Language acquisition is a gradual and synergic process: children learn approximate representations at different levels simultaneously (e.g. phonology, semantics, morphology) and refine them over time (cf. Ngön et al. 2013). For the present study, this view suggests that different patterns for complex constructions gradually find their specific semantic niche within the language system (although free variation is sometimes an option). It thus takes a developmental approach to compound semantics but broadens the scope to include other patterns for expressing similar contents within a language. The research question is: To which extent is it possible to trace competition, developmentally, between complex nominal constructions that are able to express similar basic semantic relations?

Most studies on compound semantics conclude that a rather restricted number of basic relations (around 15) manages to cover the majority of (NN) compounds, although it is also recognized that some compounds escape basic classification (cf. Bourque 2014). Bauer and Tarasova (2013) made a welcome contribution by showing that not only NN compounds, but also A N phrases (relational adjectives, cf. Rainer 2013), possessive constructions, neoclassical compounds, and blends can express similar semantic relations (Levi’s 1978).

As to word-formation acquisition, items that have high input frequency are likely to emerge early (Berman 2009). Nouns, with their naming function, are often claimed to have an advantage over other grammatical categories in early acquisition (Waxman et al. 2013). In compound-prone-languages, such as Germanic languages, children decompose NN compounds into head and modifier (Dressler et al. 2010), and they create novel ones, based on productive rules (Becker 1994; Mellenius 1997) already around age 2.

Diary notes were collected from a typically developing, monolingual Swedish girl (ages 1;9–4;2). They consist of utterances produced in daily settings, noted down immediately, regularized to normal spelling, but keeping non-target-like features. Contextual and semantic information, and age specification were included. The data were gathered with a particular focus on word-formation, but also with the aim to obtain a broad, overall picture of the language development. Although diary data can be reliable (Bretherton & Beeghly 1982), they must be validated through other methods (Wellman et al. 1995). For early language development, diary notes have several strengths: they can capture infrequent items (e.g. novel compounds) and provide a rich interpretation. To complement the diary data, longitudinal recordings from caretaker-child interactions, comprising four Swedish children, ages 1;3–4;0 (Strömqvist et al. 1993) available at CHILDES (MacWhinney 2000), are used. In the recordings, I expect to find few occurrences of novel compounds but instead more attestations of other types of constructions.

Nearly 1,000 utterances containing complex nominal constructions were attested in the diary data, and analysed for form and rudimentary semantics by a data-driven analysis. The findings show for example that Possession emerge before age 2 and is, at first, expressed by possessive constructions. Novel compounding, being also able to express Possession but on a smaller scale, emerges soon thereafter. Coordination, likewise, is expressed before age 2, either through novel compounding or through coordinated nouns. For other relations, such as Part-whole or Similarity, novel compounding is the first pattern to emerge (1a, 2a). However, later on, such relations tend to be spelled out by prepositions (1b) or subordinated clauses (2b):

1. Location
   (a) *hundblöja* (1;10;20) ‘dog-diaper’, for a diaper with dog prints
   (b) *en träja med spöken på* (3;0;14) ‘a shirt with ghosts on’

2. Similarity
   (a) *godiskaviar* (2;4;9) ‘candy-kaviar/spread’, for hazelnut cocoa spread
   (b) *en konstig lampa, en hattlampa, det ser ut som en keps, en hatt* (2;10;3)
      ‘a funny lamp, a hat-lamp, it looks like a cap, a hat’, for a pendant lamp

THE GRADUAL DEVELOPMENT OF COMPLEX NOMINAL CONSTRUCTIONS IN SWEDISH CHILD LANGUAGE: SEMANTICS AND COMPETITION

Maria Rosenberg
Umeå University, Department of language studies
Hence, the present study aims to explore the extent to which it is possible to trace competition between complex constructions on semantic grounds. The idea of semantic prominence finds support in Skeide et al. (2014) who show that below age 7, children process semantics and syntax jointly at the neural level, in the regions that adults recruit for lexical-semantic processing (a neural selectivity for syntax processing is not at place before age 10). That the naming or descriptive functions are a dividing line, although not without fuzziness, between compounds and phrases (cf. Downing 1977) is also brought into play. Some of the novel compounds in the diary data are non-target-like, often because they are descriptive in nature: the language has other patterns that are more suited for this purpose. Along with language development, more options for expressing similar contents become available for the child. Obviously, NN compounding remains a competitive option, given that it is a well-entrenched pattern (left aside adequate application of linking elements), and a powerful tool to pack much information in a condensed form.

References