**Barely There: Hard-to-Detect Auxiliaries Shed Light
on Children's Acquisition of French**

The status of children's acquisition of grammatical categories and in particular of auxiliaries continues to be debated. On the one hand, a number of corpus studies suggest that auxiliaries and similar categories are absent early on (e.g., Wijnen 1996/1997, Schlyter 2003). On the other hand, experimental studies indicate that syntactic competence for functional categories is available to toddlers and even infants (e.g., Gerken & McIntosh 1993, Santelmann & Jusczyk 1998).

This study focuses on auxiliaries in child French and evaluates these two perspectives using a new corpus of over 5000 child utterances containing cross-sectional speech samples from 18 children, ages 1;11 – 2;11. Subjects were presented with a standardized set of props and questions designed to trigger utterances with verbs and auxiliaries. Data collection and analysis involved an innovative digital recording set-up, digital transcription technology and editing software, and more detailed data analysis, including spectrograms.

The results reveal a phonetic continuum in children's (including the youngest child) phonetic realizations of auxiliaries. Close phonetic analysis made it possible to identify target-like auxiliaries ((1)), phonetically and phonologically reduced auxiliaries ((2)), "filler" vowels functioning as precursors to auxiliaries ((3)) (cf. Pepinsky, Demuth & Roark 2001), as well as subject clitics that precede nonfinite verbs ((4)) and which, in French, implicate the presence of a finite auxiliary/modal. I also identified contexts for extreme phonological reduction of the auxiliary, i.e., contexts for phonological deletion.

These findings strengthen previous experimental results regarding children's knowledge of functional categories by providing corroboration from a corpus study. Additionally, they have significant theoretical implications concerning the nature of grammatical representations to be posited for the child. On a more general level, they highlight the importance of examining syntax-phonology interactions in first language acquisition.

Examples

(1)   Child: L'élépfant, i **peut** pus, i **peut** pus tomber
                      'the elephant, he **can** no-longer, he **can** no-longer fall'
                                                        (P17, age 1;11)

(2)   Child: j' [**udre**] enver les autocollants.   (target form: [v̲udre] 'would-like-to')
                      'I **would-like-to** remove the stickers.'
                                                        (P18, age 2; 6)

(3)   Child: z'[**e**] mett' celi-là, celi-là, là, à côté cé monsieur?
                       I **V** put-INF that-one, that-one there next to this mister?
                      (asks adult about placing a figurine in a certain position; immediate future context)
                                                        (P17, age 1;11)

(4)   Interviewer: et qu'est-ce qu'il va faire Timothée avec sa maman ?
                      'and what is it that he is-gonna do Timothy with his mom ?'
       Child: **i** dormir
                      '**he** sleep-INF'
                                                        (P24, age 2;2)

References

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