

Definite and indefinite determiners in French-speaking toddlers: Distributional features and pragmatic-discursive factors

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Received 17 July 2011; received in revised form 23 March 2013; accepted 26 March 2013

Abstract

The aim of this article is to study the effects of pragmatic-discursive factors on the choice of determiners (more specifically, definite or indefinite determiners) and their distributional features. It contends that distributional features alone cannot account for mastery of the determiner category and that determiner productivity must also be examined in terms of how determiners are actually used in discourse. 2367 noun phrases produced by 24 French-speaking children between 1;10 and 3;0 (cross-sectional and longitudinal corpus) observed in natural dialogues at home, day-care and nursery school were analyzed for the distributional features of their pre-nominal slot filling (a measure of determinant contrast with noun overlap). The results of this analysis were compared with those of an analysis of NP uses in discourse. Results show that the distributional patterns of determiners depend more on the discursive (referent introduction and reactivation, labelling, topic development) and dialogical (answers, self- and other repetition) uses of NP than on the level of syntactic – morphological development. The discussion focuses on the intertwining of pragmatics and grammar and the role of pragmatics in language acquisition.

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Keywords: Determiner; Definite; Indefinite; Discursive dialogic factors; Noun overlap; Language acquisition

1. Introduction

Mastery of the definite–indefinite contrast is generally regarded as emblematic of the acquisition of the determiner category. Structurally, for a language like French in which determiners are almost always mandatory, it signals an important step in the grammaticalization process, in terms of both the acquisition of a morphological paradigm and the corollary formation of the noun category. Functionally, it means that the child's use of determiners, namely appropriate use of the definite–indefinite contrast, involves some grasp of reference phenomena such as the type of reference, referent accessibility, the state of the discourse and of mutual knowledge, as well as dialogue dynamics. These features make

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determiner acquisition a particularly relevant domain for exploring the relationships between grammar and pragmatics in the initial stages of language development.

Studies on first determiners usually focus either on distributional features or on referential features. Our contention is that the distributional features observed in children's spontaneous discourse are not independent from functional factors. Indeed the presence of a determiner is mandatory in noun phrases, but it is primarily the vehicle of referential values. And referential values depend on the position of the noun in discourse and in dialogue. Our general hypothesis is that to assess mastery of the determiner category it is necessary to consider the pragmatic-discursive dimension of determiner use, and more specifically the way children use nouns in dialogue. If children's mastery of the determiner paradigm can be indicated by the flexibility of determiner alternation for the same noun, determiners must also be in tune with the discursive and dialogic features at play in the context. Correspondingly, the lack of flexibility could be only considered as a sign of lack of grammatical knowledge if determiner use is inappropriate at the pragmatic level. Thus, the present study jointly examines the distributional features of determiners (and more specifically, definite or indefinite ones) and the effects of pragmatic-discursive factors on their use.

After a brief overview of the literature on the structural and functional aspects of determiner acquisition – with special emphasis on French – we will draw an inventory of the forms present in our corpus, and study the distributional features of definite and indefinite determiners, and their relationships with determiner uses in discourse.

1.1. *Forms and productivity: the morphosyntactic dimension*

In French – except for certain non-referential uses (see Table 2 below) – determiners (Leeman, 2004) are mandatory to actualize a noun and convey the marks of gender and number. These features seem to account for the relative precociousness of determiner acquisition in French, as in other Romance languages but not in Germanic ones (Guasti et al., 2008; Rozendaal and Baker, 2008). Accordingly, by the age of two years, the Article + Noun combination is one of the most frequent patterns in child speech (Parisse and Le Normand, 2000), and between the ages of 2;6 and 3, the vast majority of native French-speaking children use determiners in mandatory contexts (Bassano et al., 2008). Definite and indefinite determiners make up the majority of determiners used by the youngest children (Coene, 2006; Rozendaal and Baker, 2008; Salazar Orvig et al., 2005, 2007) as well as by adults, but definite ones precede indefinite ones by far.

The acquisition of determiners is a gradual process involving periods of omission, fluctuation (with fillers) in mandatory contexts, and then systematic or nearly systematic presence. Although there is general agreement on the existence of these phases, explanations of them differ (Peters, 2000). For instance, Demuth and Tremblay (2008) and Demuth and McCullough (2009) account for the fluctuations that characterize this phase in terms of phonetic- or prosodic-representation constraints, whereas in nativist approaches the first occurrences of fillers or adult-like forms (usually definite ones) are seen as expletives or “impostors” (Baauw, 2001; Coene, 2006). However, from a constructivist approach, Dressler et al. (2003) consider that nativist models lack the phases that come between rote learning and productivity. For these authors, the acquisition of grammatical morphemes can be broken down into three phases: pre-morphological, proto-morphological, and morphological (or morpho-syntactic) (see also Peters, 2000; Veneziano and Sinclair, 2000). During the pre-morphological phase, the presence of filler syllables is thought to be determined by prosodic factors. The proto-morphological phase involves the appearance of mini-paradigms in which two or three forms contrast in the same lexical context. For Veneziano (2003), this phase exhibits phenomena (such as the systematic filling of the pre-nominal slot) that foreshadow syntactic functioning and the transition to the morphological phase.

On the syntagmatic level, usage-based approaches focus on another aspect of the gradual development of the determiner category: children rely at first on items and constructions and then progress toward generalization of the category. In this vein, Pine and Martindale (1996) and Pine and Lieven (1997) challenged the idea whereby young children possess an abstract adult-like determiner category from the start (Valian, 1986). These authors focused on the definite–indefinite contrast among children under 3 years of age and found a low rate of determiner contrast with noun overlap. This low rate of paradigm unfolding lead them to conclude that there are few arguments supporting the idea that the first uses of determiners reflect underlying knowledge of a “determiner” category. Rather than attributing young children with implicit knowledge of adult grammar rules, the authors contend that children's initial use of determiners cannot be separated from the constructions or formulae in which they occur. Later work (e.g. Lieven et al., 2009) confirmed that the youngest children tend to insert new nouns in slots of constructions that contain determiners (e.g., “where's the REF¹?” or “there's a REF”).

Challenging this approach, Valian et al. (2009), who analyzed a corpus obtained from children between the ages of 1;10 and 2;8, computed six different measures of overlap, including those used by Pine and Martindale (1996) and Pine

¹ Where REF stands for REFERENT designated by a noun.

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