First Language Acquisition of Morphology and Syntax

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Perspectives across languages and learners

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Language Acquisition and Language Disorders (LALD)

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Introduction

First language, first language bilingualism and language impairment competence

Language acquisition is a well established discipline in the linguistic field, with the beginnings of research in this area going back at least to Ronjat (1916). Research conducted since Ronjat's seminal work on bilingualism has led to a high degree of specialisation and to the birth of different schools. The three main schools, i.e., generative, constructivist and functionalist, all collect empirical data, but often give diverging interpretations to one and the same database. The field is divided into three main domains according to type of participants studied: monolingual and bilingual (or multilingual) acquisition and impaired language (SLI, Down syndrome and others). Not surprisingly the first case studies were conducted on monolingual children speaking European languages such as English, French or German. More exotic languages are becoming increasingly popular subjects of study, however, and have a representation in this volume as well. It is in monolingual acquisition that the three theoretical approaches are most at odds. Whilst the interpretation of data in the constructivist approach relies very much on input, the generative approach bases its conclusions on theoretical constructs, as can be seen in two of the chapters in the present volume: Parisse and Müller & Pillunat, which focus on the topic of subject realization. Researchers became interested in the question as to whether monolingual and bilingual acquisition was qualitatively comparable in the nineteen-eighties. Much subsequent research that has compared bilingual and monolingual language acquisition has been able to show that both types of language acquisition are driven by the same principles. Only relatively recently have scholars working on theoretical approaches to language acquisition become interested in the field of language impairment. The general consensus amongst researchers is that children with SLI or Down syndrome go through the same stages as their monolingual or bilingual peers. If a difference is found, it is largely quantitative; the language of children with impairment is primarily delayed. This remains a debatable point, however, and some authors have claimed that the development of, for example, children with Down syndrome differs in some respects from that of typically developing children: particularly in the areas of morphology and syntax (Fowler 1990). This is the background against which the research described in this book is set. The book primarily seeks to address the generative approach to language acquisition in the three main domains: monolingual, bilingual acquisition and impaired language. As noted above, constructivists and generativists do not agree on the interpretation of data. This volume includes one chapter that is written in the

constructivist tradition in order to suggest that a dialogue between these two approaches is worth pursuing. Such a dialogue will contribute to our better understanding of the fascinating world of language acquisition.

The main purpose of this volume is to present original research from two different perspectives and to provide a basis for dialogue between researchers working in these diverging theoretical frameworks. The volume includes state-of-the-art research conducted mostly within the generative framework and reflects the diversity of methodological approaches and research interests that can be found in contemporary research work in the field. Many chapters in this volume address issues linked to the left periphery in various languages; some chapters are devoted to syntactic or morphological issues. We strongly believe that the result makes a contribution to our theoretical understanding of morpho-syntax, as well as contributing to the developing body of knowledge about language acquisition in different groups of learners.

1.   Monolingual acquisition

The four following chapters are devoted to monolingual first language acquisition in different languages (i.e., French, Norwegian, Spanish and Swiss German). The chapter by **Parisse** studies subject dislocations by young French-speaking children in the constructivist tradition, more specifically in the *usage-based theory of language acquisition* (UTB) by Tomasello (2000, 2003). In Parisse's approach, French is a non pro-drop language where the use of a cliticized subject personal pronoun is mandatory if there is no lexical subject. In the presence of the subject in the form of a noun phrase or lexical subject, the cliticized personal pronoun is compulsory. This is what is called dislocation, which can be left or right dislocation. Hence, it is possible to move the dislocated subject anywhere, in front of or after the verb, and to insert elements between subject and verb. It is well known that the use of optional strong personal pronouns is often found in oral language and to a lesser extent in written texts. This is very common in children's language and Parisse raises the following questions: (1) does children's production merely reflect the distributional patterns of oral adult language?; (2) does children's production reflect a specific developmental path in early French? In order to test hypothesis (1), a corpus of conversation transcripts between a child and an adult in a standardized situation was used by Parisse: the Bath Corpus. Parisse argues that children's use of subject dislocations does not fully reflect their input. A second corpus, the House corpus, was used to test whether the use of subject dislocations follows a developmental pattern (hypothesis 2). The performance changes according to increasing age in that older children use more dislocated subjects. One possible explanation offered by Parisse is that this development pattern is the result of a growing systematic use of subject pronouns in front of a verb. In order to test this claim, the proportion of verbs preceded by a pronoun was computed for both corpora. This proportion tends to increase with age, and it correlates significantly with the use of constructions with

