

Children's early prepositions in English and French: a social-interactional device¹

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Prepositions are among the fourteen first lexical items acquired by English-speaking children (Brown, 1973). Based on the spatial value of children's first prepositions in English, parallels between the acquisition of prepositions by children and the grammaticalization of prepositions in the history of languages have been made (Tyler & Evans, 2003). Indeed, studies show that semantically charged prepositions are used by children several months before more functional ones (more "grammaticalized"). And yet, other studies stress the fact that ontogeny does not parallel phylogeny (Slobin, 2004) -the factors determining the acquisition of prepositions would be linguistic rather than cognitive, and linked to language use and frequency of input (Rice, 1999).

To investigate the impact of linguistic factors, we analyzed and categorized all uses, omissions and misuses of prepositions in four longitudinal case-studies - two French and two English-speaking children recorded monthly (one-hour sessions) between 1;8 and 2;5 - according to semantic, syntactic, phonological and social-discursive factors.

Our analyses confirm that English-speaking children use spatial prepositions such as *in*, *on*, and *up* very early (around 1;05) but in a 'verb-like' manner (Tomasello, 1987) and in isolation. This points to the fact that English particles (such as *up*, *down*, *back*) are used to express PATH, whereas in French, verbs serve this function. The two French-speaking children's first prepositions were: *pour* (for), *à* (to) and *de* (of), and they appeared in complex constructions within an argumentative context (i.e. disagreement, misunderstanding), before taking on spatial functions.

Our findings therefore support the claim that some aspects of children's discourse are influenced by the particular structure of the language the child is acquiring (Talmy, 2003, Hickman&Robert, 2006), together with other parameters such as discursive organisation and context. Ultimately, "grammatical words" can express and organize social interaction, and their acquisition may be seen as a landmark towards the development of conversational skills.

References

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