

On the Acquisition of Word Order in WH-Questions in the Tromsø Dialect*

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1. Introduction

It has been shown in various studies that word order is generally acquired very early (see e.g. Pinker 1984, 1994, Radford 1990). In English for example, SVO word order is produced by children from the very beginning of their multi-word utterances, and other orders are more or less unattested in recorded data. It has been argued by e.g. Kayne (1995) that SVO order is the only underlying order in Universal Grammar (UG), and under this assumption, it is not surprising that SVO order is mastered by very young children. However, other word orders are also found to be acquired early. In German the order OV is attested from the earliest two-word utterances (Schönenberger, Penner and Weissenborn 1997). The verb second (V2) word order of most Germanic languages, which is normally assumed to be a slightly more complex pattern than SVO, has also been found to be in place very early (e.g. Poeppel and Wexler 1993 for German, Santelmann 1995 for Swedish).

But what happens when children are exposed to a language that allows several word orders? Will they acquire one first – presumably then the simplest or most frequent one – and then the others, or will all be acquired simultaneously? And how early will children be sensitive to distinctions related to the two orders, both with regard to syntax and information structure?

This paper reports on a study of the acquisition of word order in WH-questions in a dialect of Norwegian. It will be shown that the two possible word orders in this dialect are acquired more or less simultaneously by the children in the study, and that they immediately distinguish between the two with respect to subtle differences in information structure. It will also be argued that the two orders differ in the complexity of the syntactic structure, and that this is reflected in the children's slightly later acquisition of the more complex structure in its complete syntactic form.

2. The word order of Norwegian (Tromsø dialect)

Like most other Germanic languages, Norwegian is a V2 language with the verb in second position in all main clauses. The standard analysis of this

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word order is that it is a result of verb movement to C (see Vikner 1995). However, certain Norwegian dialects allow WH-questions without verb movement. In the Tromsø dialect, described by e.g. Taraldsen (1986) and Rice and Svenonius (1998), V2 word order is generally required, except after the monosyllabic WH-words *ka*, *kem* and *kor* ('what', 'who' and 'where'), resulting in the V3 order illustrated in (1):

- (1) a. *Ka ho sa?* b. *Kem det er?* c. *Kor du bor?*
 what she said *who it is* *where you live*
 'What did she say?' 'Who is it?' 'Where do you live?'

However, WH-questions with monosyllabic question words are also considered grammatical with V2 order by speakers of this dialect, as shown in (2) below. In addition, there does not seem to be any significant difference in meaning between the two word orders when the sentences are uttered in isolation.

- (2) a. *Ka sa ho?* b. *Kem er det?* c. *Kor bor du?*
 what said she *who is it* *where live you*
 'What did she say?' 'Who is it?' 'Where do you live?'

True optionality in syntax may be undesirable in certain theoretical frameworks, and for this particular construction the optionality has been commonly explained as dialect mixture: The V3 version is considered the 'true' dialect and speakers' acceptance of V2 simply a result of influence from the standard language. It has also been argued that speakers of this dialect, although they accept V2 order in grammaticality judgements, almost invariably choose the V3 form in speech (Rice and Svenonius 1998). If this is the case, then children growing up in this area would only get V3 input in these question types. It could thus be expected that children would acquire the dialect version first and only later become influenced by the standard language.

3. Word order and information structure

In a study of the acquisition of V2 word order in Norwegian, I have investigated data (collected mainly by research fellow Merete Anderssen) from three children in Tromsø, from the age of approximately 1;9 to 3. In Westergaard (2003), I present a closer investigation of some of the adult speech in the material¹, and argue that the V3 word order in (1) as well as the V2 sentences in (2) are part of the Tromsø dialect: as shown in Figure 1, both word orders are used regularly by the adult speaker investigated and, as will be shown in this paper, the patterns found are also attested in

¹ The adult corpus consists of 300 WH-questions produced by the investigator in 10 of the files from the child Ole (Ole.13-22).

the child data. It is therefore likely that this can be generalized to other speakers of the dialect. It is further argued that the choice between the two word orders is not completely optional, but sensitive to the information structure of the sentence. The V2 structure is preferred when the subject is new information, while the V3 order is used when the subject is interpreted as given information.

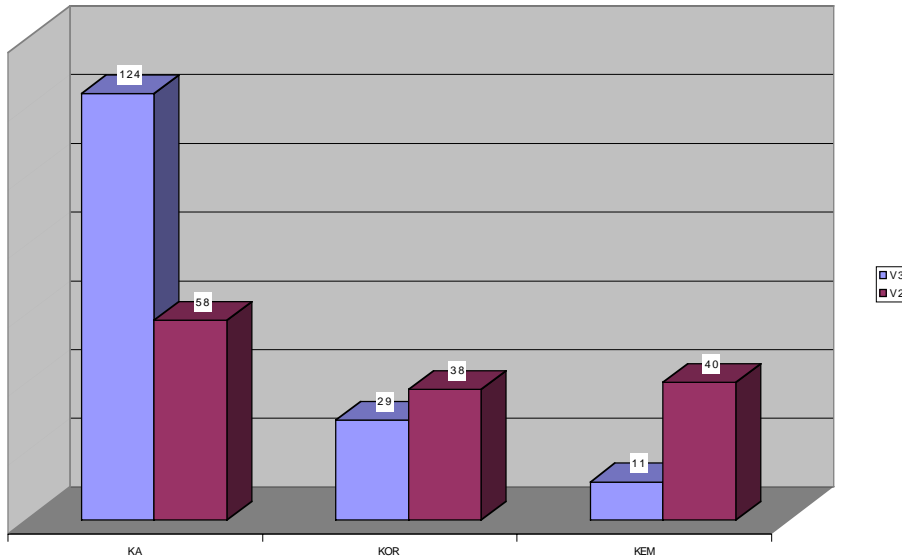


Figure 1: Number of occurrences of V2 and V3 word order in adult *ka-*, *kor-* and *kem-*questions ('what', 'where' and 'who'), INV in the files Ole.13-22.

