Children's early prepositions in English and French: a social-interactional device

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ABSTRACT. Some aspects of children’s discourse are influenced by the particular structure of the language the child is acquiring, along with other parameters such as discursive organisation and context. In order to investigate the impact of linguistic factors on the acquisition of prepositions, we analyzed and categorized all uses and misuses of prepositions in five longitudinal case-studies (three French and two English-speaking children recorded monthly between 1;8 and 2;5) according to semantic, syntactic, phonological and social-discursive factors. Our analyses of the French corpora suggest a pragmatic definition of children’s first uses of prepositions.

1 Syntactic Features of Prepositions

This paper is a synthesis of a contrastive corpus-based study of French/English acquisition of the grammatical category of prepositions in which we set forth the hypothesis that prepositions may be analyzed as a pragmatic tool in early acquisition. Our aim is to study the emergence and development of prepositions used by children between the ages of one and three years old in spontaneous dialogue. We investigated how prepositions emerge according to the language, what their first functions are, and how these uses evolve. The data from spontaneous dialogical contexts may give a new insight on how prepositions function as a grammatical category.

Prepositions represent a problematic category for theories of syntax. Recent syntactic theory suggests a classification of prepositions according to either lexical or functional features: lexical prepositions contribute semantic content while functional prepositions merely assign case. Yet the same preposition can exhibit both features, and its classification will therefore depend on its use -the same preposition *to* in English can thus be used as a lexical spatial preposition or as a functional preposition assigning dative case. Of course such a dichotomy oversimplifies matters: there is indeed a gradient between lexical and functional
prepositions, and we are not suggesting that functional prepositions are completely devoid of semantic value.

In the diachronic evolution of the English language, prepositions were spatial before being functional (Groussier, 1997) which fits perfectly into the grammaticalization process as outlined by cognitive linguists (Ziegler, 1997). However, it has also been argued that ontogeny does not parallel phylogeny and therefore language acquisition would not parallel diachrony (Slobin, 2004); the factors determining the acquisition of prepositions would be linguistic rather than cognitive, and linked to language use and frequency of input (Rice, 1999). In the literature on the acquisition of English, prepositions are said to appear as soon as a child can produce two word utterances. These first prepositions seem to be primarily spatial localizers and are part of the first twenty lexical items learnt by English speaking children (Brown, 1973). If this order of emergence in acquisition is true in English, can we assume that this is a general process? We are interested in testing these claims and comparing first uses in English to first uses in French.

3 Quantitative Analysis

We conducted semantic analyses for each child. Every preposition was categorized according to whether the use was primarily functional or spatial (collapsing other semantic fields within the functional category, for the purpose of comparison). The English-speaking children conformed to the trend found in the literature, producing more spatial prepositions (66% and 80% of total) than functional ones. The French-speaking children produced a smaller number of spatial prepositions, with a majority of functional uses (68%, 65% and 58%). The English-speaking children also used a significantly wider range of prepositions. Our data suggest that what has been presented as a general trend in child language may be specific to English and should be reconsidered for other languages.
We then conducted extensive analyses for one child from each language, focusing on social discursive uses of prepositions. We coded for argumentative, explanatory, and performative functions and found considerable differences between the children’s uses. The French-speaking child’s prepositions were key elements in discursive strategies more often than the English-speaking child’s, with 23% of all prepositional uses falling into one of the above-mentioned coding categories.

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1 Providence corpus: Work financed by a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health (Grant #1R01MH60922-01A2, K. Demuth, PI). Lyon Corpus: Work financed by a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health (Grant #1R01MH60922-01A2, K. Demuth, PI) and a grant from Action Concertée Incitative: Terrains, techniques, theories (H. Jisa, PI).
One way of accounting for these patterns of results is by examining the different structures of the two languages. English is a satellite-framed language, which means that it encodes path in the particle or preposition, and manner in the main verb (e.g. swim across the river). French, being a verb-framed language, encodes path in the main verb and manner in the prepositional phrase (e.g. traverser le fleuve en nageant). There are also differences in the functional uses of prepositions. From a syntactic point of view, particles in English are components of phrasal verbs, and are first used holophrastically in child language. We counted the children’s first uses of particles as “intransitive prepositions” (Jespersen, 1992). Early (non holophrastic) functional uses in English are highly grammaticalized; that is, they occur in phrasal verbs. French children also use the preposition dans holophrastically (though marginally), but functional uses appear first and are prevalent. In French, prepositions such as à, de, and pour assign case and are essential in early discursive strategies (e.g. disambiguating source or indicating the beneficiary role).

4 Qualitative Analysis

We analyzed every use in its dialogical context, but we will only discuss one type from among the earliest uses in each language. For English we chose an example from the spatial domain, since it was the prevalent pattern in our corpora. For French, we will present a sample of our analyses of the early uses of pour as a pragmatic tool.
The English child we focused on in the second part of our study produced a majority of verb-like & holophrastic (Tomasello, 1992) prepositions. The first uses of *up* appeared as holophrastic requests.

