The Acquisition of French

The development of inflectional morphology and syntax in L1 acquisition, bilingualism, and L2 acquisition

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Philippe Prévost

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by Philippe Prévost

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Preface

The main objective of this book is to describe linguistic knowledge developed by learners of French in different learning situations: first language (L1) acquisition, second language acquisition (SLA), bilingualism, and L1 acquisition by children suffering from Specific Language Impairment (SLI). This knowledge will be discussed using the theoretical tools of generative grammar, drawing on its various developments since the 1980s, including Principles and Parameters (P&P) (Chomsky 1986) and the Minimalist Program (Chomsky 1995, 2000, 2001, 2002). In turn, I hope to demonstrate how data on the acquisition of French can advance our understanding of the nature of linguistic knowledge. For instance, we will see how such data can be used to confirm or disconfirm particular hypotheses about language acquisition that have been proposed in the various learning situations explored in this volume. In addition, numerous comparisons with acquisition data from other languages will be drawn throughout this book, so as to better evaluate the scope of the findings that have been reported on the acquisition of French.

Another objective of this book is to compare the acquisition process across the various learning situations. Acquisition researchers (of necessity) work mainly within their own field of investigation, only occasionally drawing comparisons with other acquisition domains. The advantage of this book is the possibility for systematic review and comparison of studies across different fields. For instance, researchers in L2 French and in the acquisition of L1 French by monolinguals, bilinguals, and children with SLI have been investigating the status and role in developing systems of the functional categories that underlie grammatical notions such as tense, agreement, Case, and definiteness. They also have recently been investigating the issue of variability, particularly with respect to inflectional morphology. The time is now ripe to take a step back and look at the whole spectrum of reported results, in the hope of better understanding general as well as specific properties of language acquisition. As research in different domains has expanded in the last few years, new types of comparisons have become possible, such as between the experience of adult L2 learners and L1 acquisition by children with SLI. With this book, I hope to strengthen such comparisons.

While French has received considerable attention in acquisition studies, it has not been thoroughly investigated in all learning contexts. For instance, while verb placement has been investigated in detail, noun placement (with respect to adjectives, for example) has received much less attention. Similarly, the development of embedded clauses and question formation has been studied in L1 acquisition, but has largely been ignored in L2 acquisition. Another objective of this book is therefore to identify areas

underrepresented in existing research on the acquisition of French and to propose new avenues of investigation.

The volume is divided into four parts, each focusing on one domain of acquisition: (1) the verbal domain (with focus on inflectional morphology and verb placement in main declaratives); (2) the pronominal domain (with focus on both overt and null subject and object pronouns); (3) the nominal domain (with focus on determiners, gender, number and noun placement with respect to adjectives); (4) the CP domain (with focus on question formation, embedded clauses and relative clauses). This division is simply an organizational device and is not meant to imply that the different domains should be kept separate, an impossibility in any case since the acquisition of particular properties ranges over several domains. For example, it is impossible to talk about verbal morphology in French (see Part I) without discussing subject pronouns, which are viewed by some linguists as inflectional markers (see Part II). Therefore, numerous cross-referencing remarks are made throughout the book. Acquisition facts in different domains are also compared. For example, the various acquisition chapters of Part III compare results on the verbal and nominal domains, since proposals have been made that relate the development of the functional categories Infl and Det.

Each part contains four chapters. The first chapter presents the facts of French that are relevant to the domain under discussion, and the various theoretical accounts provided to explain them, as background information for the subsequent acquisition chapters. These chapters should be viewed as an overview of the basic facts and theoretical analyses of particular properties of French, not as a thorough investigation; properties that are not covered in the subsequent acquisition chapters will not be discussed. The subsequent chapters in each part address child L1 French, the acquisition of French by children in a bilingual setting and by children with SLI, and the acquisition of L2 French. Bilingualism and acquisition by children with SLI are grouped into one chapter for both theoretical and practical reasons: they are both subcases of L1 acquisition, and they have attracted the attention of fewer researchers, in comparison to L1 and L2 French, so there are fewer data on which to report than in the two other learning contexts.

