first person singular possessive of singular objects (1SsgABS)-ga ‘my’. It is used productively on a variety of different stems, both bare and derived, such as:

(17) Ataataagali ?
  ataata-ga-li
  father-1SsgABS-where
  ‘Where is my father?’

(18) Sikitunnguarraa!
  sikituuq-nnguq-ga
  skidoo-toy-1SsgABS
  ‘My toy skidoo!’

A second inflection is the secondary Case singular unpossessed form -mik. It is used on two different stem types:

(19) Qukiutimik natsasiluni?
  qukiuti-mik natsa-si-luni
  gun-SECsg carry-PRES-4sS.IMAPP
  ‘He’s carrying a gun?’

(20) Qimmiaalummik sujqu?
  qimmig-aluk-mik su-juq
  dog-EMPH-SECsg what-3sS.PART
  ‘What’s he doing with the dog?’

162
Finally, the allative Case singular form -mut is used on different stems to convey both instrumental and goal meanings:

(21) Sikituummut? sikituuq-mut
skido-ALLsg
‘With the skidoo?’ (I’ll phone) Mom.’
(lit. ‘To Mom.’)

(22) Anaanamut. anaana-mut
mother-ALLsg

Several other nominal inflections are used at this age, but each is used only once or twice and often in utterances in which the morpheme division is unclear, so they cannot yet be considered productive.

At 2 years, 5 months Jaaji has again increased his repertoire of nominal inflections. He now uses the locative singular -mi on at least two different stem types:

(23) Iqalugulu natimmimm. iqaluk-ruluk natiq-mi
fish-DIMIN floor-LOCsg
‘A pitiful fish is on the floor.’

(24) Tamaani immimm. tamaani imak-mi
here water-LOCsg
‘They’re) in the water.’

He has also acquired a second possessive ending - the singular third person possessor of singular objects -nga ‘his’, ‘hers’, ‘its’:

(25) Uuma illinga? uuma illi-nga
DEMSGERG bed-3SABS
‘Is that his bed?’

(26) Nasangali!!! nasa-nga-li
DEMSGERG bed-3SABS-where
‘Where is his hat!!!’

No new nominal inflections are conclusively productively acquired by age 2 years, 9 months though the transcripts include at least one instance each of 13 inflections, six of which have not appeared before. It is interesting that the ergative Case marker does not appear at all in Jaaji’s speech except to mark the genitive. However, there are a couple of instances of use of a demonstrative in the ergative Case (25) rather than in the more usual absolutive Case (14, 16).

VERBAL INFLECTION

Structure

Verbal elements are marked for “modality”, person, and number. There are eight modalities - four independent: indicative (INDIC), participative (PART), imperative (IMPER), interrogative (INTER); and four dependent: causative (CAUS), conditional (COND), perfective appositional (PERFAPP), and imperfective appositional (IMAPP). Person may be marked for one of four values (first, second, third non-coreferential, and third coreferential). Number may be marked for one of three values (singular, dual, plural). Inflections may be either transitive, reflecting both subject and direct object, or intransitive, reflecting only subject agreement. Nominals that fill the role of direct object but are marked with secondary rather than absolutive Case are not reflected in verbal inflection.

Acquisition Patterns

This section will present the verbal inflections that appear productively in Jaaji’s speech at various ages. They will be initially separated by modality rather than age, with general patterns summarized at the end of the section. At age 1 year, 9 months Jaaji uses only two verbal inflections, and both are in phrases that are likely lexicalized. Ngiimmat ‘It’s not’ is very common in child speech to express a wide variety of negation meanings, often coincident with a whining tone. Inimmuluk ‘Put something to drink in this’ is one of many commands typical at this age. The following discussion will therefore include only data from the final three taping sessions.

Indicative

As may well be expected, the first indicative inflections acquired are first person -vunga ‘I’ and -vugut ‘we(pl)’:

(27) Sikituunngualangavungaa (28) Aullasivurtuut?
sikituuq-ngungu-langa-vungaa aullar-si-vugut
skido-play-PRES-1sS.INDIC leave-PRES-1pS.INDIC
‘I’m going to play with my skidoo.’ ‘Are we leaving?’

Both almost invariably follow a tense affix, and are never affixed to the bare root at age 2 years, 1 month but by age 2 years, 4 months -vunga appears in two different allomorphs and attached to both bare roots and other internal affixes in addition to tense. By age 2 years, 5 months the second person singular form -vutit is also acquired:

(29) Sikituuqarquit. (30) Sikituulangavutit.
sikituuq-qaq-vutit sikituuq-langa-vutit
skido-have-2SS.INDIC skido-PRES-
‘You have a skidoo.’ ‘You’ll ride the skidoo.’