The information structure of the two word orders is reflected in certain patterns in the adult data concerning the choice of verbs and subjects preferred in the two constructions. V2 order is preferred when the subject is a full DP (in the *kor-*questions) or a demonstrative pronoun (in the *ka-* and *kem-*questions), while V3 is preferred when the subject is a personal pronoun. The type of verb is also of importance, V2 being preferred when the verb is *være* ('be'), while the V3 construction is predominant when the verb is any other verb. This is illustrated in Tables 1-3 below for the choice of subject and verb types in *kor-*, *ka-* and *kem-*questions with V2 and V3 order in the adult corpus. Sentences (3) and (4) are typical examples of the V2 and V3 constructions respectively.

Table 1: Subjects and verbs involved in adult *kor-*questions ('where') with V2 and V3 word order, INV in the files Ole.13-22.

	V2			V3		
	<i>være</i>	Other V	Total	<i>være</i>	Other V	Total
Full DP	33 (86.8%)	0	33	0	3	3 (10.3%)
Pronoun	5 (13.2%)	0	5	5	21	26 (89.7%)
Total	38 (100%)	0	38	5 (17.2%)	24 (82.8%)	29 (100%)

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Table 2: Subjects and verbs involved in adult *ka*-questions ('what') with V2 and V3 word order, INV in the files Ole.13-22.

	V2			V3		
	<i>være</i>	Other V	Total	<i>være</i>	Other V	Total
Full DP	2 (3.9%)	5	7 (12.1%)	0	13 (12.9%)	13 (10.5%)
Pronoun	49 (96.1%)	2	51 (87.9%)	23	88 (87.1%)	111 (89.5%)
Total	51 (87.9%)	7 (12.1%)	58 (100%)	23 (18.5%)	101 (81.5%)	124 (100%)

Table 3: Subjects and verbs involved in adult *kem*-questions ('who') with V2 and V3 word order, INV in the files Ole.13-22.

	V2			V3		
	<i>være</i>	Other V	Total	<i>være</i>	Other V	Total
Full DP	3 (7.5%)	0	3	0	0	0
Pronoun	37 (92.5%)	0	37	3 (27%)	8 (73%)	11 (100%)
Total	40 (100%)	0	40	3	8	11

- (3) kor er pingvinen henne? (INV in Ole.16)
where is penguin-DEF LOC
 'Where is the penguin?'
 (4) kor du har fått det henne? (INV in Ole.22)
where you have got that LOC
 'Where did you get that?'

4. The child data

4.1 The overall production of V2 and V3 orders

The corpus of child data consists of altogether 66 recorded one-hour sessions; 23 files with Ina (age 1;8.20-2;10.22), 21 files with Ann (age 1;8.20-3;0.1) and 22 files with Ole (age 1;9.10-2;11.23). There are altogether 517 WH-questions with the monosyllabic question words *ka*, *kor* and *kem* ('what', 'where' and 'who') in this corpus. The data is presented in Table 4 below, and the figures clearly show that both word orders are attested in child data before the age of three.

Table 4: The total number of WH-questions with V2 and V3 word order in the corpus, for all three children.

WH-word	INA 1;8.20-2;10.12		ANN 1;8.20-3;0.1		OLE 1;9.10-2;11.23		TOTAL
	V3	V2	V3	V2	V3	V2	
<i>Ka</i> (‘what’)	89 (65%)	48 (35%)	53 (73.6%)	19 (26.4%)	0	1	210
<i>Kor</i> (‘where’)	15 (10.5%)	128 (89.5%)	15 (19%)	63 (81%)	0	42	263
<i>Kem</i> (‘who’)	8 (27.5%)	21 (72.5%)	3 (25%)	9 (75%)	0	3	44
Total	112 (36%)	197 (64%)	71 (44%)	91 (56%)	0	46 (100%)	517

The two girls produce overall more instances of V2 than V3, while Ole's files actually do not contain a single complete WH-question with a V3 structure (but see section 4.5 below). However, he produces considerably fewer WH-questions than the girls on the whole, and the ones he does produce are mainly questions with the question word *kor*. These *kor*-questions also have a much larger proportion of V2 structures in the girls' production, while the *ka*-questions have the opposite proportion. For all three children in the study, the pattern seems to be that *kor*- and *kem*-questions trigger verb movement more often than *ka*-questions². This becomes even clearer in Figure 2, where the data in Table 4 is displayed graphically. It is also important to note that the overall pattern produced by the three children is very similar to the pattern found in the adult corpus, the only difference being a somewhat higher proportion of V2 structures in the child corpus, especially with the question word *kor* (cp. Figure 1).

