ON THE ACQUISITION OF DIFFERENTIAL OBJECT MARKING IN ESTONIAN

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Abstract. This article presents data on the acquisition of differential object marking (DOM) in Estonian and seeks to explain the factors influencing its acquisition. Longitudinal data of two Estonian monolingual children were analysed according to the semantic factors important in DOM: telicity, definiteness and quantification. The impact of the input and the errors were analysed for both factors. The main aim was to gain better insight into the impact of semantic and grammatical factors on the acquisition of DOM in Estonian. The data examined here clearly show that children master Estonian DOM at an early age and they do not make many errors. Partial and total case marking emerge almost concurrently, but partial case-marked objects are more frequent. Partial objects are attested with atelic predicates, when they are understood as unspecified; children initially divide situations into atelic + unspecified object and telic + specified object with ‘prototypical cases’, which reflect the input they receive. Children correctly associate partial objects with atelicity and total objects with telicity at an early age. Telicity and definiteness are acquired in conjunction.

Keywords: differential object marking, telicity, definiteness, object case, Estonian.

1. INTRODUCTION

The syntactic literature dealing with Estonian DOM is quite substantial (see, for example, Ehala 2011, Tammi 2014, Metslang 2013) beginning as early as the 19th century (Ahrens 1853). Nevertheless, the literature regarding the acquisition of DOM is scarce: there is a limited amount of literature on the acquisition of case in Estonian (Argus 2009a, 2009b) and on the acquisition of DOM based on experimental data (Argus 2008). This article is the first attempt to describe the acquisition of this phenomenon in Estonian on the basis of longitudinal data.

The Estonian DOM system (described in Section 2 below) is rather complex. The child acquiring the differential marking of objects in Estonian has to learn to distinguish between telic and atelic situations, and also between definite and indefinite noun phrases. And finally, (s)he also has to consider such grammatical factors as voice, mood and polarity.

DOM is often considered to be the most difficult part of Estonian grammar for foreign language learners (Teral 2007: 91, Torn 2004: 180–183) and one can predict that it

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may also be difficult for children. Results of previous studies on DOM in Estonian have revealed contradictory results. According to previous research based on longitudinal data (Argus 2007) the differentiation between telic and atelic situations is acquired quite early, before age 2;0 in Estonian. At the same time, experimental data on the L1 acquisition of object case (Argus 2008) shows different results concerning the comprehension and the production of object case: children can comprehend telic situations with a genitive object before atelic situations but they can produce atelic situations with the objects in the partitive case before telic situations with a genitive object. According to these results the choice of object case is not completely acquired even at age 6. Considering that this research is based on longitudinal data, that is on language production, it can be predicted that Estonian children will acquire the marking of partial objects earlier than that of total objects. The partitive objects can be acquired earlier also because partial objects are often considered to be “prototypical” objects (Ehala 2011: 328) and partial objects are also more frequent in child-directed speech.

The present study investigates the development of object constructions and the semantic factors which determine the choice of object case in child Estonian. Child directed speech (CDS) will be analysed in parallel with children’s speech and compared on all points. The main questions addressed in the present study are the following:

1) How do children acquire the semantic constraints on DOM in Estonian? Given previous findings reported in the literature, which show that telicity is acquired early (Argus 2007) whereas quantifiers emerge later (there is no published research available, the prediction is based on the data of CHILDES Estonian database), we can predict that, in relation to DOM, children will acquire the role of telicity before acquiring the role of quantification.

2) Is there any difference between the impact of semantic and grammatical factors on the acquisition of DOM in Estonian?

2. DIFFERENTIAL OBJECT MARKING IN ESTONIAN

Estonian has two types of object case: partial (or partitive) and total. The term “total” covers the morphological genitive of singular objects and the argumentative nominative case. The latter is different from subject or adjunct case (Tamm 2014: 470). Thus, the direct object can receive three grammatical cases in Estonian, of which the nominative is without a case marker and the genitive and the partitive are morphologically marked (for example: ratsa ‘wheel:NOM’; ratta ‘wheel:GEN (genitive stem)’ and ratsa-t ‘wheel-PARTIT’). Therefore the system of Estonian DOM can be considered a symmetric one (for the division see Iemmolo 2013: 380): main choices of object case (the genitive and partitive case) are morphologically marked. The genitive and the partitive are formed by stem alteration, while the partitive has also the marker -t in some declension classes.¹ DOM applies to a variety of lexical categories in Estonian: nouns, proper nouns, pronouns and wh-words.

