Children's non adult-like comprehension of PF and IPF morphology: semantics of pragmatics?

Some experimental studies have shown that children's comprehension of grammatical aspect morphemes is adult-like at 3 (Kazanina & Philips, 2007; Vinnitskaya & Wexler, 2001). Conversely, other studies have shown that the comprehension of imperfective (IPF) is not adult-like before 5 (van Hout 2008; Wagner 2009). The main differences between adults and children are found in the comprehension of IPF telic predicates, which adults associate to incomplete events while children associate to both complete and incomplete events.

We argue that the degree of adult-likeliness in the different experiments depends on the nature of the task proposed. In truth-value judgment tasks, the target response is the acceptance of IPF as the description of both complete and incomplete events; in some picture selection tasks, the target response is the association of IPF exclusively to incomplete events. IPF past predicates assert that the event was ongoing in the past without making reference to whether the event was completed or not and therefore they can refer to complete and incomplete events. However, in situations where the final outcome of the event is relevant for the conversation, the use of IPF may imply that completion was not reached. This pragmatic enrichment is similar to the pragmatic reasoning of Scalar Implicatures. Implicature reasoning is claimed not to be mastered until until 4-7 years of age (Noveck, 2001) and therefore, differences between adults and children are expected to be found in those experiments that involve implicature reasoning (pragmatic reasoning) but not in those experiments that involve logical reasoning.

We tested aspect comprehension with (A) a picture-selection task targeting pragmatic reasoning (IPF related to incomplete) and (B) a truth-value judgment task targeting logic reasoning (IPF accepted complete and incomplete events). In task A, participants had to relate PF (Spanish pretérito *construyó*) and IPF (Spanish imperfect *construía*) morphology to images depicting complete, incomplete or ongoing events (cf. van Hout, 2008). In task B participants had to judge the suitability of using PF and IPF to describe complete and incomplete events shown in movie clips (cf. van Hout et al., 2010). We expected non adult-like performance of the group of 5 year-old children (n=23) tested in task A and adult-like performance for the group of children five year-old children (n=20) tested with task B.

The results confirmed this prediction: in task A adults gave a pragmatic response, linking IPF to ongoing events, while children chose both complete and ongoing events, thus sometimes opting for the logical response (figure 1). In task B children as well as adults opted for the logical response, accepting IPF also for complete events (figure 2).
We draw two conclusions from the comparison of both tasks. First, only the picture-selection task is sufficiently sensitive to reveal scalar reasoning by adults, given that it tests which interpretation is better (IPF-incomplete) and not if a certain interpretation holds or not. Second, asymmetries between adults and children are only found in the task that involves pragmatic reasoning.

<u>Figure 1</u>. Task A: picture-selection task.
Selection of complete (C), incomplete (I) or ongoing (O) situations for PF and IPF forms
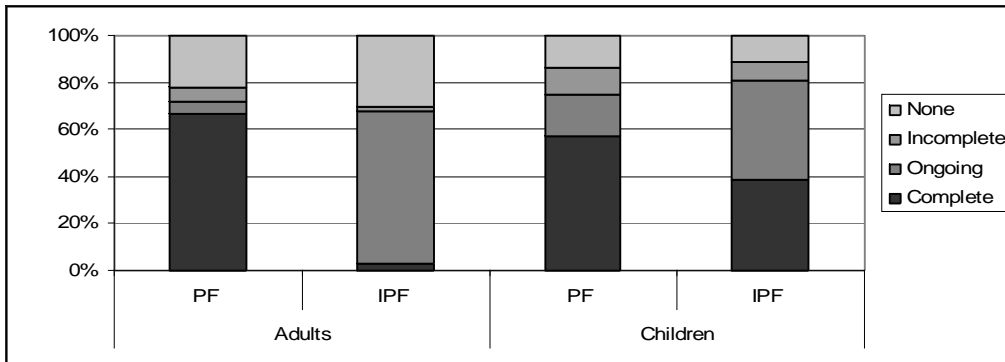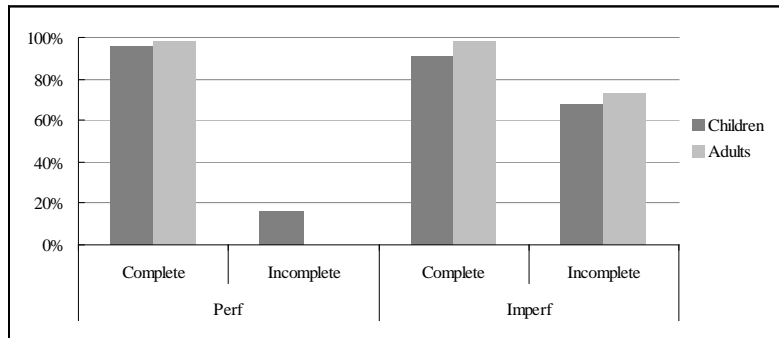

<u>Figure 2</u>. Task B: truth-value-judgment task.
Acceptance of PF/IPF forms for complete and incomplete situations

<u>Selected references</u>:

Noveck, I. A., 2001, "When children are more logical than adults", *Cognition* 86, 253–282. **Smith, C. S., 1991**, *The Parameter of Aspect*. Dordrecht: Kluwer. **Kazanina & Philips, 2007** 'A developmental perspective on the Imperfective Paradox'. *Cognition*, vol 105 (1)., pp. 65 – 102. **van Hout, A, 2008**, "Acquisition of perfective and imperfective aspect in Dutch, Italian and Polish.", *Lingua* 118, 1740–1765. **van Hout, A., Gagarina, N., Dressler, W. et al., 2010**, "Learning to understand aspect across languages". Paper presented at the 35th BUCLD. **Wagner 2009** "I'll Never Grow Up: Continuity in Aspectual Representations." *Linguistics 47* (5), 1051 – 1074. **Vinnitskaya & Wexler, 2001** "The role of pragmatics in the development of Russian aspect." *First Language* 21, 143-186.