

**The acquisition of grammatical gender in German is hard but we can facilitate it:  
Evidence from artificial language learning studies and analyses of language play**

Eva Belke, Ruhr-University Bochum

There are only few unambiguous phonological or semantic cues to the grammatical gender of nouns in German. Arguably, this is why its acquisition is notoriously difficult, even for children with German as L1. Evidence from artificial language learning with adult participants suggests that these learners can use cues from a nouns' morphosyntactic environment to infer their allocation to gender-like subclasses, provided that the cues are presented in a learner-friendly fashion (e.g., by presenting training sentences pertaining to one noun in a grouped fashion). In a previous study with adult speakers, we found that this even holds for artificial languages that emulate the form-overlap present in the German gender-case system. The work I present in my talk aimed at replicating these findings with 4- to 6-year-old children who were either trained with a grouped or a random presentation of the training sentences. We found that children trained with a grouped input showed more systematic error patterns in comparison to the random presentation group. Taken together, these findings suggest that children benefit from a structured presentation of the input in the acquisition of gender-like subclasses in languages with no noun-cues.

In an outlook, I will demonstrate how language play, children's songs and also children's books present linguistic input in a grouped fashion, suggesting that working with such material may be an effective means of fostering the acquisition of grammatical gender in German.