The acquisition of the syntax-pragmatics interface in French L1: evidence from error-patterns in DP-use
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In recent generative literature on the acquisition of morphosyntax, there has been an increased interest in the role of pragmatic knowledge and the interaction between pragmatic knowledge and grammatical principles (Avrutin, 1999; Schaeffer, 2000; De Cat, 2004). This study elaborates on this topic by investigating the morphosyntax-pragmatic interface for the DP in French L1. More specifically, the pragmatic use of pronouns and nouns with indefinite and definite articles will be examined.

The acquisition of the morphosyntax of articles and pronouns per se have been extensively investigated for French L1 from around two-years-of-age (for example Van der Velde, 2003; Van der Velde, Jakubowicz & Rigaut, 2002; Kilani-Schoch & Dressler 2001). However, correct adult usage of articles and pronouns not only requires use of the right morphosyntactic structure, but also the appropriate pragmatic application of these forms in reference. Articles and pronouns therefore are excellent examples of the syntax-pragmatics interface. For example in French, an indefinite lexical noun is usually used to introduce a referent. A personal pronoun is only appropriate in this function for a referent that is perceptually available to the listener and where deixis is involved. Thus, the degree of mutual knowledge between speaker and hearer about a referent influences the morphosyntactic form that is chosen for reference. Mutual knowledge can, amongst other things, arise from previous discourse availability (new versus given referents) or perceptual availability, which makes deixis possible (Clark & Marshall, 1981; Brown & Yule, 1983; Ariel, 1993).

Most research on the syntax-pragmatics interface of French nouns and pronouns has focused on language production in narrative tasks by children of at least 4-years of age (e.g. Hickmann 2003). It has been shown that up until at least 8 years of age children experience difficulties in estimating the listener’s knowledge. De Cat (2004) interprets these results by stating that young children are not yet far enough developed cognitively to refer in a target-like way. This then raises the question as to how children who are just beginning to acquire articles-noun combinations and pronouns deal with the syntax-pragmatics interface of these forms. To fill this gap, this study investigates (1) how indefinite/definite articles and pronouns are used for pragmatic functions in French L1, and (2) what factors (mutual knowledge, discourse availability, perceptual availability) govern the choice for form-function combinations in early child language.

Longitudinal data from three French children between 2;0 and 3;3 were taken from the CHILDES-database. The focus lies on the pragmatic use of nouns with indefinite and definite articles and pronouns. First, an analysis was made of the pragmatic functions for which children mainly use these morphosyntactic forms. A division of pragmatic functions was made between reference to non-specific entities and specific entities. Instances of specific reference were further categorized for referent introductions, referent maintenance, referent shift and (following amongst others Hickmann 2003). Secondly, analyses of erroneous form-function combinations are carried out to give insight in the patterns that govern children’s referential choices.

The results show that between 2;0 and 3;3 indefinite articles are significantly more often used to label referents (range 11%-49% of all nouns used for this pragmatic function) and to refer to non-specific entities (range 25%-46% of all nouns used for this pragmatic function). The indefinite article is also used to introduce specific entities to the discourse (new referents, range between 7%-18%), but to a significantly lesser extent than the definite article (range 53%-67%). Furthermore, the definite article is used to refer to entities that have been mentioned before in the current discourse (given referents).

For pronominal reference the children were seen to use pronouns to refer to new as well as given referents during the whole period under investigation. However, the use of pronouns for referents that are given in the discourse increases from 27% at 2;0 to 85% at 3;3. The use of pronouns for new referents stays the same, i.e. between 20% and 30%. Additionally, there is a
difference between demonstrative pronouns and personal pronouns. The children use demonstrative pronouns more often to introduce entities. They use personal pronouns more often to refer back to given referents.

As indefinite nouns and pronouns have limited pragmatic applicability in the adult-language they are relevant forms to investigate with regard to the second question, i.e., which factors govern form-function combinations? If the children are developing (adult-like) sensitivity to the listener’s needs, we would expect them to use the indefinite article correctly in contexts where there is no mutual knowledge between speaker and listener. This appears not to be the case: the children often make more than 50% errors in these contexts, which does suggest that the ability to take the listener’s perspective is still developing strongly. The children do however realize that the indefinite article is linked to new referents: they hardly ever use this form incorrectly to refer to given referents (between 0% and 6% of all cases). The erroneous use of pronouns is found in the absence of joint attention. Moreover, pronouns are sometimes erroneously used to introduce referents when there is no perceptual availability of the referent, suggesting that pronouns are not exclusively linked to perceptual availability.

The findings are discussed from a developmental-pragmatic point of view. Also, the need for models of language development that integrate both the acquisition of morphosyntax and pragmatics will be discussed.

References