

THE ACQUISITION OF FOCUS: PRODUCTION AND COMPREHENSION

VISIT 6: SCIENTIFIC REPORT

This **sixth meeting** of the three project members, B. Höhle (University of Potsdam, Germany), K. Szendroi (UCL, London, UK) and J. Gervain (CNRS-Université Paris Descartes, Paris, France) took place in Potsdam between **May 22nd-26th 2012**, hosted by Prof. Höhle. A student involved in the project was also present. This meeting had three main goals: to discuss the results obtained so far, to start manuscript preparation and prepare the upcoming conference posters and to plan additional data collection and possibilities of follow-up studies.

The objective of our project is to test the comprehension and production of focus in young children, who show seemingly paradoxical behaviour with early (around 2-3 years) adult-like production, but delayed comprehension (no adult-like performance before 6 years). Our hypothesis is that comprehension is also operational in children younger than 6 years (possibly already at 2-3 years, paralleling production), but task-related and other performance factors prevented children in previous studies from showing their full competence. To test this hypothesis, we have designed a truth-value judgement task for children and adults, in which participants need to judge the truth of prosodically marked subject- and object-focus utterances (with respect to drawn images) spoken by an experimenter, and offer verbal corrections, as appropriate.

Testing has advanced further since the last meetings in all three languages and all three original age groups. Further age groups have also been added. During this meeting, we have discussed these results (*Figure 1*). We have observed similar patterns in German and French children in the two age groups for which we have data from both languages. In particular, 3-year-olds show a bias to interpret focus as falling on the object, irrespective of the actual position of the prosodically focus-marked element, whereas by 5 years of age, this default interpretation gradually disappears and only object focus marking leads to an object focus interpretation. However, for French, we also have data from 4-year-old children, and this data set shows an unexpected pattern, with a sensitivity to subject-marking suddenly appearing. We have therefore decided to test 4-year-olds in all three languages. We have further discussed the possibility of adding a 6-year-old group to German and French in order to better trace the developmental

trajectory of the acquisition of focus and then later use age as a continuous variable in the statistical analysis. A preliminary correlation analysis has confirmed that the subject correction response increases with age in our child participants, whereas the number of object correction responses remains approximately stable. With constraints on participant recruitment in mind (e.g. end of the school term approaching), we have decided to bring up each age group to a sample size of 20 in each language (10 per condition, i.e. Subject vs. Object focus). We estimate that data collection can feasibly be completed before the summer break in schools.

We have discussed possible outlets for our work, and have opted to target prestigious specialist journals in language acquisition and development (e.g. *Language Learning and Development*, *Journal of Child Language*). We also worked on the posters that we would present at two upcoming conferences (XPRAG 2013 Conference, GALA 2013).

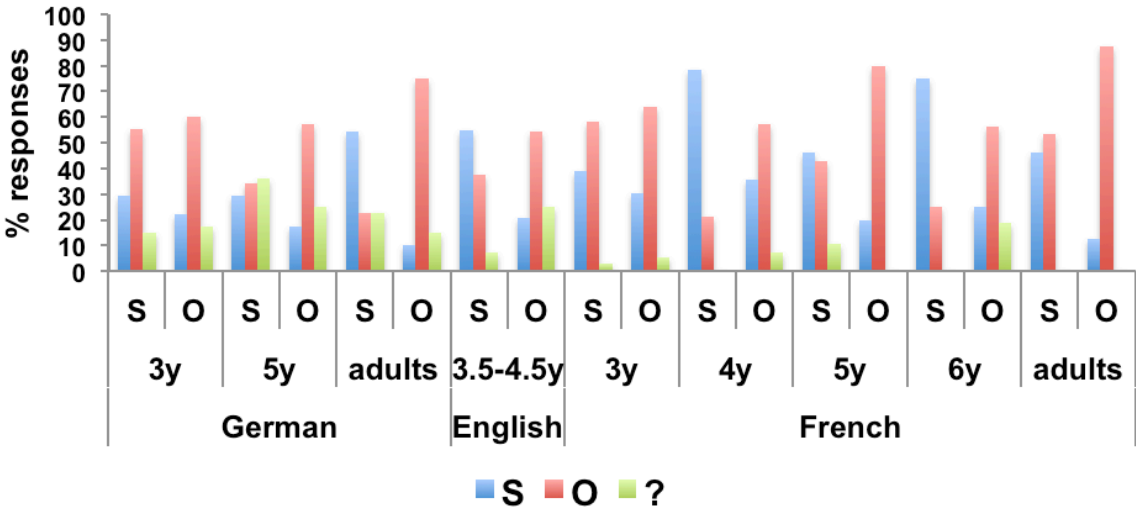


Figure 1. Summary of preliminary results. Blue bars indicate subject-correction answers, red bars object-correction answers and green bars ambiguous answers.