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978-0-521-06510-8 - Children's Discourse: Person, Space and Time across Languages

Maya Hickmann

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CHILDREN'S DISCOURSE

PERSON, SPACE AND TIME ACROSS LANGUAGES

This original comparative study explores two central questions in the study of first language acquisition. What is the relative impact of structural and functional determinants? What is universal versus language-specific during development? Maya Hickmann addresses these questions in three domains of child language: reference to entities, the representation of space, and uses of temporal-aspectual markings. She provides a thorough review of different theoretical approaches to language acquisition and a wide range of developmental research, as well as examining all three domains in English, French, German and Chinese narratives. Hickmann's findings concern the rhythm of acquisition, the interplay among different factors (syntactic, semantic, pragmatic) determining children's uses, and universal versus variable aspects of acquisition. Her conclusions stress the importance of relating sentence and discourse determinants of acquisition in a cross-linguistic perspective. *Children's Discourse* will be welcomed by those working in psychology and language-related disciplines interested in first language acquisition.

MAYA HICKMANN is Research Director at Laboratoire Cognition et Développement, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and University of Paris V. Her publications on discourse include a variety of chapters in collected volumes and articles in journals concerning first language acquisition including *Journal of Child Language*, *First Language* and *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*. She is also the editor of *Social and Functional Approaches to Language and Thought* (1987).

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Maya Hickmann

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CHILDREN'S DISCOURSE

PERSON, SPACE AND TIME
ACROSS LANGUAGES

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Contents

	<i>List of figures</i>	<i>page</i> x
	<i>List of tables</i>	xiv
	<i>Preface</i>	xv
	<i>List of abbreviations and conventions</i>	xvii
1	Introduction	1
1.1	Acquiring language	1
1.2	Domains of child language	11
1.3	Overview of contents in subsequent chapters	17
	PART I AVAILABLE THEORIES AND DATA	19
2	Theoretical issues	21
2.1	Some main theoretical issues in theories of language acquisition	21
2.2	Functional approaches to language	37
2.3	Functional aspects of reference in cohesive discourse	43
3	Cross-linguistic invariants and variations	49
3.1	Some general typological dimensions	49
3.2	Denoting entities	56
3.3	Space	67
3.4	Time	77
3.5	Summary	84
4	Coherence and cohesion in discourse development	86
4.1	Macrostructures	86
4.2	Emergence of the textual function	101
4.3	Summary	105

Contents

5	Children's marking of information status: referring expressions and clause structure	108
5.1	Referring expressions	108
5.2	Clause structure in discourse	134
5.3	Summary	139
6	The acquisition of spatial and temporal-aspectual devices	141
6.1	Motion and location	141
6.2	Temporal-aspectual markings	154
6.3	Summary	169
	PART II A CROSS-LINGUISTIC STUDY OF CHILDREN'S NARRATIVES	173
7	Methodological issues	175
7.1	Control of relevant variables	175
7.2	Design of the present study	183
8	Animate entities	194
8.1	Referent introductions	194
8.2	Reference maintenance	207
8.3	Summary and discussion	230
9	Space	240
9.1	Situation types	240
9.2	Explicitness of spatial grounds	249
9.3	Spatial anchoring	257
9.4	Maintaining reference to spatial grounds	274
9.5	Summary and discussion	276
10	Time	282
10.1	Distribution of all temporal-aspectual devices	282
10.2	Impact of predicate types on verbal devices	290
10.3	Discourse determinants of temporal-aspectual devices	294
10.4	Summary and discussion	314
11	Conclusions	318
11.1	Summary of findings in each domain	318
11.2	General conclusions across domains	324
11.3	Implications and concluding remarks	334

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-06510-8 - Children’s Discourse: Person, Space and Time across Languages
Maya Hickmann
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Appendix</i>	343
<i>Notes</i>	345
<i>References</i>	350
<i>Author index</i>	383
<i>Subject index</i>	388

Figures

8.1	First mentions of characters with appropriate local markings of newness. From Hickmann, Hendriks, Roland and Liang 1996. Reprinted with permission from Cambridge University Press.	<i>page</i> 196
8.2	Classifier use in Chinese first and subsequent mentions of characters. From Hickmann, Hendriks, Roland and Liang 1996. Reprinted with permission from Cambridge University Press.	198
8.3	First mentions and subsequent mentions of characters in postverbal position. From Hickmann, Hendriks, Roland and Liang 1996. Reprinted with permission from Cambridge University Press.	199
8.4	Types of clause structures used for the first mentions of characters	202
8.5	Types of clause structures used for first mentions of characters across ages: (a) Postverbal first mentions, (b) Preverbal first mentions	203
8.6	First mentions of characters as a function of position and local newness markings. From Hickmann, Hendriks, Roland and Liang 1996. Reprinted with permission from Cambridge University Press.	206
8.7	Lean forms in reference maintenance to characters. From Hickmann and Hendriks 1999. Reprinted with permission from Cambridge University Press.	207
8.8	Different forms used in reference maintenance to characters	208
8.9	Different forms used in reference maintenance to characters as a function of age	210
8.10	Lean forms used for each character of the HORSE story. From Hickmann and Hendriks 1999. Reprinted with permission from Cambridge University Press.	211

