In this talk I examine the acquisition of stress in Greek and explore the degree to which stress assignment is phonologically and/or morphologically conditioned. The data used for this study come from a longitudinal corpus of naturalistic speech of eleven children who acquire Greek as native language and vary in age between of 1;07 and 3;06. The data are organized in a database, which was set up by the University of Leiden Center for Linguistics. I will focus on the data from two children for this talk.

The data demonstrate that Greek children acquire stress in less predictable ways than Dutch or English children. To be more specific, given that the only rule one can establish for Greek stress is that it has to fall on one of the last three syllables of the word (what is better known as the trisyllabic window), children exhibit variable patterns with respect to how they realize their target forms and tend to be unfaithful to certain biases, such as the trochaic prosodic word minimum. To give an example, target words with ambiguous metrical structure, such as W₁SW₂, are equally realized as trochees and/or iambs. Such patterns are not characteristic of specific phases in language development; rather, they are overlapping throughout of the acquisition process. Due to these findings I challenge the idea of the trochaic bias hypothesis as well as the existence of clear-cut stages in Greek child speech. I argue that learning proceeds and is facilitated by means of variable developmental paths taking the shape of distinct co-emerging multiple grammars (cf. Kiparsky 1993) that children follow.

It will further be shown that morphology does not seem to play a crucial role in stress assignment, since children tend to respect phonological rather than morphological principles in their production. Examples from derived and compound forms display that children preserve the stressed syllable rather than any morphological constituents.

To summarize, I argue that the linguistic behaviors Greek children demonstrate are directly related to the unpredictable nature of stress in the language. I argue that child language variation occurs extensively in lexical accent systems such as Greek. However, in the Optimality Theoretic (OT, Prince and Smolensky 1993) framework I adopt, the Greek data are explained by the possible grammars that innate constraints’ permutation provides. This implies that UG is capable of predicting as well as capturing ‘unpredictable’ or unexpected stress patterns.