¹ However, there is one declension class where the nominative, the genitive and the partitive are unmarked and have the same form.
The choice of case depends on lexical, semantic and grammatical factors (see, for example, Metslang 2013: 61), which can be grouped into two main sets: 1) those connected to the meaning of a verb phrase (e.g. aspectuality) and 2) those connected to the object noun phrase (definiteness, specific and quantitative limitedness or delimitedness) (Hiietam 2003:5). Verbal aspect/actionality and quantification are the main parameters underlying symmetric alternations (Iemmolo 2013: 380).

The object case depends primarily on the aspectual properties of the lexical predicate whose complement it is (e.g. Erelt et al. 1993: 49–51, Tamm 2004: 201–207). Estonian verbs can be divided into three main groups based on the case of their object and their aspectual properties: (i) verbs requiring a partitive object (partitive verbs); (ii) verbs allowing for object case alternation between the partitive and the total case (aspectual verbs); and (iii) verbs requiring a total case object (perfective verbs) (Metslang 2013: 62). Perfective verbs take genitive or nominative objects, so genitive and nominative objects appear only with telic predicates. Partitive verbs (e.g. märkama ‘observe’, nägema ‘see’) with partitive objects express mainly atelic activities. A telic predicate can appear with a partitive case marked object only when there is a telicity marker in the sentence, e.g. a bounding time adverbial:

(1) Ma luge-si-n se-da raamatu-t kaks tundi.  
I:NOM read-PAST-1S this-PARTIT book-PARTIT two:PARTIT3  
'It took me two hours to read the book.'

On the next level, that of object marking, the quantitative limitedness or boundedness of the object noun phrase is central. It has been shown that in Estonian, as in other Finnic languages, the singular genitive and the plural nominative as object cases express the perfectivity and resultativity (or telicity) of the action with respect to the object, and that the object as a whole is totally affected by the action (definite quantity of the object noun), for example:

(2) Ma söö-n hommikusöögi-ks ühe tomati  
I:NOM eat-1S breakfast-TRANSL one:GEN tomato:GEN  
'I’ll eat one tomato for breakfast.'

The object case of count nouns (as in the previous example) is total, while mass nouns, such as “sugar”, display an unrestricted case-marking pattern, i.e. their object case can be either total or partitive (see also Tamm 2014: 470):

(3) Ma lisa-n pudru-le suhkrui-t  
I:NOM add-1S porridge-ALL sugar-PARTIT  
'I add some sugar to porridge.'
The partitive as an object case indicates that the entity is only partially affected by the activity denoted by the predicate and that the activity is imperfective and non-resultative (atelic) with respect to the object (see also Metslang 2013: 60), objects of imperfective events are usually interpreted as referring to an open quantity (Iemmo 2013: 382):

(5)  
Ma söö-n  tomat-i-t  
I:NOM  eat-1S  tomato-PARTIT  
‘I’ll eat/I’m eating /I eat (some) tomato.’

Figure 1 summarizes the factors which constrain DOM in Estonian.

Fig. 1. The main semantic factors which constrain DOM in Estonian

In the case of total objects, the choice of the case form depends on grammatical factors such as polarity (negation), voice and mood. Usually the total object is in the genitive:

(6)  
Ma söö-n hommikusöögi-ks ühe tomat  
I  eat-1S  breakfast-TRANSL  one  tomato:GEN  
‘I’ll eat one tomato for breakfast.’

Nominative objects occur only with imperative and impersonal mood predicates:

(7)  
Söö see tomat  ära!  
eat-IMP  this  tomato:NOM  perfective particle  
‘Eat this tomato (off)!’
(8) **Tomat sūük-se kohe āra**
    tomato:NOM eat-IMPERS at once perfective particle
    ‘A tomato will be eaten at once.’

In negative clauses, only partitive case marked objects can be used:

(9) **Ma ei söö tomat-i**
    I:NOM not eat tomato-PARTIT
    ‘I don’t eat tomato.’

