Why typological comparisons are crucial to understanding language development: the learning of inflectional morphology in Polish and Finnish

As Maya Hickman's work so importantly showed, cross-linguistic research is crucial to understanding the common underlying processes involved in children's language learning and the effects of typological differences on the course of acquisition. I will start by presenting theoretical positions on the learning of morphology which range from rule-based, generative models through to analogy-based, exemplar models.

I will then present data from an experiment which elicited all six, present tense, person-number, verbal forms from monolingual Polish- (N=77; 35-63 months), and Finnish-speaking (N=81; 35-59 months) children. This involved a novel methodology which made the elicitation of 1st person singular and 1st person plural forms much easier and more reliable than previous attempts to elicit these forms. The results show that overall error rates are low, but are high for rare person/number contexts. Thus, in assessing children's linguistic proficiency it is important to analyse the data at the right level: children may show pockets of high error while producing more frequent forms accurately. For both languages, the errors largely consist of frequency-based substitutions, near-miss errors or conjugation-class errors. There are significant effect of both token frequency (i.e. surface form) and phonological neighbourhood density (numbers of phonological 'friends' and, in a new method we have developed, 'enemies'). I will discuss the question of whether children's learning changes qualitatively with age and briefly mention a computational model which mirrors these results. I conclude by arguing that If 'rule-based' learning means insensitivity to surface frequency and to phonological form, then this study argues against it. Rather, the representation of surface forms is laid down in memory with the most frequent forms being the most easily accessible. If a form is not accessible on this basis, an analogy based on phonological and prosodic structure is produced. As the lexicon of surface forms grows, production and comprehension will increasingly give the impression of an abstract and rule-based system.