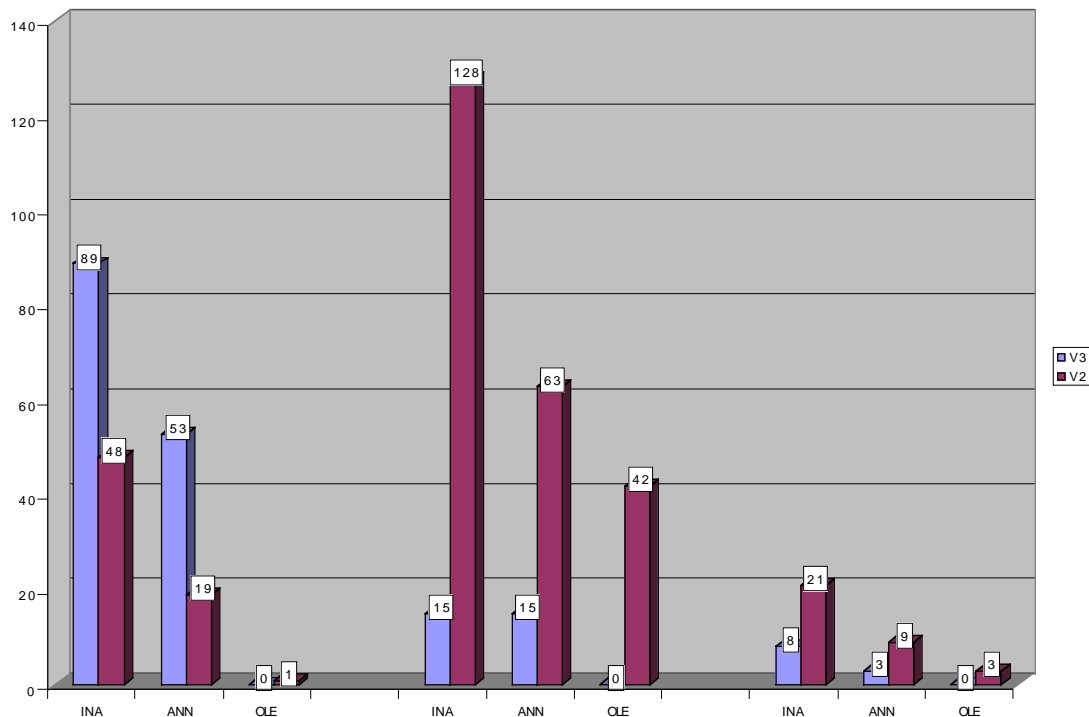


Figure 2: The number of occurrences in the three children's production of V2 and V3 word order in *ka*-questions (first set of columns), *kor*-questions (second set) and *kem*-questions (third set).

² In Westergaard (2003), this pattern is explained by reference to the information structure: When asking a WHAT-question, one is often asking about something which is present (or given) in the immediate context, at least this seems to be the case in the type of discourse register used with (and by) children. A WHERE-question, on the other hand, often asks about something which is not present.

4.2 *Markedness and the order of acquisition*

Even though both word orders are represented in the overall production of the children in this corpus, it could be the case that one is learned first and the other at a slightly later stage. For example, it is possible that children learn the 'true' dialect version with V3 order first, and only later begin to produce sentences with verb movement (V2).

Such a development would correspond to Platzack's (1996) idea of an Initial Hypothesis of Syntax, which claims that children will start out assuming that all features in the language they are acquiring are weak. Within a minimalist framework (e.g. Chomsky 1995), where movement is triggered by strong features, this would mean that children initially assume that there is no movement. In a V2 language like Norwegian, where the verb moves to C in all main clauses, children should start out assuming that verbs do not move, and later revise this initial hypothesis based on positive evidence in the input. This could lead to a brief period where Norwegian children produce structures with the verb inside the VP, e.g. WH-questions with V3 order, like in (1) above. Occasional examples of this word order have been attested in early Swedish by Santelmann 1995, as well as for WH-questions in English (for some children) as discussed e.g. in Radford (1992, 1994). For children learning the Tromsø dialect, where there is additionally V3 word order in the input, such a stage could be expected to be easier to detect, as it might last longer than in other Germanic languages where V2 order is consistent in all main clauses.

This could also be related to an idea of markedness which is frequently used to explain the order of acquisition: Unmarked features are learned first, and marked features, which are somehow more complex, are learned later. In the Platzack (1996) framework or in Roberts (1999), weak features are always unmarked, i.e. initially given by UG, while strong features are marked and have to be learned through positive evidence in the input. The V3 structure without verb movement would therefore be unmarked, and the prediction is that this is the word order that would be learned first. The marked V2 order would only be acquired after children have been exposed to enough main clauses with verb movement.

It is of course also possible that the situation is the other way around – that children start out with V2 structures and only later begin to produce the V3 structures that are special for this dialect. In that case, the V2 forms that they are producing before the age of three could be seen as overgeneralizations from other structures with verb movement, e.g. topicalizations and yes/no-questions. In these constructions V2 word order seems to be largely in place by the time the children start producing WH-questions. Thus, if V2 word order is acquired in other types of main

clauses, then it might simply take the children a little longer to realize that their dialect has some exceptions to the general verb movement rule. A possible development from V2 to V3 structures also seems to be better able to explain the production of the child Ole, whose complete WH-questions occur only with V2 order in this corpus.