pronouns in the children represented in both corpora. As opposed to this, there is no similar significant correlation in the adults' production. Parisse argues that the production of optional pronouns is more likely to be a consequence of an automatic production of pronouns in front of a verb and that the optional character of the pronoun is learned at later age. He also claims that children build these constructions differently from adults. His interpretation of the data differs substantially from the approach used in the following chapters.

The remaining chapters in this section are written in the generative tradition. In fact, the chapter by **Gordishevski and Schaeffer** reports the results of a longitudinal study with naturalistic settings. In particular, they investigated structural (NOM, ACC, GEN), inherent (DAT, INSTR), and lexical (ACC/DAT/GEN/INSTR/PREP assigned by prepositions) Case in the spontaneous speech of three Russian children raised monolingually. Inspired by Hoekstra & Hyams (1995), the researchers argue that their finding can be explained assuming the underspecification of the Number head. The results show that in the singular the children score very high, around 90% correct uses on NOM, on structural ACC, and on structural GEN as well as singular inherent DAT. Inherent INSTR was used only twice by two of the children. Similarly, the singular lexical Cases in total are produced correctly in 90% of the required contexts. In contrast, plural nouns show much lower success rates: 0% for structural ACC and for structural GEN but 14% for the lexical Cases. Plural inherent INSTR was used a few times by two children. Errors are found in around 40% of the cases and consist of substitution by NOM forms. The performance improves in all cases in the subsequent stage. Close examination of the children's plural forms suggests that plural is not productive: (a) numbers of plural forms are extremely low; (b) most of the words used in plural represent pair-wise ('hands') or plural ('fingers') body parts, types of footwear and plural non-count nouns; (c) almost none of the plurals occur in their singular forms in the same transcripts. On the basis of these observations, Gordishevski and Schaeffer propose that the nominal Num head is initially underspecified, namely, it represents [-plural] only (cf. Müller 1994). They assume that in order to check Case features on N and D a "Case-chain" needs to be established. Following Hoekstra and Hyams (1995), Gordishevski and Schaeffer propose that in case of a plural N, an underspecified Num ([-plural]) breaks the Case-chain, because the N's plural feature cannot be checked. This blocks Case feature checking, yielding default NOM forms in early Russian. When the noun is singular, underspecified Num does not break the Case-chain as it is [-plural], thus yielding forms correctly marked for Case.

Chapter three by **Westergaard** argues for an analysis of verb-second (V2) word order which involves a split CP as suggested by (Rizzi 1997) on acquisition data from a dialect of Norwegian (Tromsø). Investigating three children, it is shown that, although verb movement (i.e., verb-second (V2) word order in non-subject-initial) is generally acquired early in declaratives, the children make certain errors in topicalisations and questions with respect to the position of pronominal subjects in negated utterances. More specifically, in the early files the children predominantly produce the Neg-S word

order illustrated in (1), which is unusual in the target language unless the pronominal subject is stressed. There is a clear development to the more target-like word order in (2) in the files of all three children investigated.

(1)   nå   skal ikke dem sove.   (Ole 2;3.15)
       now shall not   they sleep
       'Now they shouldn't sleep.'

(2)   og   no   kan æ ikke drikke det.   (Ole 2;10.0)
       and now can I   not   drink   it
       'And now I can't drink it.'

