



# **How Native - English Speaking Children Learn the Past - Tense Verbs**

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## **Structure**

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# 1. My aim

**My aim is to talk about how English-speaking children learn their past tense in their native language.**

**This is a well-known topic but still we do not know all the answers. I read several research papers concerning this subject. In my presentation is the main part deals with an excellent research done with small children, investigating how do they learn past tense .**

**Children can make mistakes while using the past tense. I mention these two specific types of mistakes. Then I talk about a hypothesis. After that I want to get into details of a linguistic experiment. Finally I will describe about the outcome - the result proved the hypothesis right.**

## 2. INTRODUCTION

Language acquisition is a long process. It also includes the overgeneralization of various linguistic inflections, in which the child generalizes a regular rule to irregular forms. The English past-tense inflection illustrates this phenomenon, using overgeneralization for many years.

The child learning English produces two types of overgeneralization errors of the past tense:

one type in which he adds the regular - ed suffix to the base form of the irregular verb (eated, goed)

another type in which he adds the - ed suffix to the past form of the irregular verb (ated, wented) having used overgeneralization

### 3. HYPOTHESIS

„1. **3- and 4-year old children will accept overgeneralized forms such as *eated*** more often than forms such as *ated*

2. **5- and 6-year old children will be as likely to accept forms such as *ated*** as they will be to accept forms such as *eated*

3. **7- and 8-year old children will exhibit a strong tendency to reject all ungrammatical past-tense forms**, due to their long-time exposure to their correct forms in their linguistic environment

4. **Children of all ages will accept correct irregular past forms more often than either type of overgeneralized irregular form since they are constantly exposed to correct irregular past forms in their linguistic environment.”**

(Kuczay, 1978, p .320)

## **4. EXPERIMENT**

**45 native English-speaking children participated in the experiment.**

**The procedure was done in Texas.**

**First group's age was 4 - 11**

**Second group's age was 5 - 11**

**Third group's age was 7 - 11**





## Task and procedure

Researchers used a variant of the judgement –task paradigm, in which the children were asked to decide if a given sentence or linguistic form is acceptable. *Three puppets were used* in this experiment. The linguists explained to the children that puppets liked to talk **silly** and they might sometimes say something which was not correct. The researchers wanted the child to help them to decide if any of the dolls said something silly or not correct.

Each puppet said grammatical and ungrammatical sentences. The sentence pairs and triplets were intermingled and presented in a random order.

**These verb pairs were used in the experiment:**

**hurt-hurted**

**caught-catched – caughted**

**maked**

**went-goed-wented**

**camed**

**threw-threwed-throwed**

**put-putted**

**ate – ated-eated**

**took-tooked-taked**

**drank-drinked-dranked**

**hit-hitted**

**fell-felled-falled**

**broke-brokek-broked**

**cut-cuttet**

**made-maded-**

**came-comed-**

**The verb pairs were composed of verbs in which the past-tense form is identical with the base form so only one type of overgeneralization error was possible. These types of verb are called**

### **NONCHANGE VERBS**

**In the verb triplets there are the grammatical past-tense forms and two ungrammatical past-tense forms. These are the**

### **CHANGE VERBS**

**As predicted in the hypothesis, grammatical nonchange verbs were treated as acceptable more often than ungrammatical nonchange verbs. The reason for that explanation was that the children treated each grammatical nonchange verb as**

### **ACCEPTABLE**

**Interestingly enough regular –ed usage appeared later than irregular forms .**

**(Bloom, 1980, p.394)**

## 5.RESULT

At the end the following developmental sequence was suggested:

„ 1.) Initially, children learn that some grammatical irregular past-tense verbs are used

appropriately in certain contexts. At this same time, the child will not accept

overgeneralized, ungrammatical forms as correct nor will he produce such forms, since

*HE HAS NOT YET CONSTRUCTED THE REGULAR PAST- TENSE RULE*, which will later

result in emergence of both types of overgeneralization errors

2.) Children make overgeneralization errors. At this point, children primarily make

overgeneralization errors of the base + ed variety (eated)

3.) Children become more concerned with semantic notions with syntactic forms.

So produce base + ed and past + ed overgeneralization errors.

4.) With increasing age, children come to eliminate many overgeneralization errors. „

( Kuczaj, 1978, p.325)

**Few concluding remarks concerning children's final steps for learning tenses:**

**In the beginning children limit their use of tense but later slowly extend the category boundary and finally acquire the adult norm.**

**(Yasuhiro, 1995. p. 759)**

**Although it is accepted and proven, that the children learn with age and eliminate overgeneralization errors, but the researchers find that it is not a completely uncomplicated developmental improvement. Sometimes we find an increase and then an unexpected decrease of overgeneralization error occurs.**

**As stated :**

**„ Overall frequency of errors decreased with age, yet the tendency for certain types of irregularization increased in the older groups.”**

**(Marchman, 1997, p. 283)**

**But all in all, the hypothesis was proven right.**

## 6. References

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**Here I am with my two bilingual children. They also struggled with English irregular past tenses..... ..**

**Thanks for your attention!**