This hypothesis would correspond to another definition of markedness. Henry and Tangney (1999) considers a language that has movement in all clause types less complex than one that has movement in only some clause types. That is, it is not sufficient to consider a construction (e.g. verb movement) in isolation; it has to be considered within the linguistic system that it occurs. In Standard Norwegian V2 word order should thus be unmarked, since there is verb movement in all main clauses. The V3 WH-questions in the Tromsø dialect, on the other hand, would be marked, since they are exceptional in that it is only these constructions that do not require verb movement in the dialect. They should therefore also take longer to learn.

Thus, we have two possible hypotheses of markedness that make completely opposite predictions with respect to the order of acquisition of the two question types. However, a closer investigation of the child data reveals that it is not possible to detect a clear development from one word order to the other in the children's production of WH-questions. In the linguistic data of the two girls, who produce both V2 and V3 word order in the corpus, both structures occur from the earliest files. The graph in Figure 3 below shows Ina's production of *ka*-questions ('what'), where there is an overall majority of V3 structures (89 vs. 48). Figure 4 displays her word order in *kor*-questions ('where'), which have an overall majority of V2 structures (15 vs. 128). The only detectable development is (obviously) that Ina produces more WH-questions as she gets older.

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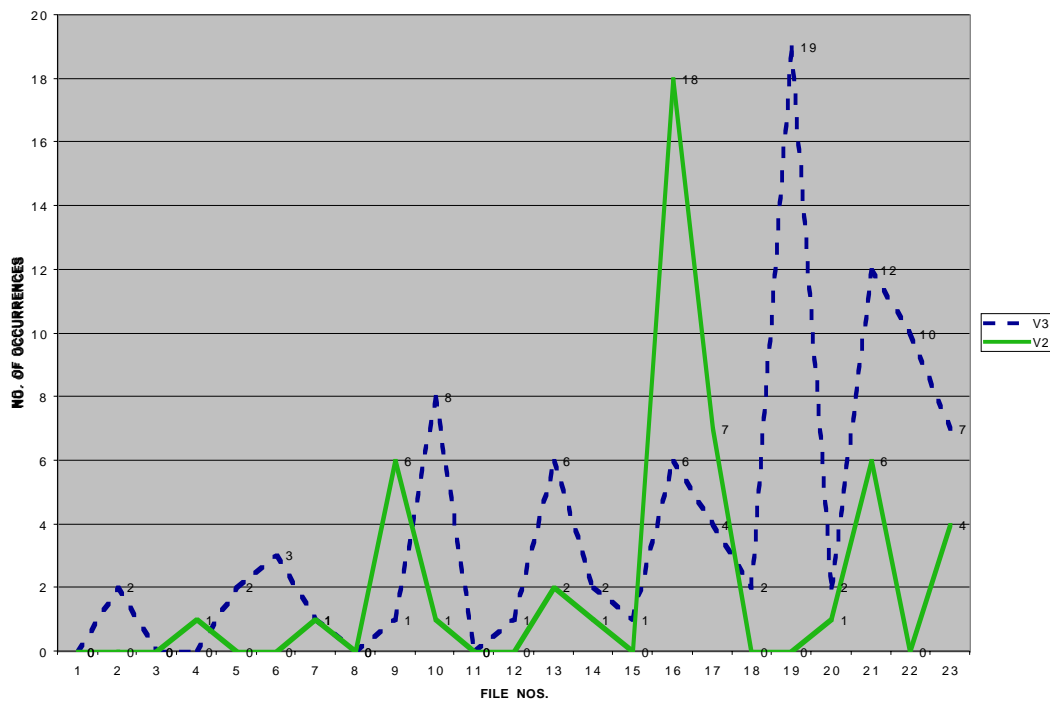


Figure 3: The number of *ka*-questions (‘what’) with V2 and V3 word order, Ina.1-23.