List of figures

8.11	Lean forms used for each character of the CAT story. From Hickmann and Hendriks 1999. Reprinted with permission from Cambridge University Press.	212
8.12	Overall relation between the position and form of subsequent mentions. From Hickmann and Hendriks 1999. Reprinted with permission from Cambridge University Press.	213
8.13	Overall relation between the semantic role and position of subsequent mentions	215
8.14	Overall relation between the semantic role and form of subsequent mentions	216
8.15	Overall relation between the grammatical role and form of subsequent mentions	217
8.16	Overall relation between coreference and the form of subsequent mentions	219
8.17	Percentages of coreferential NPs within each form type. From Hickmann and Hendriks 1999. Reprinted with permission from Cambridge University Press.	220
8.18	Grammatical role and coreference within each form type	221
8.19	Relation between the grammatical role and form of coreferential subsequent mentions across ages. From Hickmann and Hendriks 1999. Reprinted with permission from Cambridge University Press.	222
8.20	Types of coreferential subsequent mentions overall	223
8.21	Types of coreferential subsequent mentions across ages. From Hickmann and Hendriks 1999. Reprinted with permission from Cambridge University Press.	224
8.22	Types of coreferential subsequent mentions within each form type overall	225
8.23	Pronominal and nominal subsequent mentions in SS relations for each character in the HORSE story	226
8.24	Pronominal and nominal subsequent mentions in SS relations for each character in the CAT story	227
8.25	Types of coreferential subject pronominals. From Hickmann and Hendriks 1999. Reprinted with permission from Cambridge University Press.	228
9.1	Overall distribution of predicate types	242
9.2	Ambiguous mentions of spatial grounds	250
9.3	Overall explicit mentions of spatial grounds	252
9.4	Explicit mentions of spatial grounds as a function of predicate types	254

List of figures

9.5	German sentence-initial pronominal adverbials	257
9.6	First mentions of spatial grounds with local newness markings	258
9.7	Forms and positions of Chinese first mentions of spatial grounds	260
9.8	Predicates used for the first mentions of spatial grounds overall	261
9.9	Predicates and NP types used for the first mentions of spatial grounds as a function of age	262
9.10	First mentions of spatial grounds in locative role across ages	263
9.11	Semantic roles and forms of the first mentions of spatial grounds	264
9.12	Local newness markings with locative vs. non-locative first mentions of spatial grounds across ages	265
9.13	Local newness markings with first mentions of spatial grounds within each semantic role	266
9.14	Early spatial anchoring, late first mentions, and omissions as a function of age	271
9.15	Forms of early spatial anchors in the CAT and HORSE stories overall	272
9.16	Forms of early spatial anchors across ages	273
9.17	Nominal subsequent mentions of spatial grounds across ages	274
9.18	Predicate types used for the subsequent mentions of spatial anchors	275
9.19	Locative subsequent mentions of spatial anchors	276
9.20	Coreferential mentions of spatial anchors across ages	277
10.1	Overall proportions of past inflections	284
10.2	Uses and non-uses of aspect particles in Chinese	285
10.3	Different uses of the aspect particle <i>le</i> in Chinese	286
10.4	Proportions of regional connectives across ages	289
10.5	Temporal-aspectual markings used with regional connectives	291
10.6	Most frequent temporal-aspectual markings used with regional connectives across ages	292
10.7	Proportions of past and/or perfective markers with bounded vs. unbounded predicates. From Hickmann 1996. Reprinted with permission from Lawrence Erlbaum.	293
10.8	Overall temporal anchoring in English, French, and German HORSE stories	298
10.9	Overall temporal anchoring in English, French, and German CAT stories	299

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-06510-8 - Children’s Discourse: Person, Space and Time across Languages
Maya Hickmann
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

List of figures

10.10	Temporal anchoring in English, French, and German across ages	300
10.11	Overall temporal anchoring in English, French, and German mixed HORSE stories	301
10.12	Overall temporal anchoring in English, French, and German mixed CAT stories	302
10.13	Temporal anchoring in English, French, and German mixed narratives across ages	303
10.14	Discourse contexts of temporal-aspectual shifts overall	305
10.15	Most frequent discourse contexts of temporal-aspectual shifts across ages	306
10.16	All temporal-aspectual shifts marking a grounding distinction	307
10.17	Temporal-aspectual shifts in Chinese overall	312
10.18	Temporal-aspectual shifts across ages in Chinese	313
10.19	Inflection and particle shifts marking situational overlaps in the CAT story. From Hickmann 1996. Reprinted with permission from Lawrence Erlbaum.	314