The findings are accounted for within a split-CP model which departs from the existence of two subject positions in the IP domain: a high one for informationally given subjects and a lower one for subjects conveying new information. In addition a pragmatic account of the child data is also considered, but rejected in favor of an economy-based analysis which includes factors such as input frequency and complexity.

Chapter four (**Schönenberger**) investigates word order acquisition as well. This chapter addresses three puzzles relating to the acquisition of verb-placement in Swiss German. Swiss German is a V2 language, which displays the verb-final pattern in embedded clauses. The children of Schönenberger's study misplace the finite verb in embedded clauses: they generally move the finite verb to the second position in any type of embedded clause before they switch to the verb-final pattern around age 5;0. Since this finding is surprising, the author examined the input one of the children was exposed to. The examination of the input is based on two samples of speech in which primarily the child's mother interacts with the child once at the beginning of the study. However, no significant differences in the input were found. Although Swiss German is verb-final, this pattern can sometimes be disguised, since Swiss German allows extra-position, which gives rise to word-orders in which the finite verb does not show up clause-finally (3). Such examples might be misanalysed by the child as involving verb-movement to the left rather than extra-position to the right.

(3)   complementizer Subject . . . ti . . . Vfin XPi

Swiss German allows embedded V2–besides the verb-final pattern–in clauses introduced by <u>wil</u> "because", which induces a difference in interpretation. The three puzzles are, therefore, as follows: (i) In the adult samples there is a large proportion of clear-cut verb-final sentences–over 65% that are unambiguously verb-final, but the child generalizes verb movement to all embedded clauses. (ii) In clauses introduced by <u>wil</u> V2 is allowed in the target grammar, but only in 15% of all <u>wil</u>-clauses do the adults use this option. (iii) Around age 6;0 the child mainly produces the verb-final pattern. There are a few V2 examples with <u>wil</u>, which in contrast to early <u>wil</u>-clauses with V2, occur with the appropriate pragmatic interpretation. However, even after age 6;0 the child still misplaces finite auxiliaries which select a participle. The dialect the child is exposed to does not allow the sequence *Aux Participle* but only *Participle Aux* in

embedded clauses, which is attested in over 190 examples produced by the adults. In trying to solve these puzzles Schönenberger draws a comparison between the child data and adult matrix clauses, and also points out similarities between the child's embedded clauses and matrix clauses in Old and Middle English.

The next two chapters are devoted to children's understanding of preverbal universal quantifiers in Spanish and logical words in Hebrew. Chapter five by **Escobar and Torrens** seeks to investigate clausal structures containing fronted phrases doubled by a clitic. The chapter highlightes a potentially difficult asymmetry: quantifiers in preverbal or postverbal position in contexts of Clitic Left Dislocation. Following previous work on the topic (e.g., Uribe-Etxebarria (1995) and Zubizarreta (1998)), the authors hypothesised that if Quantifier Raising is part of the early grammar of Spanish, the choice for a postverbal or preverbal quantifier subject would then be free. More crucially, the authors hypothesised that learners at all ages are expected to obtain the wide scope interpretation of postverbal quantifier subjects. The experimental design by Chien & Wexler (1991) also followed by Philip & Coopmans (1995) was chosen in order to collect data from children. According to this study's findings, children do not show a special preference for a preverbal or postverbal quantifier subject in instances of Clitic Left Dislocation. However, Torrens and Escobar offer different accounts in order to explain these findings. What is clear then is that Spanish five-year-olds easily obtain the wide scope interpretation of postverbal quantifier subjects, unless they are presented with biased matching pictures (with an impaired object or an impaired agent). But adults also have problems with the mismatched pictures. In turn, this study supports the continuity hypothesis that children and adults share a common core of linguistic knowledge.

