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Dislocations as a developmental marker in French language :

A preliminary study

Christelle Maillart[°]

Christophe Parisse*

[°] University of Liège, Belgium

* INSERM-MoDyCo, France

Address for correspondence:

Christelle Maillart
ULg - Département des Sciences Cognitives
Troubles développementaux du langage
Bât. B33, Logopédie
Bd du Rectorat, 3
4000 Liège (Sart-Tilman), Belgium
Tel. 00.32.4.366.22.37
E-mail: christelle.maillart@ulg.ac.be

Abstract

In a previous study, Parisse (in press) suggested that subject dislocations in French language (e.g. la fille elle dort) could be considered as a marker of morphosyntactic development in children with normal language development. The present study aimed to develop this proposition and to confront it to experimental data, more specifically the fact that this development would go through a four-step process. Our prediction was that children could produce together forms that correspond to successive steps in the developmental process (for example forms [1] and [2], or [2] and [3]), but not forms that were very different (for example forms [1] and [4], or [2] and [4]). In order to test this hypothesis, a sentence repetition task was administrated to 27 children aged 4 to 5. The results tend to confirm the presence of a developmental trend in the use of dislocation in spontaneous language. At age 4, dislocations were frequent (30%), and tended to respect the gender (stade 3 & 4). At age 5, dislocations were rare (stade 4). Previous stades (1 & 2) would be observed in younger children.

Keywords: French, dislocation, morphosyntactic development

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Introduction

Recent researches (Tomasello, 2003) have proposed that children's syntactic knowledge starts with simple constructions and grows progressively towards more complex and abstract constructions. In a previous study, Parisse (in press) suggested that subject dislocations in French language (e.g. la fille elle dort) could be considered as a marker of morphosyntactic development in children with normal language development. We proposed that this development would go through a four-step process. The process can be exemplified and tested in utterances with more than one content word (or more than one lexical word) : [1] First, children would produce words (X) that correspond to bare forms (e.g. a word with no morphosyntactic markings) such as "dort" (sleep). Utterances with two lexical words will have the form 'X Y' where X and Y are bare lexical words. [2] Second, children would produce constructions with one open slot (aX) or two open slot (aX bY) that are made of a word and a highly frequent morphosyntactic marker which is produced automatically, without integrating its meaning and functional value in the utterance. Utterances with two lexical words will have the form 'aX bY' where 'a' and 'b' are morphosyntactic markers which are frequent but do not necessarily agree in gender or number (i.e. la fille i dort ; the girl he sleeps). [3] Third, children would produce the same type of constructions as before, but not only with highly frequent morphosyntactic markers and they will take into account the meaning and functional value of the markers. Utterances with two lexical words will have the form 'a¹X a²Y' where 'a¹' and 'a²' are morphosyntactic markers which agree in gender or number (i.e. la fille elle dort ; the girl she sleeps). [4] Fourth, children would produce complex constructions

with two open slots (aXY) without dislocations (i.e. la fille dort ; the girl sleeps). Utterances with two lexical words will be produced using constructions such as ‘aXY’.

Our prediction is that children can produce together forms that correspond to successive steps in the developmental process (for example forms [1] and [2], or [2] and [3]), but not forms that do not belong to successive steps (for example forms [1] and [3], or [2] and [4]). This hypothesis will be tested with control children (aged four to five). The lexical words that will be tested are the lexical subject and the main verb, the morphological markings determiners and pre-verbal pronouns.

Method

Participants

Thirty-eight French-speaking children participated in the study. All the children were recruited from kindergarden in the North of France. According to the teachers' report and background information supplied by the parents, these children had no history of speech, language or hearing problems. A language assessment was carried out on all these children in order to include in the study only children who demonstrated normal-range language abilities. Language skills were assessed using several subtests (word repetition, sentence comprehension and sentence production) of a French language scale (ELO, Evaluation du langage oral, Khomsi 2001) to examine receptive and expressive language. In addition, the French version of the Test of Reception of Grammar (Ecosse, Lecocq 1996) as well as two subtests of Nouvelles épreuves d'évaluation du langage (NEEL, Chevrie-Muller and Plaza 2001) (sentence completion and a narrative production) were also administered to control more precisely the morphosyntactic level. After this evaluation, eleven children were excluded from the sample because their performances were below percentile 10 or above percentile 90 on language evaluation. The children were distributed into two subgroups

depending on their chronological age : a 4-year-old subgroup with 14 children aged 3;6 to 4;5 and a 5-year-old subgroup with 13 children aged 4;9 to 5;6.

