From buds to flowers :
the blossoming of frames and constructions in child language

In the course of their development, children make their way along successive transitory systems with their own internal coherence. This phenomenon can be observed at all levels of linguistic analysis.

Conventional symbolic gestures like pointing appear at the end of children's first year (Bates 1977, Tomasello 1999). Gesture-word combinations can be observed in their second year and are a transition towards two-word speech (Goldin-Meadow & Butcher 2003). But before gestures are combined with words, gaze and vocalizations complement them. These combinations already carry pragmatic, social and semantic functions. The meaning and function of children's first one word utterances can also only be grasped in their communicative and linguistic context. The first morpho-syntactic markers often start budding in child language under the shape of phonemes or syllables that could be heard between identifiable lexical words and are called fillers (Peters 2001). Budding grammatical markers are acquired in dialogue with a discursive function peculiar to the child's language in construction.

Observers of child language have noted the recurrent « errors » produced by children between one and three, which have been referred to as « barbarisms » by Egger (1879) or « incorrect forms » by Buhler (1926). Most linguists now consider these 'errors' as revealing the process of early grammaticalization in children's speech, as in Clark's description of 'emergent categories' (2001). The gap between the non-standard uses children make of some morphemes and the adult uses, as well as the development of these morphemes in child language, can shed an interesting light on the syntax/semantics/pragmatics interface at the root of the development of morpho-syntax.

In this paper, we will be analyzing the four longitudinal follow-ups of three children speaking French and one child using French Sign language recorded once a month at home with their family from 7 months to 3 years old. We will present the paths these children follow from gestures and first words or first signs to complex constructions embedded in their dialogic context, as they develop both cognitive, linguistic, conversational and social skills necessary to their full mastery of language. We will then focus our analyses on

a) the uses of pre-nominal fillers versus bare nouns at 1;10 ("a ballon" versus "ballon"/"ball");

b) presence versus absence of prepositions between 1;10 and 2,02 ("café Martine" as opposed to "a café pour Martine" meaning "coffee for Martine");

c) asyndetic parataxis versus the use of the subordinator 'parce que' (because) between 1;10 and 2;04 ("l'aime pas, vilain" / "don't like him, naughty" and "non, paque veux pas" / "no cos I don't want".

Our data shows that the use of marked and unmarked forms is irregular in terms of canonical syntax but not random, and corresponds to specific situations, and particular semantic/pragmatic features.

We studied the marked grammatical forms mentioned in b) and c) and noted that 'pour' and 'parce que' are used with unexpected and 'deviant' functions. We show that although they are irregular according to the semantics of French, there seems to be a creative and coherent pattern to the children's use of these morphemes within their transitory system. This regular pattern implies the selection of one of the semantic features of the morpheme excluding some others and enabling the child to attribute a specific pragmatic force to the marker.

What appear to be errors in children's productions actually form a coherent, albeit transitory system. Children's selection of the marked or unmarked forms, although they do not follow

the adult rule, might not be considered as erratic: the non-canonical productions are not devoid of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic relevance. The same can be said about the deviant uses of prepositions and subordinators, which are not nonsense productions but seem to endorse specific pragmatic, discursive, or syntactic functions.

Our analyses will give us the opportunity to underline the direct and indirect influence of Charles Fillmore in the field of language acquisition seen from the perspective of French linguists.

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