**Example 1: Will (1;04) wants to go upstairs**

Will: yy (cries) /ap/
Mother: Can you use your words please?
Will: **Up,**
Mother: **Up**?
Will: **Up,**
Mother: **Up.** Oh gotta go / we’ll go up later.

Once in the multiword stage, the child uses *up* both in untruncated phrasal verbs and in a less grammaticalized manner, as the head of a prepositional phrase.

**Example 2: Will (2;03) is playing outside in the garden**

Mother: I'm gonna go get a paper-towel, and wipe off the slide okay?
Will: go **up** the slide. (as he runs towards the slide)

In French, early conversational needs of a similar nature are encoded differently: for instance, Madeleine uses the verb *monter* for a request that is strikingly similar to Will’s in example 1.

**Example 3: Madeleine (1;09) is trying to get onto the sofa.**

**Madeleine:** Aide [?] **monter,** (help [?] up)
Madeleine crawls up onto the sofa, with her mother’s help
Mother: **Tu** veux pas le livre avec toutes les photos là? (you don’t want that book with all the pictures ?)

Our linguistic analyses of the three French children’s uses of *pour* show that prepositions emerge with a pragmatic and argumentative function in dialogue. First, we focused on the sequences in which *pour* was used by the child in order to disambiguate the previous utterance.

**Example 4: Léonard (1;08) at the dinner table.**

Father : Les belles saucisses! (What beautiful sausages!)
Léonard : **Donne,** (Give me)
Mother : J(e) te l’ai donnée, ouais. (I already gave you one)
Léonard : **Pour** papa, (for daddy)

Leonard’s parents have not understood who was to be the recipient of the sausage. Thanks to the use of *pour* in “pour papa”, Léonard clarifies the target and therefore makes the argument of the verb *give* (“donné”) explicit. The preposition is thus used in the context of a misunderstanding and has an explanatory value.
We find this same discursive feature in the use of *pour* with infinitives.

**Example 5: Léonard (2;02) is on his bed**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Léonard: Maman, où est le petit lit?</th>
<th>(Mummy, where’s the little bed?)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother: Le petit lit?</td>
<td>(The little bed?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Léonard: <strong>Pour</strong> sauter.</td>
<td>(<strong>To</strong> jump [= <strong>For</strong> jumping])</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The preposition helps Léonard add an argument in order to elaborate his request for a bed. He gives the reason for his request when faced with his mother’s incomprehension: he is explaining that he wants the bed because he wants to jump on it and use it as a trampoline.

We also conducted detailed analyses on the occurrences we had categorized as misuses: here is one example.

**Example 6: Marie (2;08) is talking about the hot-water bottle her mum just took out.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marie: C’est <strong>pour</strong> les pieds, c’est <strong>pour</strong> je [//] j’aï les pieds chauds.</th>
<th>It’s for feet, it’s for/ my feet are warm.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother: C’est pour avoir les pieds chauds.</td>
<td>It’s for your feet to be warm / to keep your feet warm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie: Mmm.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In adult speech, there is a difference between the preposition *pour*, be it used with a noun or a verb, and the conjunction *pour que*, which introduces a causal clause. This sequence exemplifies the evolution from the production of an elliptical *pour* + noun to that of a proto-conjunction *pour*, followed by a clause. In such instances, instead of considering the child’s use of the preposition as a misuse, we have tried to understand the function she ascribes to it, in what might be seen as an ‘emergent category’ (Clark, 2001) in her language. Clearly here, the transition from the first, prepositional use of *pour*, and its combination with a clause is motivated by the explanatory function of the marker, which is retained in the conjunction. The category of prepositions, as it emerges in Marie’s language, is used not so much to assign case but to explain and justify her knowledge about a shared focus of attention. The category emerges with a pragmatic, argumentative function in the dialogue with her mother, and it evolves towards complex sentential uses in contexts where the same pragmatic function is salient.


6 Conclusion

Quantitative observations of emerging prepositions show that French and English children do not behave in the same way, with a clear priority of spatial first prepositions for English children and the reverse for French children. However, a qualitative analysis of the actual uses of these emerging prepositions in context shows that this purely syntactic opposition is not entirely adequate and that another level of analysis is more appropriate; namely, the social-discursive level.

In our corpus of French children, this grammatical category is first organised as a pragmatic paradigm—where prepositions are mainly used as tools for speech acts performed to justify actions, disambiguate intentions, or interpersonal positioning of speech or phrases within the utterances.

A closer look at English corpora shows that spatial predominance should perhaps also be reconsidered. It appears that in quantitative morpho-syntactic analyses, the items that are gathered around the term ‘preposition’ are actually free preposition-like morphemes that do not always have a prepositional syntactic function in child speech and could well belong to the category of verbal particles, and correspond to truncated phrasal verbs which are used as requests for the addressee’s actions.

These free preposition-like morphemes form a kind of morphological ‘supercategory’ when they emerge, and the items within this category will be subcategorized as particles and prepositions according to a functional and pragmatic discriminating feature. First uses by children are therefore interesting to analyse, and show that parallels between language acquisition and language histories may not be so accurate either. A better parallel to draw would perhaps be the one between first uses in language acquisition and the core, basic or schematic operations to be found behind those grammatical markers.

References


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