Material

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 sentence (n=40) the subject was feminine while in the other half (n= 40), the subject was masculine. Examples of the material are presented in Table 1. Full materials can be requested from the first author.

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 1. Examples of the materials

Gender	Short sentences (n = 40)
masculine	Le garçon joue avec la balle [the boy plays with the ball].
feminine	La maîtresse lit une histoire [the teacher reads a story].
	Long sentences (n= 40)
masculine	L'homme que tu connais vit dans une grande maison [The man that you know lives in a big house]
feminine	La voiture qui dépasse le camion roule très vite [The car which exceeds the truck runs very fast]

Procedure

Each child was tested individually in a quiet room. All the sentence stimuli were presented via the computer. Children were told to listen to the sentence and to repeat it "as well as possible". Throughout testing, children were provided constant encouragement. Responses of the children were recorded.

Results

The main results are presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Table 2. Repartition of the production following the different stades

	4-year-old (n=14)		5-year-old (n=13)	
	N	%	N	%
Stade 1 "bare forms"	2	0,18	0	0
Stade 2 "dislocation without gender marking or respect"	82	7,3	9	0,87
Stade 3 "dislocation with gender respect"	261	23,3	66	6,3
Stade 4 "correct repetition"	535	48	783	75
other errors (phonological or syntactical)	240	21,4	182	17,5
total	1120		1040	

An analysis of variance was performed on the percentage of correct responses (stade 4) with age (4 vs. 5) as a "between subjects" variable and gender (masculine vs feminine) and length (short vs length) as "within subjects" variables. An age effect was found: $F(1, 25) = 10,82$, $p < 0.01$, reflecting the fact that 5-year-olds produced more correct repetition (75,29% (6,02)) than 4-year-olds (47,77% (6,02)). The effect of length was also significant, $F(1, 25) = 93,99$, $p < 0.0001$: short sentences (81,3% (3,95)) were better repeated than longer (41,75% (5,26)). No gender effect or interactions between the different variables were found. The same pattern was found when a similar analysis of variance was specifically performed with the percentage of dislocations (stade 2 and stade 3). The age effect was significant, $F(1, 25) = 6,92$, $p < 0.05$. At age four, 32% (6,33) of sentences contained a dislocation while this was observed only in 7,5% (6,6) of sentences one year later. The length effect was also significant: dislocations were found in 10,9% (4,04) of the short sentences but 28,11% (5,79) of the longer ones. The others effects and interactions were not significant.

Discussion and conclusion

A sentence repetition task was administered to children aged four to five in order to evaluate the production of subject dislocations in young French-speaking children. According to our predictions, four different stages should emerge : bare forms (stade 1) ; dislocation without gender respect (stade 2); dislocations with gender respect (stade 3), and finally correct

sentences (stade 4). Moreover, the presence of a developmental trend would be indicated by different patterns in 4-year-olds and 5-year-olds.

Globally, our present results confirmed previous work (Pariße in press) and seemed compatible with a developmental trend in the use of dislocation in spontaneous language. The results showed that different trends could be found. At age four, dislocations were frequent (30% of the production) but tended to respect the gender (stade 3). Half of the sentences were correctly repeated (stade 4) and few dislocations (about 7%) presented bad gender agreement (stade 2). So, 4-year-olds were situated between stade 3 and 4. At age 5, the children were clearly situated at stade 4 : dislocations were rare (about 7 %), and always respected the gender agreement (stade 3). Previous stades were absent.

Whatever children's age, an important length effect was found out. The dislocations were massively present in long sentences. This could give some explanation about the role of dislocations. Pariße (in press) suggested that they represent a way to produce longer utterances by avoiding performance limitations and using simpler syntax.

Further researches are needed to extend these findings to younger children (3-year-olds) and to confirm the presence of stade 2. Longitudinal studies could be interesting to verify if all the children present the four stades. It could be the case that some children did not produce dislocations. Finally, some studies should be conducted in children with specific language impairment in order to contrast delayed or deviant developmental path.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank Véronique Outrebon and Laurence Demanet (Institut supérieur de Logopédie, Ghlin, Belgium) for assistance with data collection, and participants who made the research possible.

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