Introduction: The acquisition sketch project

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1   Introduction

The Acquisition Sketch Project provides a framework for documenting and describing child language and child-directed language in a diverse range of languages and cultures. It grew out of current debates about improving the empirical foundation of language acquisition research, which – despite its long history of cross-linguistic research – continues to be severely biased towards English and other big European languages. Major efforts are needed to adequately take into account the enormous diversity in the types of languages that children learn and the cultures they grow up in.

There are different ways to take on this challenge. Our proposal focuses on increasing the breadth of coverage by providing step-by-step comprehensive guidelines to produce a sketch of acquisition patterns in a language based on only five hours of data from ages 2-4 years. We strive to make the sketch achievable by limiting the amount of data necessary, and by offering hands-on advice on collecting, analyzing and presenting the data. Our goal is to encourage and enable a wide audience to contribute to studying language use by and with children, including, for example, field linguists and language documenters, community language workers, child language researchers or MA students. We adopt a transdisciplinary approach that spans the fields of language documentation, language acquisition and language socialization, which seeks to do justice to each field's unique perspective. Concomitantly, the results are set to feed back into the different fields: widening the evidential base of language acquisition and socialization research, extending the scope of language documentation to include communicative practices that involve children, supporting language maintenance and revitalization efforts through a better understanding of acquisition and socialization patterns in contexts of language shift, and gaining insights into the structure of the adult language.

Our approach is based on two cornerstones: a sketch corpus and an acquisition sketch. The sketch corpus consists of minimally five hours of annotated and archived data, and it documents communicative practices of children between the ages of 2 and 4. The acquisition sketch is a description of child language, child-directed language, and socialization practice as it is attested in the sketch corpus. We offer the possibility to archive with the *Language Archive Cologne* and to publish within Special Publication 28 of *Language Documentation & Conservation*, but these are not the only conceivable archives and publishers. Additionally,

we maintain a website where information and updates on developments and current events are compiled (https://acquisition-sketch.phil-fak.uni-koeln.de/).

The inaugural set of contributions to Special Publication 28 comprises five papers. The volume starts with the Sketch Acquisition Manual (SAM), divided into two parts. The SAM offers detailed guidelines for creating sketch corpora (part I) and acquisition sketches (part II).

Following that, two papers address central aspects of our approach.

First, Christoph Bracks and Maria Bardají i Farré report on creating a sketch corpus of Totoli, a western Austronesian language of Indonesia. The authors have a background in language documentation and description, and their experience will be especially valuable to readers who consider broadening the scope of their language documentation project to include a child language component.

Second, Gianna Urbanczik provides a first evaluation of the sketch format. She focuses on the acquisition of case marking in German, and evaluates the results from a sketch corpus against our extensive knowledge of the acquisition of German case. Due to its limited size, we cannot expect the sketch corpus to capture everything, but encouragingly it captures many common phenomena, and all sketch results are confirmed by the existing literature.

The volume then turns to the acquisition sketches proper. Hannah Lee and Shanley Allen present a sketch of Inuktitut, an Inuit language of Canada. It is the first sketch that follows the guidelines laid out in parts I and II of the SAM. It is somewhat unusual in that it can draw on considerable prior research on the acquisition of Inuktitut, but the authors are careful to follow the guidelines and anchor generalizations exclusively in the sketch corpus. As such, this contribution serves two purposes. On the one hand, it adds to the evaluation of the sketch format, confirming that it captures many salient phenomena. On the other hand, it sketches the acquisition of Inuktitut, and thereby serves as an example of how authors can approach the task of writing an acquisition sketch. There are, of course, different ways of approaching this task, and we will continue to add further sketches over time. Our hope is that others will take inspiration from them and will help to create a set of comparable sketch corpora and acquisition sketches that will form the basis for cross-linguistic comparisons and that will substantially increase our knowledge of variability and universality in language acquisition and socialization.

2 Contact persons

The Acquisition Sketch Project is a long-term project, and we are committed to working with you on your sketches and developing the project further. If you are interested in collecting sketch data, writing acquisition sketches or contributing to the project in any other way, we encourage you to get in touch with us and discuss your plans (see also https://acquisition-sketch.phil-fak.uni-koeln.de/ for updates on contact details):

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3 Dedication

It is with the greatest of sadness that we dedicate this special publication to our recently passed co-editor and co-author, Barbara Kelly. Barb died suddenly as we were finalizing the publication, and no words can truly express our heartbreak in losing our much-loved friend and colleague. Throughout her career Barb was committed to working with and for minority language communities, while also working on a wide range of other topics. She had a seemingly limitless energy for everything in her life, and it was impossible not to be swept up in her enthusiasm. We will all miss her dearly, but are comforted in the knowledge that her substantial contribution to the SAM means her legacy will be evident in every sketch, both those that appear here, and future ones that are yet to be written.