Chapter six, on the other hand, by **Armon-Lotem** investigates the relative influence of syntax, semantics and pragmatics on children's understanding of sentences containing logical words, such as, *some* and *or*, showing a subject-object asymmetry. Specifically, Armon-Loten's chapter reports the results of a truth value judgment task administered to Hebrew speaking children, using *Eyzeshehu yeled* for *some boy* and *o* for *or*. Three hypotheses were tested: (1) Children derive the exclusive reading in the descriptive mode but accept an inclusive reading in the prediction mode. (2) Children judge the inclusive reading of or in the prediction mode as true more readily than the weaker reading of some in the prediction mode. (3) The specificity in subject position blocks the influence of non-specificity in the prediction mode. The group of children was split into two in order to be presented with sentences in the descriptive and sentences in the prediction mode respectively, where the implicature can be suspended in order to test hypothesis 1. For hypothesis 2, each child was presented with 5 sentences containing *or*, and 5 containing *some*. Hypothesis 3 was tested by a number of items in the description and in the prediction mode. The results of the Hebrew replication were similar for *or*, with children accepting the inclusive reading in the predicative mode but much less in the descriptive mode. The results for *some*, though similar too, showed a subject-object asymmetry, suggesting a possible syntactic interference.

In the predictive mode, when the logical word was used with a direct object, the implicature was always erased, but when it was used with a subject the implicature was erased in less than third of the times. That is, while *some NP* was always accepted for *every NP* in the direct object position (4a), it was accepted for *every NP* only in third of times in subject position (4b):

(4) a. *ani   menaxesh she   ha-yeled   yoxal   eyzeshehu tapuax*
         I   guess   that the-boy   will-eat   some   apple
     b. *ani   menaxesh she   eyzeshehu yeled yoxal   tapuax*
         I   guess   that some   boy   will-eat   apple

This indicates that, unlike adults, Hebrew speaking children are less likely to erase the scalar implicature in subject position than in object position. This subject-object asymmetry suggests that other linguistic factors, e.g., syntactic position, also contribute to children's comprehension of sentences containing logical words.

2.   Bilingual acquisition

The next three chapters deal with the acquisition of syntax by bilingual children and the issue of vulnerability. **Bonnesens**' chapter considers the question of the vulnerability of the CP or Left Periphery in Bilingual First Language Acquisition. Former studies on bilingual language acquisition (e.g., Meisel 1994; Meisel & Müller 1992) have revealed that children acquiring two languages from birth never go through a stage where the IP of one language is transferred into the other language. Numerous other studies have shown that the IP is not a vulnerable domain for cross-linguistic influence in bilingual first language acquisition. Recently Platzack (2001) has proposed that, in contrast to the IP, the CP is vulnerable even in monolingual acquisition, an approach which has been discussed by several authors in Müller (2003) from the perspective of bilingual language acquisition. In this chapter Bonnesen analyzes the left periphery of two French/German bilingual children, Annika and Pierre of the DuFDE-corpus (see Köppe 1994). Since the two languages differ clearly as far as the left periphery is concerned, the data are an excellent basis to verify the "vulnerability of the CP"- hypothesis. German is assumed to be a verb-second (V2) language (den Besten 1977; Platzack 1983). The verb-second structure is explained by the movement of the finite verb to C°. The initial phrase of a main clause occupies the Spec CP-position. In contrast to German, a preposed element in French (5a–b) results in a V3-struture.

(5) a. Nun geht$_V$ Peter ins Kino
     b. Maintenant Jean va$_V$ au cinéma.
         Now John goes to the cinema.

The author suggests that the V2-structure of German can be transferred into French and/or that ungrammatical V3-structures are used in German, if the left periphery is

indeed a vulnerable domain. In analyzing the French data, the status of the clitic subject pronouns is considered as well. According to Kaiser & Meisel (1991) and Kaiser (1992), the subject clitics are verbal affixes. Since Bonnesen adopts the prefix analysis of the subject clitics, a V3-structure on the surface may actually be a V2-structure if the subject pronoun is a clitic. In an utterance like "*maintenant il part*" (now he leaves) the verb and the subject clitic occupy the same position, I° (or T°/Agr°). If a child uses the German V2-structure in French, the Adverb "*maintenant*" would occupy SpecCP and the verb and the clitic would move to C°, though on the surface, the word order is the same as in a French structure. Hence utterances with only clitic subjects have been excluded as evidence for or against transfer of the V2-rule from German into French. If the subject is a DP, the movement of the verb to C° becomes visible resulting in "*maintenant part Jean*" (now leaves John) which is a German word order, but incorrect in French.

