

Noun grammaticization in French: Prosodic and lexical factors on determiner use in children's speech

Dominique Bassano,
Laboratoire Cognition & Développement, CNRS – Université Paris 5,
bassano@psycho.univ-paris5.fr

Isabelle Maillachon,
Laboratoire Cognition & Développement et Université du Havre, dipcef@free.fr

Sylvain Mottet,
Laboratoire Cognition & Développement, CNRS – Université Paris 5,
mottet@psycho.univ-paris5.fr

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Abstract

A main question in current research on early language development is when and how children acquire the grammatical categories of the language they are learning. The present study investigates the development of the noun grammatical category in French by analysing children's naturalistic productions from three age groups, i.e., 1;8, 2;6 and 3;3. In oral French, the noun class is mainly characterized by the fact that nouns are usually preceded by obligatory determiners, which are marked for number and gender. From this perspective, we examined when and how the grammatical constraint of determiner use was acquired by children. More particularly, we explored the role of two kinds of factors likely to influence the noun grammaticization process: prosodic factors related to noun length, on the one hand, and lexical factors related to animacy, on the other hand. In regard to prosodic factors, a likely hypothesis is that, if children are influenced by rhythmic properties of the language they are learning (see Gerken's metrical hypothesis, 1994), they should omit determiners more often before multisyllabic than before monosyllabic nouns, and use determiners or fillers more often before monosyllabic than before multisyllabic nouns. In regard to lexical factors, one hypothesis derived from the analysis of one child's longitudinal data (Bassano, 2000; 2005) proposed that inanimate object nouns are semantic primers in noun grammaticization. According to this lexical hypothesis, children should preferentially use determiners with inanimates rather than with animates nouns.

The database used for the present study consisted of the corpora of 20 children in each of the three age groups, 1;8, 2;6 and 3;3. Data were obtained using a spontaneous speech sampling method, in which children's naturalistic productions were systematically collected and transcribed according to CHILDES. Samples of children's utterances were then submitted to coding regarding lexical, morphosyntactic and length properties of nouns. Coding files were analysed using a specific processing program elaborated for the study.

Results showed that the acquisition of the determiner use constraint gradually developed across the period under study. It was emerging at 1;8 : children frequently omitted obligatory determiners, using determiners or fillers in only 38% of the mandatory contexts. Grammaticization was greatly improved at 2;6 (around 75% of obligatory determiner use), and it was achieved at 3;3 (around 95% of obligatory determiner use). Focusing on the 1;8 and 2;6 groups, we examined the role of nouns prosodic and lexical properties in the grammaticization process. Noun length effects supporting the prosodic hypothesis were found at 1;8, but they were not found at 2;6. In the 1;8 group, determiner omission was significantly

more frequent with multisyllabic than with monosyllabic nouns, and filler/determiner use was more frequent with monosyllabic than multisyllabic nouns. This interaction was not found at 2;6. In contrast, animacy effects supporting the lexical hypothesis were not observed at 1;8, but they were found at 2;6. In the 2;6 group, obligatory determiners were more frequently used with inanimate than with animate nouns. These results indicate that noun grammaticization is a gradual process in French children. Prosodic and lexical factors both appear to influence the development of the determiner use constraint. However, the role of these two kinds of factors vary across time: prosodic effects might influence the first steps of the developmental process, and lexical effects might influence the later steps.

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