

THE ACQUISITION OF FOCUS: PRODUCTION AND COMPREHENSION

VISIT 3: SCIENTIFIC REPORT

This **third 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 **April 18th – 19th 2012**. (K. Szendroi was on sabbatical at the University of Potsdam until April 20th 2012, so this meeting only required one member, Judit Gervain, to travel.) During this meeting, we evaluated the results of a third and final round of pilot studies conducted with German adults.

The main objective of the 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. We therefore needed to design a task whereby (i) adult performance was clear and well-established, (ii) both production and comprehension could be tested, (iii) the testing situation was pragmatically appropriate and naturally led to the felicitous use of focus constructions, (iv) the test material was adequate in all three languages involved (English, German, French), and (v) the material was easily amenable to additional experimental techniques not relying on meta-linguistic performance (e.g. eye-tracking).

We had previously conducted two pilot studies with English- and German-speaking adults. These designs met criteria (ii), (iv) and (v) above, but needed improvement regarding criteria (i) and (iii). In particular, participants showed a bias to interpret focus constructions as object-focus even when the subject was marked for focus, a strong carryover effect between successive conditions (object vs. subject focus) was observed, and the test material allowed correct responses to be inferred from the material by exclusion without the need to interpret the focus construction. We thus improved the design and ran a third pilot with German adult participants before this third meeting.

At the meeting, we assessed this pilot study and concluded that the current design successfully avoids all previous problems. Given this successful design, we defined the desired number of test, control and filler items, double-checked the material for cross-linguistic adequacy

and discussed how the procedure would be adapted for eye-tracking. We concluded that the experiment was now ready for testing with adults and the two child age-groups planned, and discussed the details of the recruitment and testing procedure at the three testing sites. We are expecting testing to start within a few weeks.