### 3. DATA AND METHOD

The present study is based on the longitudinal corpora of two Estonian-speaking monolingual children aged 1;7–2;4 and 1;3–2;3 (one girl, one boy, 18 hours of recorded spontaneous speech). Interactions were transcribed and analysed using CHAT. For the present analysis all the constructions with a direct object were extracted. I analysed both children’s speech as well as CDS. Direct imitations (repeated utterance with an object construction following immediately in the next turn) were excluded. Fragmental constructions, which had insufficient information to decide which case form the child was using, were analysed separately, as were contexts in which the direct object was ungrammatical. Every DOM context was coded according to its semantic (telicity and definiteness of the amount denoted by the object noun phrase) and its grammatical (negation, mood and voice) properties. Table 1 presents the general information on the corpus analysed in the study: 17 recording sessions, the number of object contexts in child’s speech (CS) and in CDS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number of DOM contexts in CS</th>
<th>Number of DOM contexts in CDS</th>
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<th>Number of DOM contexts in CS</th>
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Table 1 shows that the first object constructions were present in the children’s speech in the first recordings and that the number of these constructions increased in the course of development. The number of object constructions remained at approximately the same level in the CDS, and a “fine-tuning” effect was not observed in child-directed speech in terms of the total number of object constructions.

4. RESULTS

The early development of DOM will be traced through the emergence of first objects, the acquisition of different object marking in telic and atelic situations, and with object noun phrases, which express a specified or an unspecified amount. The errors are presented in the last section of the results.

4.1. The emergence of objects

All three object cases are among children’s first case forms (see also Argus 2009: 122). On the basis of the data analysed here, it is clear that there were several nouns that occurred not only in the 0-marked nominative but also in the genitive or in the partitive case in the children’s first recordings. All first partitives occurred in direct object constructions. The first attested objects in the speech of both children under observation were **partial (partitive) objects:**

\[(10) \text{(n)äita mängu}^4\]

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show:IMP game:PARTIT
'Show (me) the game.'
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(Martina 1;3)

\[(11) \text{kooki. kooki.}\]

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'I want) cake:PARTIT cake:PARTIT
'(I want) some cake.'
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(Andreas 1;7)

Andreas used only partial objects in his first recording at age 1;7. With Martina, although the majority of direct objects were also partial objects, two total object constructions are also found in her first recording, at 1;3:

\[(12) \text{kaasa lamba}\]

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with sheep:GEN
'(I’ll take) a sheep with me.'
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(Martina 1;3)

The first total objects occurred approximately a month later (at age 1;8) in the speech of Andreas:

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4 All information that helps to clarify the child’s utterance or omitted parts of words is presented in brackets on the main line of examples.
(13) Adult: *ehitad?*  
‘Are you building?’ 
Child: *torni.*  
tower:GEN (suffixless form in the II degree of quantity)  
‘(I am building) a tower.’

On the basis of the first recordings of both children, it can be claimed that the development of DOM in Estonian starts from the actually concurrent emergence of the two types of objects. Partial objects occur only one month before genitive objects but are used more frequently and with variety in noun lemmas and also in pronouns. For example, the first pronouns in the partitive case occurred shortly after the first nouns in the partitive in the speech of both children:

(14) (vaatame) *se-da*.  
(look at) this-PARTIT  
‘Let’s look at this.’  

Still, the partitive objects can be considered to be fully acquired earlier than genitive objects by both children: there are only two genitive objects (with two different lemmas) in the first recordings of both children, while the number of partitive objects was much higher, 12–15.

4.2. The acquisition of partial and total objects: differentiating between telic and atelic situations

The acquisition of DOM in Estonian starts with the prototypical object case, with the partitive. The partitive case can be considered to be acquired when it has been used with different noun lemmas. The partitive was already used with four different lemmas in the first recording of Martina, at age 1;3, in the data of Andreas, the partitive can be considered to be acquired at age 1;8, when he had partitive objects from five different lemmas.

The two children used partitives only for atelic situations and in utterances where the object noun phrase expressed an unspecified amount. Partitive case marked objects with telic predicates were also rare in CDS. For example, there were only two such utterances in the input to Martina. The first telic predicate with a time adverbial and the object in the partitive case form occurred in the CDS to Martina at child’s age 1;10:

(15) Adult: *niikaua saa-d vaada-ta oma raamatu-i-d.*  
up till now can-2S look-INF your book-PL-PARTIT  
‘You can look at your books now.’

In the utterance above, the amount expressed by the object noun phrase is unspecified but telicity is signalled by the time adverbial *up till now*. There is a very small number of bounding time adverbials in the speech of children (see also Parm 2013). This could also be the reason why children do not use the partitive case in sentences where telicity is achieved by using a time adverbial.

Although most objects were initially used with atelic predicates and hence marked with the partitive case (see partial objects in Figures 2 and 3), some telic situations with
total object constructions were also attested from the very beginning. Both children had genitive case forms from more than one lemma from the very beginning (Martina at 1;3 and Andreas at age 1;8).