These two examples clearly show productive acquisition since the same inflection is affixed to two different but similar stems and the basic morpheme becomes -qutit to assimilate it to its phonological environment.

No new indicative inflections are acquired at 2 years, 9 months. Note also that no transitive inflections have been acquired by this age in the indicative. The three different transitive inflections which he did use in the latter two sessions were used only once each and therefore cannot be classified as productive. Also conspicuously absent is the third singular inflection -uq which Fortescue and Lennert Olsen (in press) recorded as already appearing at 2 years, 2 months (the youngest child in their study). This absence is compensated for, however, by the early acquisition by Jaaji of the equivalent participative inflection -juq (which is unavailable in Greenlandic).
ACQUISITION OF INUKTITUT

Participative

The participative modality is quite similar in meaning to the indicative in that they both are used to relate a basic or plain statement. The difference between them seems essentially discourse-related: the indicative generally refers to a specific event while the participative refers to an “enduring situation, more encompassing in scope” (Dorais 1986: p. 57). Jaaji tends more towards use of the participative, though the forms acquired are similar to those of the indicative. This same form is used in a purely participial rather than indicative function in Greenlandic and thus its acquisition in the two languages cannot be compared (Fortescue personal communication).

As before, the first inflection to appear is the first person -junga ‘I’ by 2 years, 1 month. At this age, the third person singular -juq is present, as well as the transitive -jara ‘I - he/she/it.’ -Juq appears on the same stem as -jugut in (28), as well as in the allomorph -tuq as in (32):

(31) Nua aullasijuq.
    nua aullar-si-juq.
    Noah leave-PRES-3sS.PART
    ‘Noah’s leaving.’

Two allomorphs are also used for -jara:

(33) Atuttara!
    atuq-jara
    use-1sS/3sO.PART
    ‘I’m using it!’

(34) Qukiutuna maunngasijara.
    qukiuti-una maunnga-si-jara
    gun-DEMsgABS here-PRES-1sS/3sO.PART
    ‘I’ll put the rifle here!’

The second singular form -jutit as well as the first plural form -jugut are acquired by age 2 years, 5 months, again parallel to the indicative. In addition, a second transitive form is acquired: -jakka ‘I - they’. Its productivity is supported by an error in Jaaji’s speech:

(35a)Ukua nurqatakka?
    ukua nurqa-si-vatu?
    DEMpl finish-1sS/3pO.PART
    ‘I’m through with these.’

The sentence in (35a) is the one he produced; the sentence in (35b) is the correct form. He has obviously mistaken the classification of the verb as transitive rather than intransitive, and affixed a transitive inflection which would never have been used in such a way in adult speech.

Like the indicative, no new inflections are productively acquired by age 2 years, 9 months, though two dual forms are used on isolated occasions.

Interrogative

The interrogative modality is not well-represented in Jaaji’s speech. During all the taping sessions he only used the second singular form -vit productively:

(36) Iqaluguluvit?
    iqaluk-rulk-u-vit
    fish-DIMIN-be-2sS.INTER
    ‘Are you a pitiful fish?’

(37) Kamilasivit?
    kamik-laq-si-vit
    boots-remove-PRES-2sS.INTER
    ‘Are you taking your boots off?’

This is not so surprising when one considers that questions can be formed in Inuktitut using a variety of different modalities including indicative, participative, and perfective. In fact, Jaaji makes good use of these other modalities in the formation of his questions.

Imperative

The imperative modality is the one in which Jaaji has acquired the most inflections. At 2 years, 1 month he uses four first person forms: two intransitive (-langa ‘T’ and -luk ‘we(du)’) and two transitive (-lagu ‘I - he/she/it’ and -lakka ‘I - they(pl)’). These are obviously used in the sense of suggestion or question, as shown below:

(38) Takkaanilirlangaa?
    takkaani-it-liq-langa
    down.here-be-POL-1sS.IMPER
    ‘May I stay down here?’

(39) Naavitsilaurlangaa?
    naavit-si-lauq-langa
    empty-PRES-POL-1sS.IMPER
    ‘Should I spill something?’

Both of these examples show questioning. Note the politeness affixes -liq- and -lauq- which immediately preceed the imperative inflections. Also used as tense markers, these affixes frequently appear to soften imperative constructions since Inuktitut does not commonly use such politeness terms as please and thank you. Jaaji uses them in a large percentage of his imperative utterances.