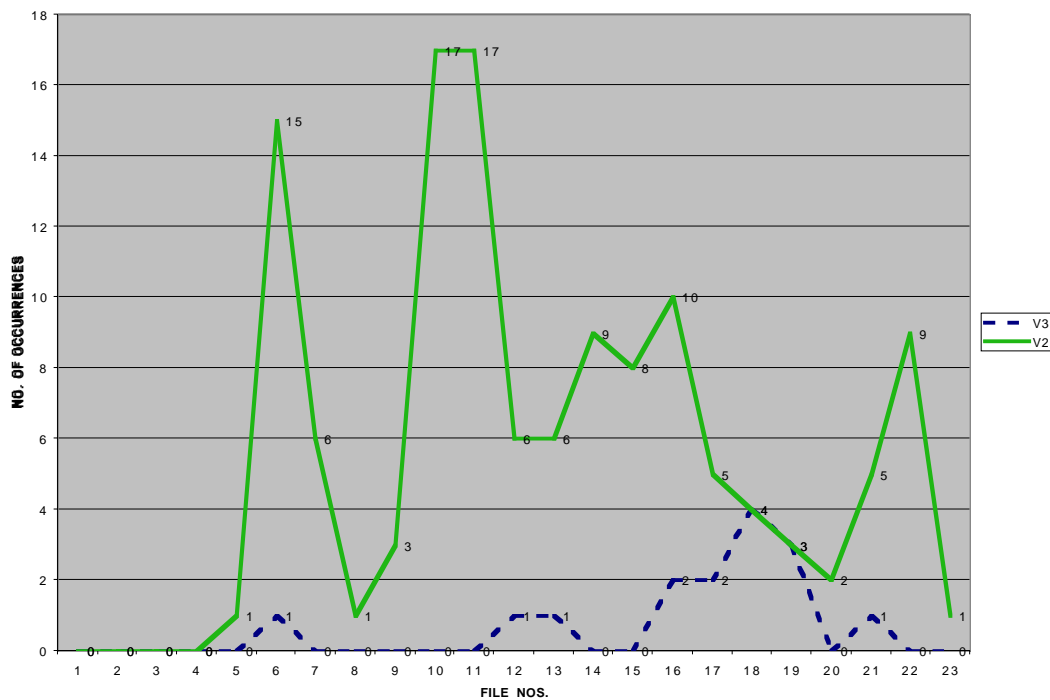


Figure 4: The number of *kor*-questions (‘where’) with V2 and V3 word order, Ina.1-23.

When considering Ann’s production of *ka*- and *kor*-questions, we see a similar development, as illustrated in Figures 5 and 6. Even though Ann on the whole produces fewer WH-questions (162 compared to Ina’s 309), the proportions of V3 to V2 in Ann’s questions are also comparable to Ina’s figures, 53 vs. 19 in *ka*-questions, 15 vs. 63 in *kor*-questions.

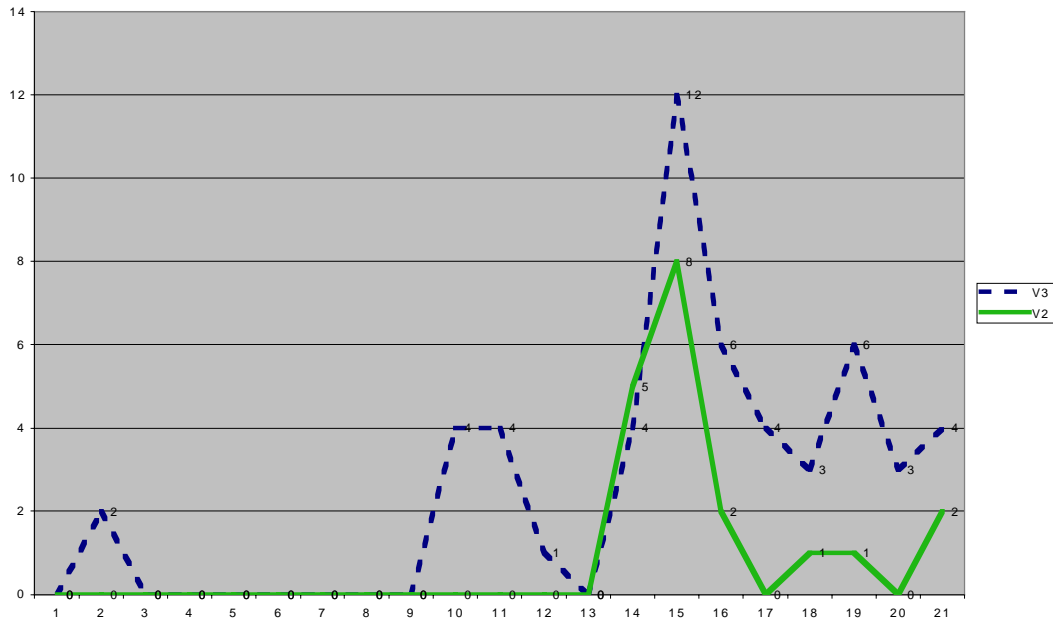


Figure 5: The number of *ka*-questions (‘what’) with V2 and V3 order, Ann.1-21.

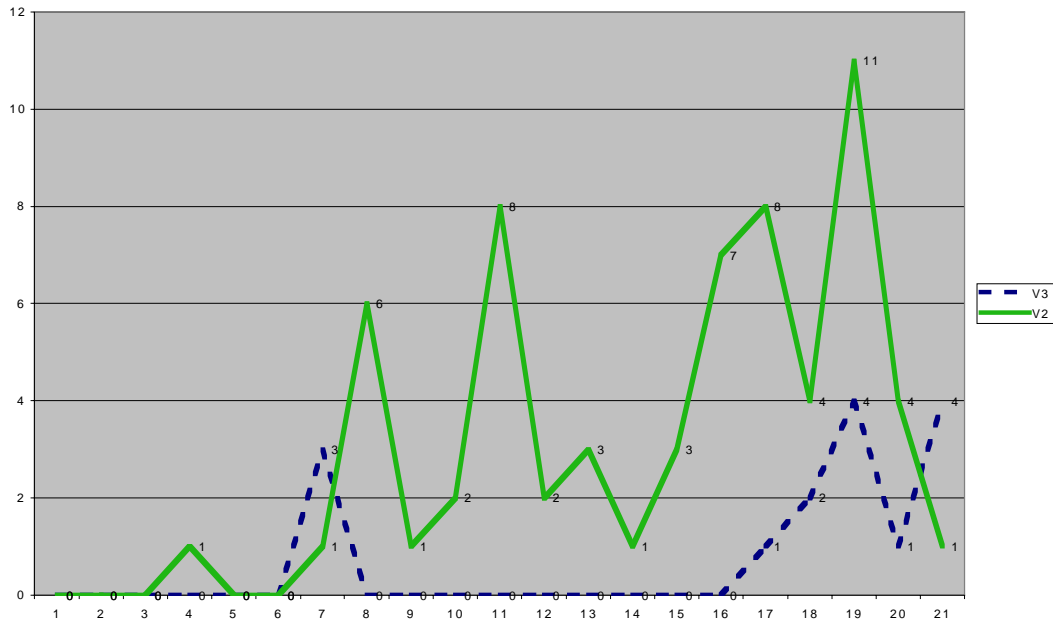


Figure 6: The number of *kor*-questions (‘where’) with V2 and V3 order, Ann.1-21.