The number of total objects varied in different recordings but it can still be stated that there were fewer total objects at the beginning of the observation period and that the number of total objects started to increase at a particular age point (at 2;1 with Andreas, and at 1;10 with Martina) (Figures 2 and 3).

An increase in the number of total objects and a clear fine-tuning effect were not observed in the child-directed speech (Figures 4 and 5). The adults used more total objects than the children at the beginning of the observation period, and the proportion of total and partial objects varied in different recordings but did not depend on the child’s age.
The children used partitive objects only for atelic situations and genitive or nominative objects for telic situations. Atelic situations can be expressed only with the object in the partitive case, which means that the entity is only partially affected by the activity denoted by the predicate. In the case of mass nouns, the difference between unspecified and specified amount cannot always be distinguished, and therefore mass nouns usually occur only in the partitive case. Thus, the differentiation between specified and unspecified amount of the object noun in the speech of children can be clearly observed only in situations where the object noun is a countable one. The differentiation between specified and unspecified amount of the object noun phrase (and of course, at the same time between telic and atelic situations) can be considered to be acquired only when the child uses the same noun lemma in both types of situations. The first uses of the same noun lemma in both types of situations occurred at an early age for both children. Andreas used the noun *pilt* “picture” (in partitive case form) in an atelic situation in the first recording (example 16 below) and in a telic situation (the genitive case form) (example 17 below) in the second recording, a month later.
(16) (ei taha) *pitti* [: pilti]  
(don’t want) picture:PARTIT  
‘I do not want the picture.’  
(Andreas 1;7)

(17) Child: *pildi*  
picture:GEN  
Adult: kes tõi selle pildi?  
‘Who has brought this picture?’  
(Andreas 1;8)

The first usage of a count noun in contrasting types of situations and case forms are attested even earlier, at age 1;6, in the speech of Martina:

(18) *Lote pane-b veel kinga*  
Lote put-3S yet shoe:PARTIT  
‘Lote is still putting on her shoe.’  
(Martina 1;6)

(19) *(v)aata-me ehee Lote (p)ane-d ja *  
look-1.PL ehee Lote:NOM put-3S shoe-PL.NOM foot:ILL  
‘Look, Lote is putting her shoes on.’  
(Martina 1;6)

If we divide all object nouns into three groups: mass nouns, count nouns and nouns which are countable but behave similarly to mass nouns (usually nouns denoting some kind of food, for example *leib* ‘bread’, *komm* ‘candy’, etc., and can be used with quantifiers: *some of …, little …, a bit of …*)5 we can see that initially children use mass nouns only with the partitive case (in atelic situations). Only 5 mass nouns in the genitive are attested in the corpus: 4 with Andreas and 1 with Martina:

(20) *Atsu [: Andreas] lase-b vee sooja-ks.*  
Atsu:NOM let-3S water:GEN warm-TRANSL  
‘Atsu will let the tap run until the water is warm.’  
(Andreas 2;1)

Those countable nouns, which behave like mass nouns, are marked with the partitive in the beginning. Such nouns are first attested as total objects at age 2;1 in the speech of both children. Martina marked such objects both with the partitive and with the genitive in the recording from age 2;1:

(21) *Kelle kää-st me sa-i-me mango?*  
who:GEN hand-ELA we get-PAST-1.PL mango:GEN  
‘From whom have we got the mango?’

(22) *Taha-n veel mango-t.*  
want-1S more mango-PARTIT  
‘I’ll want a bit of mango.’

5 It has been stated that the distinction based on simple mass-count division is not satisfactory for explaining Estonian DOM (Tamm 2014: 469) and like some abstract nouns owning properties of count nouns, there are count nouns which have the properties of mass nouns.
Nevertheless, there were only few occurrences of such nouns in the genitive in the whole corpus, while count nouns were used both in the partitive and in the genitive case. Therefore it can be concluded that mass nouns and count nouns behaving like mass nouns emerge in atelic situations and are usually quantitatively unspecified. The intertwining of the two semantic factors, definiteness (or more precisely, quantification) and telicity, can be seen in the data of both children.

Thus, despite some differences with respect to the age when the first contrastive uses of case forms are attested, both children started to differentiate between telic and atelic situations with partial and total objects at an early age and they acquired the difference between telic and atelic situations approximately two to three months after the first usages of both situation types.