The evaluation of the data presented by Bonnesen does not support the "vulnerability-hypothesis" of the CP. In German there is no evidence at all that the French grammar influences the German system. In Pierre's French data there is no evidence of transfer either. Only in Annika's French data, there are several utterances which can be explained by the German V2-structure. Nevertheless, correct V3-structures always occur. Hence, it cannot be argued that Annika transfers the general I-to-C-movement-rule of German into French. Rather, her V2-structures during a certain period are probably only a problem of her performance. After the age of 3;08 V2-structures show up (until the end of the recordings) exclusively with the adverbs "*là*" and "*ici*". So the author argues that Annika has merely a lexical-driven V2-structure with these adverbs, which is much too weak to support the "vulnerability of the CP"-hypothesis. Furthermore, he shows that in Annika's data the position of the object is affected as well by the influence of German on the performance level, which indicates that her "vulnerability" is not at all linked only to the CP-level.

In the same vein, **Larrañaga's** chapter seeks to investigate the acquisition of word order within the generative perspective. This chapter examines the position of the subjects of unaccusative verbs and their pragmatic entailments in the speech of Basque/Spanish children raised bilingually. Basque and Spanish differ in the position of the head. Basque is head-final and Spanish head initial. Larrañaga adheres to the so-called Burzio's (1984) generalization; subjects of unaccusative verbs are generated in the complement position. Hence, VS in Spanish and SV in Basque have the neutral reading. However, since both languages are free word order languages, both SV and VS are possible in both languages, but have different pragmatic readings. According to Larrañaga this is an ideal domain to test recent hypotheses. This chapter is based on Rizzi's (1997) work on left periphery and on Müller & Hulk's (2001) approach to cross-linguistic influence in bilingual first language acquisition. The data analysed with respect to the position of the subject and the information status show that there are two clear patterns of acquisition according to the language involved. The children studied by Larrañaga use SV in Basque from the outset of language acquisition and throughout

the whole study where S has diverging target-like pragmatic readings. VS is almost non-existent in Basque. As opposed to Basque, both children show a strong preference for VS in Spanish until the age of 3;00. After this age, both SV and VS are used in Spanish. Hence, both children use the target-like word orders in both Basque and Spanish throughout the whole study. Larrañaga shows that there are no signs of cross-linguistic influence in the domain studied in Basque/Spanish bilinguals, although topic and contrastive subjects are possible in both languages and are represented in the C-domain if in preverbal position. This is the more surprising since topic subjects occur at a later stage in both languages. Larrañaga also shows that the preverbal subjects with a topic reading are used at a later stage because the C-layer is missing at early stages.

The final chapter about bilingual first language acquisition is the one by **Kupisch**. In this chapter Kupisch seeks to investigate the relation between language dominance, mixed language utterances and cross-linguistic influence based on data from two German/French bilingual children who have been studied longitudinally. The children differ in terms of the extent to which one language can be considered dominant, but both children seem to produce fewer mixed utterances in their stronger language. The issue of cross-linguistic influence is then examined with respect to determiner acquisition. The languages under scrutiny – German and French – possess pronominal definite and indefinite determiners, but at the same time there are clear and evident inter-language differences regarding the frequency of occurrence, morphological load, and the prosodic structure of determiners. Monolingual German and French children acquire determiners at different rates, the process being faster in French. The bilinguals use more determiners in German than monolinguals of comparable ages, which is interpreted in favour of positive influence from French. According to Kupisch's findings, language dominance does not cause any delay in the path of acquisition. On the contrary, children can differentiate between the two languages at an early stage. More importantly, even though the amount of mixing seems to be related to language dominance as one of the reasons, mixing does not seem to be unidirectional and does not consequently imply that the language development is slower. Hence, cross-linguistic influence does not seem to go together with the mixing rate and language dominance. In sum, the results from this chapter are inconsistent with mixing and dominance patterns, and the author argues that influence and mixing may represent different types of contact phenomena. Above all, the author commits to the proposal that cross-linguistic influence and mixing constitute in fact two different types of contact phenomena with the bilingual acquisition.