4.3 The child data and information structure

As shown in section 4.1, the figures for V2 and V3 word order for the child corpus as a whole parallels the adult figures. The tables for the child production presented in this section show that the distribution of subject and verb types preferred in the different constructions is also strikingly similar. This is illustrated by the following examples, where the V2 order in (5) is used with the verb *være* and a full DP subject, while the V3 order

in (6) is used with a pronoun subject and another verb (cp. also examples (3) and (4) above from the adult corpus).

- (5) kor er Ann sin dukke hen? (Ann.04, age 1;11.0)
where is Ann POSS doll LOC
 ‘Where is Ann’s doll?’
- (6) ka du gjør? (Ann.10, age 2;3.9)
what you do-PRES
 ‘What are you doing?’

Table 5 shows the distribution of subjects and verb types used with the two word orders in Ina’s *kor*-questions. We noted earlier (Figures 1 and 2) that Ina produces considerably more V2 structures than the adult. When considering the combination of subjects and verbs involved in these structures, however, we discover that there is no serious discrepancy in the adult and child patterns. Ina just produces more instances of one particular pattern, viz. questions with a full DP subject and the verb *være*, which would have V2 word order also in the adult system.

Table 5: Subjects and verbs in *kor*-questions (‘where’), Ina.1-23.

	V2 ³			V3		
	<i>være</i>	Other V	Total	<i>være</i>	Other V	Total
Full DP	115+2?	0	115+2?	1	2	3
Pronoun	9	2	11	6	6	12
Total	126	2	128	7	8	15

Table 6 displays the subject and verb types in Ina’s *ka*-questions (‘what’), and the overall distribution is again similar to the adult pattern, except for one figure: the 23 examples of V2 questions with pronoun subjects with a verb other than *være* (‘be’). These are examples of only three sentences repeated many times, illustrated in (7)-(9):

³ The number 2 marked with a question mark refers to two instances where the transcriber has not been able to identify what the child said:

- (i) Kor er xx?
where is xx

It is likely that the xx’s refer to a noun rather than a pronoun in these cases, as pronouns are short, easy to pronounce and limited in number, and thus easier to identify in children’s speech.

Table 6: Subject and verbs in *ka*-questions ('what'), Ina.1-23.

	V2 ⁴			V3		
	<i>være</i>	Other V	Total	<i>være</i>	Other V	Total
Full DP	1	8+2?	9+2?	0	5	5
Pronoun	14	23	37	18	66	84
Total	15	33	48	18	71	89

- (7) *ka hete han (der)?*
what is-called he (there)
 'What is he called?' (Ina.7, age 2;1.23 and Ina.9, age 2;2.12, 1 instance in each)⁵
- (8) *ka har han/ho (der)?*
what has he/she (there)
 'What does he/she have?' (Ina.16, age 2;7.8: 7 instances, Ina.17, age 2;7.22: 5 instances, Ina.21, age 2;9.18: 4 instances, Ina.23, age 2;10.22: 2 instances)
- (9) *ka gjør han?*
what does he
 'What is he doing?' (Ina.20, age 2;8.27: 1 instance, Ina.21, age 2;9.18: 2 instances)

In all these 23 examples the subject is a third person pronoun, and it seems that Ina is using these as deictic pronouns, pointing to people present in the context, e.g. in a book. The frequent use of the locative particle *there* in these situations indicates that this might be the case. Therefore, these pronouns are not considered given information in this context, as they have to be pointed out to the listener.

Table 7 displays the distribution of subject and verb types in Ina's *kem*-questions ('who'), and a comparison with the adult figures in Table 3 again reveals very similar patterns.

⁴ Again, the number 2 marked with a question mark refers to two instances where the transcriber has not been able to identify what the child said:

(i) *Ka hete xx?*
what is-called xx

It is likely that the *xx*'s refer to a noun rather than a pronoun in these cases (see previous footnote).

⁵ These two examples stand out in the corpus, as there are numerous examples in the later files of the opposite order with *hete*:

(i) *Ka han hete?*
what he is-called

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Table 7: Subjects and verbs in *kem*-questions ('who'), Ina.1-23.

	V2			V3		
	<i>være</i>	Other V	Total	<i>være</i>	Other V	Total
Full DP	2	1	3	0	0	0
Pronoun	18	0	18	6	2	8
Total	20	1	21	6	2	8

As we saw earlier, Ann produces fewer WH-questions overall than Ina, but the distribution of V2 vs. V3 is similar. In the following tables it is shown that also the verbs and subject types involved in the respective constructions do not differ significantly from Ina's or the adult figures.

Table 8: Subjects and verbs in *kor*-questions ('where'), Ann.1-21.

	V2			V3		
	<i>være</i>	V	Total	<i>være</i>	V	Total
Full DP	48	0	48	2	2	4
Pronoun	13	2	15	3	8	11
Total	61	2	63	5	10	15

Table 9: Subjects and verbs in *ka*-questions ('what'), Ann.1-21.