The fact that there are no telic predicates with unspecified amount of object nouns indicate that they associate telicity with specified amount and atelicity with unspecified amount of an object noun. It can be argued that initially they seem to have two prototypical categories: atelic situations with object noun phrases which express unspecified amount and telic situations only with noun phrases which express specified amount. This kind of division is also found in CDS.

### 4.3. Grammatical factors influencing the choice of object case

In Estonian, total objects can be nominative or genitive. The first attested total objects in both corpora are in the genitive case (Martina at age 1;3, Andreas at age 1;8). The first total object in the nominative occurred at age 1;5 in the speech of Martina and at age 1;11 in the speech of Andreas. In telic situations, where the amount expressed by the object noun is specified, the total object (genitive or nominative) has to be used. But if the sentence is negative, the situation is no longer considered telic and the object should always be in the partitive case. Different case marking of the object in positive and negative clauses with the same object noun lemma (examples 23 and 24 below) is attested later than the differentiation between partial and total object case in telic and atelic situations (examples 21–22 above).

(23) **Pane see ära.**  
put-IMP it:NOM away  
‘Put it away.’  
(Andreas 1;11)

(24) **Ma ei näe se-da ka.**  
I:NOM no see it-PARTIT also  
‘I do not see it either.’  
(Andreas 2;4)

Although the prototypical case of the total object is the genitive, the nominative has to be used when the verb is in the imperative mood or in an impersonal voice. Martina started to differentiate between the nominative and the genitive in imperative and indicative sentences very early, at age 1;5, when she first used both case forms of the same noun lemma:
Andreas used the first different total object case forms much later. At age 1;11 he used the nominative in imperative clauses (see example 27 below) and the genitive of the same pronoun lemma in indicative sentences at age 2;1 (example 28):

(27) Pane see ära.
put:IMP it:NOM perf.particle
‘Put it away.’

(28) Antsu tee-b selle ka.
Antsu:NOM make-3S.IND it:GEN also
‘Antsu will also make it.’

No total object constructions with the verb in impersonal voice were found in either of the two corpora.

The overall number of total objects in the genitive is higher than the overall number of total objects in the nominative with both children. Usually there were only 1–2 nominative objects per recording session, while one child, Andreas, still used some more nominative objects at age 2;0–2;4. This difference is also found in CDS: both adults used fewer total objects in the nominative than in the genitive, although they used more nominative total objects than their children. The higher frequency of nominative total objects in CDS can be correlated with the higher proportion of imperative sentences in the speech of adults.

Comparing the above data with the data on differentiation between total and partial object cases, it can be stated that one child, Martina, acquired grammatically conditioned DOM one month, but the other child, Andreas, 7 months later than semantically conditioned DOM.

4.4. Errors

According to Rodríguez-Mondoñedo (2008) children acquiring Spanish as their first language “master Spanish DOM with a performance virtually errorless”. At the same time, it has been stated that DOM in Estonian is often considered to be the very difficult part of Estonian grammar for L2 learners (Teral 2007: 91, Torn 2004: 180–183) and therefore we can assume that Estonian children can also make many errors in acquiring Estonian DOM.

On the basis of the longitudinal data analysed here, we can say that children acquiring DOM in Estonian generally do not make many errors. Although the number of errors increased to 22% in one recording of one child, usually the percentage of errors remained below 7–8% of all object contexts. When the child used more object
constructions, the number of errors increased: for example, Martina’s recording at age 1;5 and Andreas’ recording at age 2;0 (Figures 6 and 7).

![Fig. 6. The number of object contexts and errors in the speech of Martina](image1)

![Fig. 7. The number of object contexts and errors in the speech of Andreas](image2)

The attested errors made by children when acquiring DOM in Estonian can be divided into two main categories: unidentifiable forms and usages of wrong case form. Unidentifiable forms are those which cannot be identified as specific case forms, such as nominative, partitive or genitive case. These forms are usually shortened or incomplete stems:

(29) Adult: Mis sa tahad? ‘What do you want?’
Child: *kipsi (küpsist) cookie ‘(I want) a cookie.’ (Andreas 1;7)
Both children used unmarked forms (or incomplete stems) for both telic and atelic situations. These errors represented 41% of all the errors in Martina's data and 24% of the errors in Andreas' data. This type of error occurred more frequently in the speech of Martina and at the beginning of the observation period (for example, there were 23 total errors in the speech of Martina at age 1;5 and 10 out of these errors represented incomplete forms). As Martina was an earlier speaker than Andreas, it can be assumed that the usage of unidentifiable forms was, to some extent, due to phonological immaturity.

