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Children's Discourse

Person, Space and Time
across Languages

MAYA HICKMANN

CHILDREN'S DISCOURSE

PERSON, SPACE AND TIME
ACROSS LANGUAGES

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CHILDREN'S DISCOURSE

PERSON, SPACE AND TIME ACROSS LANGUAGES

This original comparative study explores two central questions in the study of first language acquisition. What is the relative impact of structural and functional determinants? What is universal versus language-specific during development? Maya Hickmann addresses these questions in three domains of child language: reference to entities, the representation of space, and uses of temporal-aspectual markings. She provides a thorough review of different theoretical approaches to language acquisition and a wide range of developmental research, as well as examining all three domains in English, French, German and Chinese narratives. Hickmann's findings concern the rhythm of acquisition, the interplay among different factors (syntactic, semantic, pragmatic) determining children's uses, and universal versus variable aspects of acquisition. Her conclusions stress the importance of relating sentence and discourse determinants of acquisition in a cross-linguistic perspective. *Children's Discourse* will be welcomed by those working in psychology and language-related disciplines interested in first language acquisition.

MAYA HICKMANN is Research Director at Laboratoire Cognition et Développement, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and University of Paris V. Her publications on discourse include a variety of chapters in collected volumes and articles in journals concerning first language acquisition including *Journal of Child Language*, *First Language* and *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*. She is also the editor of *Social and Functional Approaches to Language and Thought* (1987).

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Children's Discourse

Preface

The aim of this book is to explore two questions in the study of first language acquisition: the role of structural and functional determinants during acquisition, and the extent to which the developmental process is invariant vs. variable across languages. In order to address these questions, I examine within a functional and cross-linguistic perspective the acquisition of a variety of linguistic devices relevant to three domains of child language: the denotation of entities, the expression of motion and location, and the marking of temporal-aspectual distinctions. In relation to the first question, my aim is to determine the relative impact of two types of factors during language acquisition: syntactic and semantic factors that operate at the sentence level; and discourse pragmatic factors that operate beyond the sentence, particularly those that regulate the flow of information across utterances as a function of presupposition and focus in discourse. Furthermore, the book is framed within a comparative perspective, in which evidence from different languages is repeatedly brought to bear on the second question, in light of various claims concerning universal vs. language-specific determinants of acquisition.

After an introduction presenting the general aims of the book, subsequent chapters are divided into two parts. The first part provides a general theoretical background and overview of the relevant developmental literature. After a discussion of the methodological issues arising from this literature, several chapters in the second part then present the results of a study comparing narrative productions of children and adults in four languages (French, English, German and Mandarin Chinese). The last chapter argues that models that focus exclusively on the sentence or discourse levels of linguistic organisation and/or ignore cross-linguistic evidence are misleading. My conclusion stresses the crucial role of multifunctionality during language acquisition and the necessary inclusion of this fundamental property of human language for an adequate account of the developmental process in a cross-linguistic perspective.

Some specific questions are addressed to specialists, but my intention is also to provide a wider audience with an updated introduction to cross-linguistic functional approaches to language acquisition. Although developmental psycholinguistics has considerably expanded during the twentieth century, resulting in a striking proliferation of theories, of methodologies, and of results, this field is now in serious

Preface

need of fresh attempts to relate sentence and discourse determinants of acquisition across languages. Given this ambition, some deliberate choices were obviously necessary. Although the book is centrally concerned with the relation among forms and functions in language acquisition, not all facets of this relation are discussed. Some aspects of linguistic structure are only touched upon, even though they clearly have an impact on a number of linguistic phenomena investigated here. In addition, I purposefully focus on only one set of functional determinants, namely pragmatic principles governing information flow within cohesive discourse. I give reasons throughout to justify these choices, pointing out areas that deserve more research.

The empirical contribution of this book stems from a large project I began as a member of the Max-Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen (1981–92). The collaboration of Jürgen Weissenborn (University of Potsdam) allowed the constitution of the German corpus. The Chinese corpus resulted from an exchange programme between Nijmegen and Peking, set up through the friendly and efficient labour of James Liang (University of Leiden) and the generous collaboration of Professors Xu and Ye (University of Peking). Subsequent financial support was provided by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (Schwerpunkt ‘Spracherwerb’ 1988–94), by the Max-Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (1994–5), and by an exchange programme (1995–97) jointly financed by the Max-Planck Gesellschaft in Germany and the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in France. This support allowed the project to expand considerably into several domains and theoretical directions, as well as to develop a rigorous coding method suited to large cross-linguistic databases, which is now used by many colleagues in several countries.

I have had three main collaborators throughout: James Liang, to whom I owe many insights about Chinese; Françoise Roland, who made invaluable contributions to the analyses; and Henriëtte Hendriks, who co-ordinated all phases of the research with me. Several assistants joined us for shorter periods of time, contributing to the lively and endless work of coding: Justine Cassell, Maghiel van Crevel, Xu Ding, Lydia Humblot, Birgit Kaiser, Li Ping, Brigitte Löbach, Ester Messing, and Caroline Rek. I am also indebted to Madeleine Léveillé for her patient and devoted technical help with programming and formatting. Much of my inspiration came from stimulating discussions with members of the Max-Planck Institute throughout the years: Melissa Bowerman, Werner Deutsch, Wolfgang Klein, Clive Perdue, and Jürgen Weissenborn. I am indebted to Ruth Berman and Dan Slobin for constant encouragement and readiness to listen. Especially warm thanks go to Wolfgang Klein for his continuous support throughout.

Maya Hickmann

Abbreviations and conventions

Whenever necessary, literal and free translations of examples are provided. Free translations are somewhat arbitrary with respect to categories not encoded in a given language (e.g. tense in Chinese). Whenever relevant, the following conventions are used in examples in addition to those explicitly glossed in the text (except in examples that are quoted from another source): (1) for number, gender, and case; (2) for word order; (3) for temporal-aspectual morphology; (4) additional conventions specific to Chinese.

- (1) SG singular
 - PL plural
 - FEM feminine
 - MASC masculine
 - NEU neuter
 - NOM nominative
 - ACC accusative
 - DAT dative
 - GEN genitive
- (2) SOV Subject-Object-Verb
 - SVO Subject-Verb-Object
 - SSVO left-dislocated subject with coreferential pronoun
- (3) **English**
 - PR present
 - PRPG present progressive
 - PRT preterite (past non-progressive)
 - PAPG past progressive
 - PRPERF present perfect
 - PAPF past perfective (pluperfect)
 - PG untensed progressive
- French**
 - PR *présent*
 - IMP *imparfait*

List of abbreviations and conventions

PC *passé composé*

PS *passé simple*

PQP *plus-que-parfait*

German

PR *Präsens*

PTT *Präteritum*

PFK *Perfekt*

PQP *Plusquamperfektum*

(4) **Chinese**

1 to 4 tones

3p third person pronoun

CL classifier, distinguished when necessary as SCL (specific classifier)

vs. GCL (general classifier)

IMP imperfective marker

POS possessive marker

PCL particles

Some Chinese particles are not translated (e.g. *le*, *ba3*, and *gei3* are simply indicated as LE, BA, and GEI).

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