

# Rezensionen

Holger Diessel: *The Acquisition of Complex Sentences*.  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004 (Cambridge  
Studies in Linguistics 105).

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## 1 Introduction

In this book, Holger Diessel investigates how English-speaking children between the ages of 2 and 5 acquire complex sentences, based on observational data taken from the CHILDES database. He considers finite as well as nonfinite clauses and argues that complex sentences develop from simple non-embedded sentences. Two developmental paths are distinguished. Complement clauses and relative clauses are assumed to develop from simple sentences which are expanded to multiple-clause constructions, while co-ordinate clauses and adverbial clauses are argued to evolve from simple sentences by clause integration. The theoretical framework on which Diessel bases his analysis is a combination of construction grammar with a usage-based model. He suggests that various factors contribute to the acquisition of complex sentences, such as how often the structure occurs in the input, how complex it is, and what kind of communicative function it carries.

I first summarize the chapters of the book in Section 2 before giving a critical evaluation in Section 3.

## 2 Summary of chapters in the book

Chapter 1 introduces the essential elements of Diessel's study: his two main hypotheses, the factors interacting in the development of complex clauses, and an overview of the data.

At the core of his analysis are the following two hypotheses: (i) Complex sentences develop from simple non-embedded clauses, which characterize the early data, by either expanding the simple clauses to multiple-clause structures, as in the case of complement clauses and relative clauses, or by integrating two independent sentences into a biclausal unit, as in the case of co-ordinate clauses and adverbial clauses. (ii) The early complex sentences produced by the children are organized around a small number of concrete lexical expressions. More abstract representations of complex sentences only arise once the children have learned a sufficient number of lexically specific constructions which enable them to generalize these structures.

Diessel distinguishes different factors which influence the emergence of complex sentences. A tight link is seen between the appearance of a construction in the child data and the frequency at which the child is exposed to this construction in the input. Whether or not a construction is learned early by the child not only depends on its frequency but also on its