The children also used some 0-marked (nominative case form) wh-words in their speech:

(32) \( \text{Väata, mis mina leid-si-n.} \)  
\( \text{look:IMP what:NOM I:NOM find-PAST-1S} \)  
\( \text{‘Look what I found.’} \)  
(Martina 2;4)

These unmarked wh-words cannot be analysed as errors because the adults also used the object questions with the wh-word in the nominative even in contexts where the genitive or the partitive should be used, and this tendency is also observable in colloquial Estonian in general:

(33) \( \text{Mis sa sööd?} \)  
\( \text{what:NOM you eat?} \)  
\( \text{‘What are you eating?’} \) (instead of Mi-da what-PARTIT sa sööd).

It is also worth highlighting that the number of such questions changed in CDS: in the first recordings, adults used only object questions with unmarked wh-words. At the end of the observation period, there were some marked wh-words in the CDS to both children (for example 4 out of 11 object questions in CDS to Martina and 1 out of 8 object questions in CDS to Andreas). Therefore, the usages of unmarked wh-words can be considered to be a type of fine-tuning strategy in the speech of adults. Children themselves do not ask much object questions at all (10 object questions in the data of Martina and only 5 such questions in the data of Andreas), in the speech of Andreas only unmarked wh-words can be found and there were 4 marked object questions in the speech of Martina.

The other type of error was erroneous case marking. These errors were multidirectional: children used partial objects in contexts where total objects should have been used and the other way around (Tables 2 and 3). There were still more errors in the choice of the nominative instead of the partitive (in atelic situations).
The typical case error was when the child used the 0-marked nominative instead of the partitive in atelic situations:

(34) *Pane-me sinna sool [: soola]*
    put-1P there salt:NOM
    ‘Let’s put some salt there.’ (Martin 1;10)

In the example below, Andreas should have used the object in the nominative case but he used the partitive:

(35) *Anna siia mu-le [: mul-le] üks pulki [: purki]!*
    give:IMP here me-ALL one jar:PARTIT
    ‘Give me a jar here.’ (Andreas 2;0)
In the example (35) above the child used the wrong case form with a quantifier üks ‘one’, and it could be that he overgeneralized the partitive because all the other quantifiers except for üks ‘one’ require the partitive.

Errors in the choice of the nominative and the genitive in total object constructions are attested later, beginning at age 1;10–2;0 in the speech of the two children:

(36) Emme anna-b üks [: ühe] (paberi)
Mommy:NOM give-3S one (paper)
'Mommy gives (me) one (paper).'

(Andreas 2;0)

5. CONCLUSIONS

Both children started to mark partial objects, i.e. partitive objects expressing indefinite quantity of object items, and atelic situations early, one child at age 1;3, the other at age 1;7. The first total objects occurred in the speech of one child at the same age when partitives are also attested but into the speech of the other child only a month later. Partial objects were the most frequent ones in the speech of both children at the beginning of the observation period, and their usage was almost target-like. Input frequency had only a small influence on the acquisition of object marking (there were slightly more partial objects than total objects in the input).

The children also started to differentiate telic from atelic situations early, using partial objects with atelic situations and total objects with telic situations. The usage of the same noun lemma in both types of situations occurred one to three months after the occurrence of the first object constructions. Therefore, it can be argued that the longitudinal data presented here differs from previous experimental data: according to the results of an experiment, Estonian children do not comprehend and produce object constructions correctly even at age 6;0 (Argus 2008), according to the longitudinal data analysed here Estonian children acquire DOM at an early age.

However, it can be argued that children differentially mark objects in accordance with the semantic constraints on DOM at an early age. Telicity and definiteness are acquired in conjunction: telic situations with specified amount of object and atelic situations with unspecified amount of object. The input also has some influence on the acquisition of constructions with unspecified amount of object nouns in telic situations: utterances expressing telic situations with unspecified amount of objects were also extremely rare in the speech of the adults.

The choice between two different total object cases, the nominative and the genitive, was acquired only a month later by one child but five months later by another child. This can indicate that the choice between the nominative and the genitive case and between the partitive and the nominative case when DOM is conditioned by grammatical factors is more vulnerable than the semantically constrained choice between partial and total objects in the case of telic and atelic situations.

Error analysis revealed slight overuse of nominative objects in the speech of both children during the whole observation period, errors in using total object case, that is choice between the nominative and the genitive was acquired later.
In conclusion, the data on the acquisition of DOM in Estonian show that children start to acquire DOM in Estonian at an early age and they use objects almost target-like from the beginning.

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