Linguistic properties of French that have been investigated in each of the four learning contexts were given priority, so as to facilitate comparisons. This is particularly the case in the verbal and pronominal domains. In some cases, however, some properties were included that have significant implications for theory but have only been investigated in a subset of learning contexts, such as the binding properties of pronouns (which have not been examined in L2 French), or the constraints on wh-movement (which have mainly been explored in TD monolinguals). Within each chapters, the facts are presented first and their theoretical implications second, under the assumption that it is easier to understand the theoretical implication of learners'

behaviour once the details of that behaviour are known. Incidentally, this organization makes the volume easily usable for those who are only interested in the results of the studies presented.

Some linguistic properties are not discussed at all, simply because of lack of acquisition data. This particularly applies to French phonology, as the investigation of the phonology of French within the generative program is relatively new in some of the learning situations considered in this book. A substantial comparison of phonological development in the different acquisition contexts considered will hopefully be possible in the near future.

Writing this book has been a rather long process mainly due to too many other commitments. I should thank several people for their patience, including Harald Clahsen, Lydia White, and Kees Vaes. Many thanks also to Harald, Lydia, and an anonymous reviewer for their fruitful comments on previous versions of this book. This volume is dedicated to all the people with whom I discussed its content across the four acquisition contexts over the years and who never ceased to encourage me. I know that many of them have been waiting for the final product; there it is! Special thanks to Silvina Montrul, who wrote a similar volume on the acquisition of Spanish, for her support. This book could not have been the same without the wonderful editing skills of Jennifer Ormston. Her advice far extended beyond style, grammar, and typos, and she deserves my warmest gratitude. Finally, many thanks to Bill, Nicola, Phil, and Verena, who despite their many ironic inquiries as to whether the book would ever come out, never really stopped believing that one day it would (I hope!).

Abbreviations

ACC	accusative
Adj	adjective
AdjP	Adjective Phrase
Adv	Adverb
Agr	Agreement (as a functional category)
AgrO	Object Agreement (as a functional category)
AgrP	Agreement Phrase
AgrS	Subject Agreement (as a functional category)
ATOM	Agreement or Tense Omission Model
AUX	auxiliary
AUXP	Auxiliary Phrase
C(omp)	Complementizer
CCH	Computational Complexity Hypothesis
cl	clitic
CM	code mixing
COND	conditional
CP	Complementizer Phrase
CS	code switching
D	Determiner (as a functional category)
DAT	dative
DM	Distributed Morphology
DP	Determiner Phrase
ec	empty category
F	Finite (as a functional category)
FC	functional category
FEM	feminine
FIN	Finite
FP	Finite Phrase
FQ	floating quantifier
FUT	future
I(nfl)	Inflection (as a functional category)
I(nfl)P	Inflection Phrase
IL	interlanguage
INF	infinitival
L1	first language
L2	second language
L3	third language
MA	Moroccan Arabic
MASC	masculine
MDG	Minimal Default Grammar
MLU	Mean Length of Utterance
Mod	modal verb
N	Noun
nc	null constant
NEG	Negative particle
Neg	Negation (as a functional category)
NegP	Negation phrase
NMP	Nominal Mapping Parameter
NOM	nominative
NP	Noun Phrase
Num	Number
NumP	Number phrase
OI	optional infinitive
P(rep)	Preposition
ph	placeholder
PL	plural
POSS	possessor
POSSP	Possessive Phrase
PP	Prepositional Phrase
PtP	present participle

PTP	past participle	STR	strong pronoun
PLU	Predominant Length of Utterance	T	Tense
Q	Question marker		(as a functional category)
QP	Quantifier Phrase	t	trace
RC	relative clause	TD	typically developing
rec	recording	TNS	tense (as a feature)
refl	reflexive	TP	Tense Phrase
RI	root infinitive	UCC	Unique Checking Constraint
S	subject	UG	Universal Grammar
SG	singular	V	Verb
SLA	second language acquisition	V2	verb second
SLI	Specific Linguistic Impairment	V3	verb third
SM	sentence matching	VP	Verb phrase
Spec	specifier	WM	working memory

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