	V2			V3		
	<i>være</i>	Other V	Total	<i>være</i>	Other V	Total
Full DP	2	0	2	0	5	5
Pronoun	17	0	17	12	36	48
Total	19	0	19	12	41	53

Table 10: Subjects and verbs in *kem*-questions ('who'), Ann.1-21.

	V2			V3		
	<i>være</i>	Other V	Total	<i>være</i>	Other V	Total
Full DP	1	0	1	0	0	0
Pronoun	8	0	8	1	2	3
Total	9	0	9	1	2	3

Finally, let us consider the production of Ole, who produces a total of only 46 WH-questions in the present corpus, compared to e.g. Ina's 309. As mentioned above, he does not produce a single example with V3 word order, with any of the three question words. However, a closer investigation of the distribution of subjects and verbs reveals that Ole does not exhibit a different pattern from the other two children. As shown in Figure 11, he simply produces fewer patterns than they do, basically just one: questions with the question word *kor* ('where'), with the verb *være* ('be') and a full DP subject, i.e. the pattern that is also used more by Ina. And this is a pattern that would require V2 order also in the production of the other children as well as the adult.

Table 11: Subjects and verbs in WH-questions - all with V2 order, Ole.1-22.

	<i>ka</i> ('what')		<i>kor</i> ('where')		<i>kem</i> ('who')	
	<i>være</i>	V	<i>være</i>	V	<i>være</i>	V
Full DP	0	0	37	0	0	0
Pronoun	1	0	3	2	3	0
Total	1	0	40	2	3	0

4.4 A comparison of the adult and child production

The tables in the previous sections show that the children produce the same patterns for subject and verb types with the two word orders as the adult. Thus, it is difficult to detect any development in these children with regard to word order in these constructions. In Figure 7, the information from Tables 1, 5, 8 and 11 are displayed graphically, comparing the adult and child preferences of subject and verb types in *kor*-questions ('where'). Even though the number of sentences produced within each pattern may differ, the patterns themselves are stable across all four individuals. Thus, it is possible to conclude that not only do the children acquire the two word orders simultaneously – they also seem to be sensitive to the subtle distinction in information structure between the two orders from their earliest production of WH-questions.

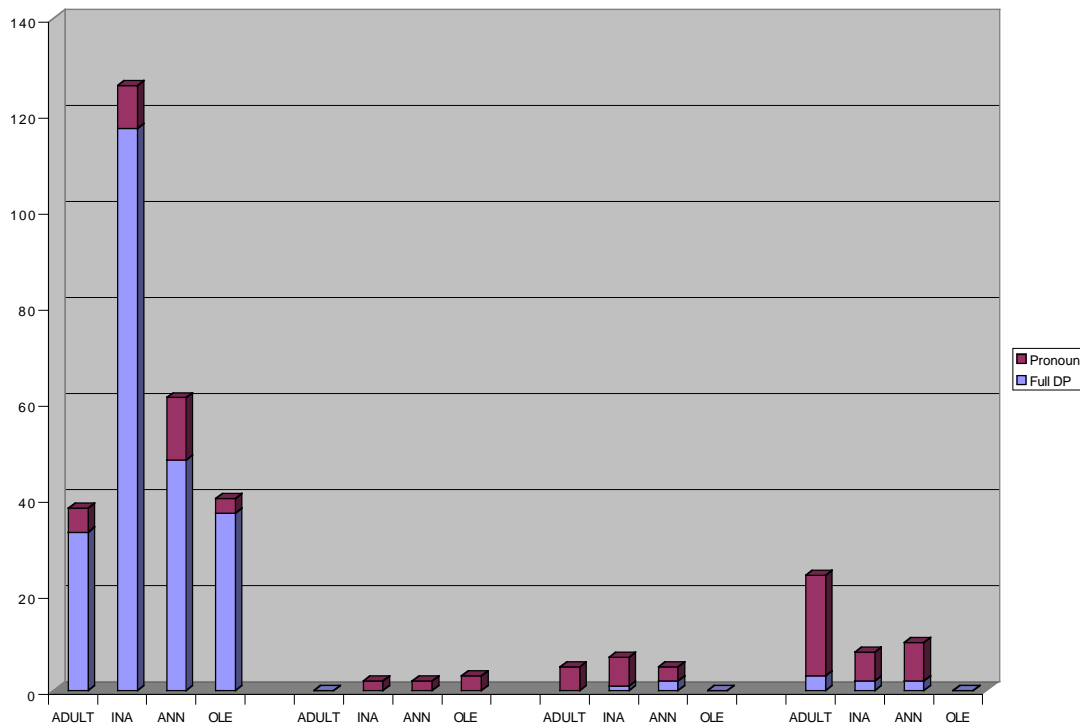


Figure 7: The distribution of full DP and pronoun subjects in KOR-questions with V2/*være* (first set of columns), V2/other verbs (second set of columns), V3/*være* (third set) and V3/other verbs (fourth set).

4.5 WH-less questions

In order to detect any development at all in these children with regard to word order in WH-questions, it is necessary to search the corpus for a slightly different question type. In addition to regular WH-questions, all three children produce some non-target WH-questions without question words. The first striking feature of these questions is that the same word order patterns are in place with respect to the choice of subject and verb types preferred, even when the WH-word is not expressed. Typical examples are the V2 construction in (10), which has the verb *være* ('be') and a full DP subject, and the structure without verb movement (V3)⁶ in (11), which has a pronoun subject and another verb than *være*.

