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MODAL VERBS IN THE EARLY ONTOGENESIS OF THE BULGARIAN LANGUAGE

Abstract

The focus of the article is on the first steps two Bulgarian girls take towards the acquisition of modal verbs. The empirical basis of the research incorporates longitudinal data, transcribed and coded using the terminology of the CHILDES system. The appearance and development of modal verbs are mapped with a view towards the phases of early morphological development (the premorphological, transitive, and protomorphological phases) on the cognitive model of linguistic acquisition of natural morphology (see Dressler 1997). In the course of the research, the chronology of mastering the modal verbs is studied, taking into account both the formal aspect (their presence in a particular phase in the quality of a conventional modal device) and the functional-semantic aspect (the conventional functions fulfilled by the modal verbs used by the children). The study of the acquisition of the category of modality is based on an integrated approach towards language facts that makes it possible to present them both in a “vertical” and a “horizontal” perspective. The analysis of the modal verbs mastered by the children is conducted, on the one hand, by comparing them with units and categories from the language of adults, and on the other hand, by determining their place and how they function in each of the successively unfolding stages of language development in early language acquisition. The results of the study show that modal verbs are the earliest lexical modal device registered in the speech data of both of the children. At the same time, their complete assimilation is protracted because of their semantic complexity, which they acquire gradually in the acquisition process. Particularly indicative of this is the fact that, in their first appearances in children’s speech, Bulgarian modal verbs perform deontic and/or dynamic, and not epistemic, functions.

Keywords: Bulgarian language, first language acquisition, child-directed speech, modality, modal verbs