

# DISLOCATIONS AS DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS IN THE FRENCH LANGUAGE : DEVELOPMENTAL AND PATHOLOGICAL STUDIES

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## Context

Recent research (Tomasello, 2003) have suggested that children's syntactic knowledge starts with simple constructions and grows progressively towards more complex and abstract constructions.

We propose that subject dislocations (e.g. la fille *elle* dort) could be a marker of such development in children with normal language development.

This development would go through a four-step process.

[1] First, children would produce words (X) that correspond to bare forms (e.g. a word with no morphosyntactic markings) such as 'dort'. TYPE 1

[2] Second, children would produce constructions with one open slot (aX) or two open slots (aX bY) that are each made of a word and a highly frequent morphosyntactic marker which is produced automatically, without integrating its meaning and functional value in the utterance. Morphosyntactic markers will not necessarily agree in gender or number (e.g. la fille i dort). TYPE 2

[3] Third, children would produce the same type of constructions as before, but they would take into account the meaning and functional value of the markers and morphosyntactic markers would agree in gender or number (e.g. la fille elle dort). TYPE 3

[4] Finally, children would produce complex constructions with two open slots (aXY) without dislocations (e.g. la fille dort). TYPE 4

## Procedure

Each child was tested individually in a quiet room. All the sentence stimuli were presented via the computer. Children were told to listen the sentence and to repeat it "as well as possible".

## Predictions

1. There is a **four-step developmental process**
2. Children **would produce at the same time forms that are close in the developmental process** (for example, forms [1] and [2], or [2] and [3]), but not forms that are very different (for example forms [1] and [3], or [2] and [4]).

## METHODS

### Participants

#### Developmental study :

60 children distributed into four subgroups (n=15) depending on their chronological age: 3-year-old, 3;6- year-old, 4-year-old or 5-year-old

#### Pathological study :

20 children with SLI (mean age : 6 years) and 20 children (mean age 3;6 years) issued from the developmental study matched on morphosyntactic productive level

### Experimental task : sentence repetition

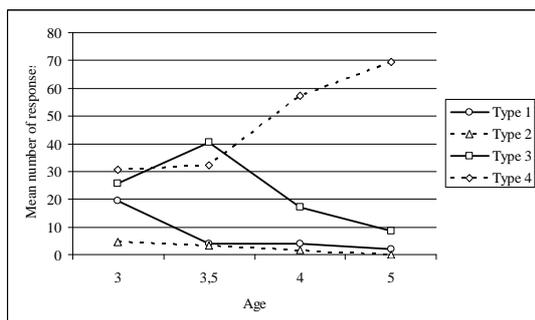
The task comprised 80 experimental sentences and 15 trial sentences. All the sentences were syntactically simple constructions that contained a vocabulary appropriate for 3-4-year-olds' comprehension and production abilities.

Two psycholinguistic variables were manipulated :

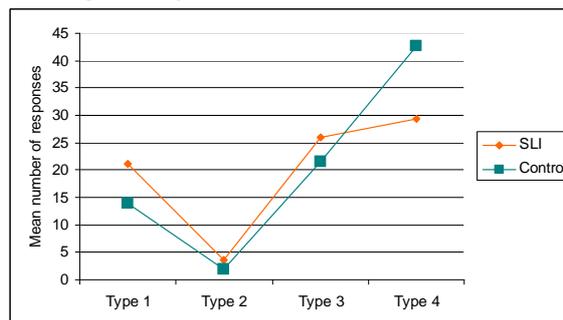
- 1) **length** : half the sentence (n=40) were short (max. 3 syllables before the verb and 7 syllables for the sentence) while in the other half (n=40), sentences were long (7 syllables before the verb and 12 syllables for the sentence).
- 2) **gender** : in half the sentences (n=40) the subject was feminine while in the other half (n= 40), the subject was masculine.

## Results

### Developmental study



### Pathological study



## Discussion

It is confirmed that dislocations follow a developmental pattern.

At age three, three productions are equally represented (around 30% for each): bare forms (type 1), dislocations (type 2) and correct repetitions (type 4). Dislocations tended to respect the gender (6% for gender errors). At age 3;6, bare forms decrease (16%) while dislocation increase (50%). After 4 year, dislocations are progressively replaced by correct responses.

Whatever children's age, an important length effect is found out. The dislocations are massively present in long sentences.

Compared to children matched on morphosyntactic productive level, the children with SLI do not produce more dislocations (no group effect on type 2 or 3) even with gender errors

For type 3 dislocations, the group by gender interaction ( $F(1, 38)=4.14, p < .05$ ) is significant : a gender effect (more dislocation with a masculine form) is found only in children with SLI.

## Conclusion

The results argue in favour of construction-based theories of language acquisition. The number of dislocations produced in a repetition task tends to demonstrate that this is a robust grammatical construction because children often did not follow the provided model, which did not contain any dislocations.

### Reference

Tomasello, M. (2003). Constructing a language: A usage-based theory of language acquisition. Cambridge: MA: Harvard.