- | | | |
|------|--|--|
| (10) | er doktoren?
<i>is the doctor</i>
'(Where) is the doctor?' | (V2: <i>være</i> + DP)

(Ole.2, age 1;10.0) |
| (11) | den gjør der?
<i>that does there</i>
'(What) is that doing there?' | (V3: Pronoun + other V)

(Ole.2, age 1;10.0) |

Both of these examples are taken from the files of Ole, showing that even though he does not produce a single question without verb movement as a full WH-question, the V3 structure *is* in place from his earliest production – as well as the distinction between given and new information as the decisive factor between the two word orders.

An interesting feature appears when the number of V2 vs. V3 structures in the children's WH-less questions is considered. Concentrating on the production of only one of the children (Ina)⁷, one finds that among the questions without WH-words, there is a considerably larger number of V3 structures than V2 structures – which is exactly the opposite of what was the case with the regular WH-questions discussed above. While there are only 6 examples of WH-less structures with V2 in Ina's overall production, all in the earliest files, there are as many as 123 V3 questions, distributed over the 23 files. These figures indicate that the WH-questions requiring verb movement are in place earlier than the ones without verb movement: the V2 structures occur with all three elements expressed (WH-

⁶ When the WH-word is missing, the verb is of course in first position when the verb has moved and in second when verb movement has not applied. However, the constructions will continue to be called V2 and V3 respectively.

⁷ The other two children in the corpus do not show exactly the same behavior in this respect, but their production does not contradict the analysis of Ina's WH-less questions presented here.

word, subject and verb) at an earlier stage than the V3 constructions. This suggests that there is something about the *syntax* of the V3 structure that is more difficult than the V2 construction, since it takes longer to occur in its full form⁸.

Another interesting feature of Ina's WH-less questions appears when the two files with the largest number of these constructions are investigated in more detail. These are files 9 and 10, when Ina is 2;2.12 and 2;3.12 respectively. In file 9, Ina produces 21 V3 structures and in file 10 as many as 55, all with the verb *hete* ('is-called'). In the same two files there is only one example in each of a WH-less V2 question (but many full V2 questions). Typical examples are sentences like (12), while the only V2 example in file 9 is given in (13). In the same two files, there are also many WH-questions with *hete*, where the WH-word is expressed, but with the subject missing, like in (14) below⁹. Table 12 shows the distribution of the different questions with *hete* in the two files:

- (12) den/han/ho hete? (21 examples in Ina.9, 2;2.12)
that/he/she is-called
 '(What) is that/he/she called?'
 (13) E hete farga?¹⁰ (1 example in Ina.9, 2;2.12)
PART is-called color-ART
 '(What) is the color called?'
 (14) ka hete? (17 examples in Ina.9, 2;2;12)
what is-called
 'What is (it) called?'

Table 12: The number of WH-questions with and without WH-words and with/without subjects in the files Ina.9 and Ina.10.

QUESTION	Ina.09, age 2;2.12	Ina.10, age 2;3.12
S hete? / ka S hete?	21 / 0	55 / 4
hete S? / ka hete S?	1 / 5	1 / 1
ka hete?	17	11
hete?	2	18

⁸ Some speculations on what the syntactic structure of the two constructions could be can be found in Westergaard (2003), and a more detailed analysis is proposed in Westergaard and Vangsnes (2002).

⁹ These subjectless sentences seem to be counter-evidence to a common argument in the literature that children do not omit subjects in WH-questions in non-pro-drop languages (Rizzi 1992, 2000).

¹⁰ Note that this example may not even be a true WH-less question, as there is a particle present (called E here) which may be used in place of the WH-word. This question particle is also found in the production of the other two children.

Again, this seems to indicate that the V3 structure is somehow more difficult to learn than the V2 structure. When the overall complexity of the sentence is too demanding for the child, then some kind of bottleneck mechanism comes into play, and *either* the WH-word or the subject is deleted. Obviously, it cannot be stated with certainty that these subjectless sentences are ‘underlyingly’ structures without verb movement, as there is no overt material that the verb has moved across. However, it seems to be more likely that the subject will be deleted when it is given information, in which case it is the V3 structure that would be required. It is also striking that this does not seem to happen in the constructions which require V2 word order: in those questions both the WH-word and the subject are in place earlier than in the V3 structures.

The data presented in this section, together with the production of the child Ole discussed above, may be taken as evidence that the V3 structure is more difficult to learn than the V2 structure and takes slightly longer to fall into place in its full form. That would support an analysis of WH-questions in the Tromsø dialect where it is the V3 structures that are special, unusual and *marked* in the language. This also suggests that the Henry and Tangney (1999) account of markedness is more appropriate in this case than a Platzack (1996) or Roberts (1999) minimalist account of markedness, where movement is always considered to be marked.

5. Summary and conclusion

The study reported on in this paper has shown that in a dialect that allows two word orders in WH-questions, both word orders are acquired extremely early by children. Sentences with verb movement (V2) as well as sentences without verb movement (V3) occur from the earliest files of the three children in the study, i.e. before the age of two. Moreover, the subtle distinction between the two orders with respect to information structure is respected from the beginning. However, it is suggested that the syntactic complexity of the two word orders differs, and that this results in a slightly later acquisition of the more complex (V3) structure in its full form.

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