The example in (40) shows a minimal pair with (39):

(40) Unaa naavillagaa?
    una naavit-lagu
    DEMsgABS empty-1sS/3sO.IMPER
    ‘Should I spill this one?’

Here Jaaji has altered the inflection to indicate a more specific intended object, and thus illustrates his control of the contrast between the two inflections.

Suggestion of activity is another use for first person imperative:

(41) Pattaluuk?
    pattaq-luk
    play.ball-1dS.IMPER
    ‘Let’s play ball!’
Jaaji uses this inflection frequently in his play with a slightly older cousin. Note that this is the only dual form that is productive in Jaaji's speech at any of the taping sessions, though he uses several dual forms once each on occasion.

A third use for first imperative is in the form of “Let me” requests or commands common at age 2 years, 5 months:

(42) Aah! Maliqattalanga!
   aah malik-qattaq-langa
   hey follow-HABIT-1sS.IMPER
   'Hey! Let me follow!'

Second person imperative forms appear as commands as well - with a new inflection added at each session. By 2 years, 1 month Jaaji has acquired the prototypical second singular imperative inflection -git. At 2 years, 5 months he acquires one transitive form -guk 'you - he/she/it', and another, -nnga ‘you - me’ at age 2 years, 9 months:

(43) Anaanaa, ukuilauru   (44) Takunnga.
   anaana ukku-iauq-guk      taku-nnga
   mother open-POL-          see-2sS/1sO.IMPER
   2sS/3sO.IMPER
   'Mommy, open the door.'

While (44) appears to be a lexicalized form, the verb taku- appears with a large variety of inflections following, so presumably Jaaji is employing them with some degree of productivity.

Causative

This is the first of the modalities termed “dependent” in that they may only appear in subordinate clauses in written Inuktitut. In spoken Inuktitut, however, the dominating matrix clause may be omitted so that a one-clause sentence in the dependent modality is perfectly well-formed.

The first causative inflection Jaaji acquired, by 2 years, 1 month is the first singular -gama:

(45) Nuutirumagaa Ruutakkunnit.
   nuttiq-guma-gama ruuta-kku-nut
   move-want-1sS.CAUS Rhoda-&family-ALLpl
   'I'd like to move to Rhoda’s.'

(46) Qaujimagamaa?
   qaujima-gama
   know-1sS.CAUS
   'Do I know?'

Note that it is used as a statement, with the causal meaning of the causative modality implicitly inferred in (45). In (46) the causative is used to form a question, which is quite usual in adult speech. By 2 years, 5 months he has acquired the first plural -gatta, as well as the third singular -mmat. He also has one transitive affix, -gakkit 'I - they'.

(47) Ujaraluummat tamaanittu.
   ujara-aluk-u-mmat tamaani-it-juq
   rock-big-be-3sS.CAUS here-be-3sS.PART
   'A big rock is here.'

(48) Atiiluu? Langagakkit?
   atiiluu langa-gakkit
   again PRES-1sS/3pO. CAUS
   '(Shall I play) again?
   I'll (fiddle around with) them (the keys).

Note that in (48) there is no verbal root in the sentence. This will be touched upon in the summary below. Finally the second singular -gavit is acquired by 2 years, 9 months.

Remaining Dependent Modalities

None of the remaining three dependent verbal modalities are at all frequent in Jaaji's speech at any of the taping sessions. He produced only a couple of instances of inflections in the conditional and perfective appositional modalities, none of them productive. Imperfect appositional inflections appear slightly more often, but only one is productive: the first singular-lunga:

(49) Aanaa kapulungaa   (50) Pisulunga.
   aanaa kapu-lunga       pisu-lunga
   Anna spear.repeatedly-1sS.IMAPP   walk-1sS.IMAPP
   'Anna, may I spear at that?
   I'll walk.'

Summary of Verbal Affixation

Several patterns are apparent in this overview of acquisition of verbal inflections. Firstly, note the prevalence of first person forms. In five of the six modalities in which inflections were at all productive, the first singular form was productive by 2 years, 1 month. It is not surprising that this should be the case given the focus of young children on themselves and their desires. The only exception is the interrogative modality, in which the first singular is not a very useful form except to very introspective children.

Secondly, note the ratio between intransitive and transitive inflections - slightly more than two to one. This tendency was also noted by Fortescue and Lennert Olsen (in press) for Greenlandic children, and probably has to do with the conceptual complexity pertaining to these two valencies.