3.   Impaired language

The chapter by **Perovic** focuses on the acquisition of the binding principles in Down syndrome in L1 English and Serbo-Croatian. Down syndrome (DS) is a genetic disorder typically accompanied by moderate to severe learning disabilities. Language in

this population is traditionally described as delayed, mirroring the pattern in typical language development, with no obvious signs of deficiency. In this study the author reports findings from an experimental investigation of the knowledge of binding, the module of grammar constraining the distribution of reflexives and pronouns, in two groups of young adults with DS. Individuals with DS, both English and Serbo-Croatian speaking, were found to have difficulties comprehending reflexives, but not pronouns. Since for the interpretation of reflexives the syntactic relation between the reflexive element and its antecedent is crucial, in contrast to pronouns that are interpreted by invoking extra-syntactic mechanisms, the results suggests a deficit in the DS population which is syntactic in nature. Such a pattern is exactly the opposite to that found in typically developing English children who obey the syntactic constraints on the distribution of reflexives early on, but have trouble applying co-reference rule, a constraint beyond syntax that rules the interpretation of pronouns. This chapter provides crucial evidence that language in DS speakers is not merely delayed but also deficient in important respects, with the deficit pertaining to an inability to establish the syntactic relation between the anaphor and its antecedent. Secondly, the findings further our knowledge of binding in non-impaired grammar, favouring one of the competing theories of binding phenomena: one that invokes both syntactic and extra-syntactic factors in the process of determining reference of a pronominal element (Reinhart & Reuland, 1993; Grodzinsky & Reinhart, 1993) as opposed to a theory that relies solely on syntactic constraints in the same process (standard Binding Theory of Chomsky, 1981, 1986).

Chapter eleven by **Müller & Pillunat** reports on the language development by French/German bilingual children with more or less balanced bilingualism, amongst whom there is one child who has not been diagnosed with SLI but whose language very much matches with all the criteria proposed for children with SLI. The topic of the study is a rather robust grammatical phenomenon, namely pronoun use in the development of German and French. Research on monolingual children with SLI has revealed that some aspects of language are acquired in the same way as in typically developing monolingual children. The difference between children with SLI and typically developing children has been claimed to be of a quantitative nature (delay). Müller & Pillunat have studied a child with no diagnosed SLI who is raised with German and French from birth. The language development is measured, as in typically developing bilingual children, on the basis of MLU, absolute number of utterances per recording session, development of the nominal and the verbal lexicon, also in order to determine whether the two languages develop at equal pace. The acquisition process is studied from 2;8 – 3;8 and compared with that of typically developing German/French bilinguals (a) with a strong and a weak language or (b) with a balanced language development. It is shown that the pronominal system develops in this bilingual child as in typical monolingual and bilingual (balanced and unbalanced) children, i.e., the authors find a delay of object clitics in French and no delay of object pronouns in German, thus confirming results by researchers who have denied the existence of a difference

between monolingual and bilingual children with SLI. A careful analysis of the contexts for the different kinds of pronouns reveals however that the bilingual child with SLI shows an overuse of strong pronouns. In this respect she differs from her typically developing monolingual and bilingual children. The authors argue that children with SLI face a problem with the interface between syntax and pragmatics.

In sum, the present book includes a range of different languages and language combinations, and the effects of Specific Language Impairment and Down syndrome on acquisition, meaning that this collection gives a wide range of different perspectives on a number of topics of current importance in the theoretical study of morphology and syntax. The varied contributions illustrate the exciting range of empirical work that is currently under way in the field of language acquisition, and should stimulate further investigation and increased dialogue between researchers using different theoretical approaches.

Acknowledgments

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