

Workshop : *Psycholinguistic insights into the conceptual processes underlying the use of grammatical aspect*

Identifying and tracing a cognitive pathway in children's first uses of the present perfect

The present perfect is often described as a multi-layered form combining temporal, aspectual and pragmatic properties (Smith, 1997; Portner, 2003; Ritz, 2012). The literature has focused extensively on discussing the temporal restrictions in its usage and on the subsequent limited set of adverbs allowed by the form (McCoard, 1978; Klein, 1992; Michaelis, 1994). The study of oral corpora has shown that speakers do not systematically take these restrictions into account (Miller, 2000) and the study of written and spoken corpora has pointed out the determining role of discourse and context (Nishiyama & Koenig, 2005; Schlüter, 2006). The present perfect is often studied in comparison with simple past (Elsness, 1997) which is presented as a competing structure to refer to past events.

The analysis of children's first uses of these two forms might account for the primary conceptualisation of tense and aspect that structures speakers' choice between the present perfect and simple past. Moreover, the present perfect is of particular interest as it combines both a temporal and aspectual perspective that might conjure up more complex cognitive abilities. The studies on language acquisition that support the aspect before tense hypothesis have underlined the fundamental role of the lexical aspect in classifying verbs and more largely, in the conceptualisation of tense and aspect (Wagner, 1997; Li & Shirai, 2000). We hypothesise that children's use of the present perfect is the result of different intertwining parameters – i.e. lexical aspect and coercion, discourse and context, communicational needs.

In order to analyse the emergence of the present perfect and how it might interact and interfere with simple past, two dense oral corpora were coded: Thomas (Roland, Fletcher 2006) and Lara (Maslen and al., 2004) from the CHILDES database (MacWhinney, 2000). Analyses based on qualitative and quantitative data were conducted on the adult and the child's speech in the context of the interactions between the two.

The results show that the children follow two pathways in the acquisition of the present perfect and simple past. The children use simple past to express a single punctual event in the past and then progressively structure and complexify their utterances. On the contrary, the children's first uses of the present perfect are directly replicated from the input and serve specific communicational needs.

The study of the acquisition of the present perfect might help us get a better understanding of the construal, the representation and conceptualisation of the English temporal and aspectual systems.

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