Thirdly, as has been mentioned above, just as not all verb roots are inflected, so not all inflections are affixed to verb roots. Sentences constructed in this way are not uncommon in Jaaji’s speech. They usually omit the verb root and are formed from just internal affixes - internal verb (51), tense (48), or politeness (52) affixes - and the inflection, and also sometimes an enclitic.
(51) Rumanngiturut
guma-ngit-jugut
want-NEG-1pS.PART
‘We don’t want (to go).’
(2 years, 5 months)

(52) Laullaruna.
lauq-lagun-una
POL-1sS/3sO.IMPER-
DEMmsgABS
‘Let me do that.’
(2 years, 1 month)

The patterns observed here are not so unusual in many ways in relation to child acquisition of languages such as English. What is remarkable, however, is that an Inuk child can master such a wide variety of inflections so quickly.

CONCLUSION

Longitudinal production data at four times in the language development of one preschool Inuk boy were considered in the research done for the present paper. General patterns of acquisition have been discussed and it has been shown that this boy is precocious in the acquisition of the inflectional system of Inuktut. It is expected that these traits will hold for Inuit children in general. Further research may be directed to reasons for precocity of acquisition in relation to other languages, as well as to detailed study of each of the items mentioned above in section 2 in the General Overview.

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NOTES

1. Terminology and abbreviations are explained in the GLOSSARY below.

2. These data were collected as the basis for a study by Crago (1988). Transcription was done by native speakers of Inuktut. Morpheme breakdown was done by the author in consultation with native speakers.

3. The term “type” here refers to a particular morpheme, as opposed to “token” which refers to an occurrence of the morpheme type. Note that I am using this term to delineate those items used at least once in the data; the inflections in particular are not necessarily productively acquired.

4. Terms for nominal inflection vary from author to author. Variations include relative for ergative; comitative or instrumental for secondary; dative for allative; perative, proactive, or translative for viasals; and simulative for equative.

5. Terms for verbal inflection also vary. Some common equivalents include: optative for suggestion [1sS, 1pS(excl.), 3sS, 3pS] rather than command [2sS, 2pSs, 1pS(incl.)] forms of imperative; past subordinative or perfective for causative; future subordinative or imperfective for conditional; contemporative for imperfective appositional; and verbal participle for perfective appositional.

GLOSSARY

affix: a bound morpheme that modifies the meaning and/or syntactic category of the stem in some way; general term covering prefix, suffix, and infix.

allomorph: a variant form of a morpheme.

Case: an inflectional category that marks the grammatical and/or semantic function of a noun phrase.

complex: consisting of more than one smaller unit.

demonstrative: an adjective or pronoun used to point out a particular object e.g. this, that.

enclitic: a grammatical particle at the end of a word.

genitive: bearing the possessive relation.

inflection: an affix on a word that marks the grammatical subclass to which that word belongs.

linguistics: the study of the structure and use of language.

locative: a Case marker or noun phrase indicating place or location.

longitudinal study: a study that collects data from a small number of subjects at intervals over an extended period of time, rather than only once or twice.

modality: an aspect of a verb indicating the way in which the speaker regards the denoted action.

morpheme: a minimal meaning-bearing unit of language.

morphology: the various phenomena relating to words and their internal structure.

phonology: the various phenomena relating to sounds and sound patterns in language.

polysynthetic language: a language that makes extensive use of words made up of two or more morphemes, and that is particularly complex in terms of the number of morphemes it can combine and the type of allomorphic variation it exhibits.
production data: data collected by assessing the subject's own spontaneous or elicited speech rather than his/her comprehension of others' speech.

root: the basic form of the word to which no affixes have yet been attached.

stem: the form of the word to which an affix is attached; it may or may not have other affixes already attached.

syntax: the various phenomena pertaining to the form and structure of sentences.

ABBREVIATIONS

ABS absolutive Case
ALL allative Case
CAUS causative modality
DIMIN diminutive
EMPH emphatic
ERG ergative Case
IMAPP imperfective oppositional modality
IMPER imperative modality
INDIC indicative modality
INTER interrogative modality
LOC locative Case
MLU mean length of utterance
NP noun phrase
NEG negative
PART participative modality

PERF perfective aspect
pl plural
POL politeness affix
PRES present tense
SEC secondary Case
sg singular
VIAL vialis Case
1sS first person, singular, subject (I)
2pO second person, plural, object (you)

REFERENCES