Tables

3.1	Impact of aspect on the interpretation of temporal relations among events	<i>page</i> 84
4.1	Example of canonical story (Stein and Glenn 1979)	89
4.2	Example of canonical story (Mandler 1978)	90
4.3	Example of canonical story (Hickmann and Schneider 2000)	99
4.4	Summary of all experimental conditions (Hickmann and Schneider 2000)	100
5.1	Example of canonical story (Hickmann and Schneider, 1993)	130
5.2	Summary of all experimental conditions (Hickmann and Schneider, 1993)	130
7.1	Samples of subjects in the study	186
9.1	Packaging of information in dynamic predicates: French	244
9.2	Packaging of information in dynamic predicates: English	244
9.3	Packaging of information in dynamic predicates: German	245
9.4	Packaging of information in dynamic predicates: Chinese	245
9.5	Presentative constructions used with each predicate type in French and Chinese	255
9.6	Postverbal introductions of inanimate referents serving as grounds	259
10.1	Verbal inflections in the Indo-European languages	283
10.2	Uses and non-uses of Chinese aspect markers within each narrative	287
10.3	Connectives as a function of inflections and particles	290

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-06510-8 - Children's Discourse: Person, Space and Time across Languages

Maya Hickmann

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

The aim of this book is to explore two questions in the study of first language acquisition: the role of structural and functional determinants during acquisition, and the extent to which the developmental process is invariant vs. variable across languages. In order to address these questions, I examine within a functional and cross-linguistic perspective the acquisition of a variety of linguistic devices relevant to three domains of child language: the denotation of entities, the expression of motion and location, and the marking of temporal-aspectual distinctions. In relation to the first question, my aim is to determine the relative impact of two types of factors during language acquisition: syntactic and semantic factors that operate at the sentence level; and discourse pragmatic factors that operate beyond the sentence, particularly those that regulate the flow of information across utterances as a function of presupposition and focus in discourse. Furthermore, the book is framed within a comparative perspective, in which evidence from different languages is repeatedly brought to bear on the second question, in light of various claims concerning universal vs. language-specific determinants of acquisition.

After an introduction presenting the general aims of the book, subsequent chapters are divided into two parts. The first part provides a general theoretical background and overview of the relevant developmental literature. After a discussion of the methodological issues arising from this literature, several chapters in the second part then present the results of a study comparing narrative productions of children and adults in four languages (French, English, German and Mandarin Chinese). The last chapter argues that models that focus exclusively on the sentence or discourse levels of linguistic organisation and/or ignore cross-linguistic evidence are misleading. My conclusion stresses the crucial role of multifunctionality during language acquisition and the necessary inclusion of this fundamental property of human language for an adequate account of the developmental process in a cross-linguistic perspective.

Some specific questions are addressed to specialists, but my intention is also to provide a wider audience with an updated introduction to cross-linguistic functional approaches to language acquisition. Although developmental psycholinguistics has considerably expanded during the twentieth century, resulting in a striking proliferation of theories, of methodologies, and of results, this field is now in serious

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-06510-8 - Children's Discourse: Person, Space and Time across Languages

Maya Hickmann

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

need of fresh attempts to relate sentence and discourse determinants of acquisition across languages. Given this ambition, some deliberate choices were obviously necessary. Although the book is centrally concerned with the relation among forms and functions in language acquisition, not all facets of this relation are discussed. Some aspects of linguistic structure are only touched upon, even though they clearly have an impact on a number of linguistic phenomena investigated here. In addition, I purposefully focus on only one set of functional determinants, namely pragmatic principles governing information flow within cohesive discourse. I give reasons throughout to justify these choices, pointing out areas that deserve more research.

The empirical contribution of this book stems from a large project I began as a member of the Max-Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen (1981–92). The collaboration of Jürgen Weissenborn (University of Potsdam) allowed the constitution of the German corpus. The Chinese corpus resulted from an exchange programme between Nijmegen and Peking, set up through the friendly and efficient labour of James Liang (University of Leiden) and the generous collaboration of Professors Xu and Ye (University of Peking). Subsequent financial support was provided by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (Schwerpunkt 'Spracherwerb' 1988–94), by the Max-Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (1994–5), and by an exchange programme (1995–97) jointly financed by the Max-Planck Gesellschaft in Germany and the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in France. This support allowed the project to expand considerably into several domains and theoretical directions, as well as to develop a rigorous coding method suited to large cross-linguistic databases, which is now used by many colleagues in several countries.

I have had three main collaborators throughout: James Liang, to whom I owe many insights about Chinese; Françoise Roland, who made invaluable contributions to the analyses; and Henriëtte Hendriks, who co-ordinated all phases of the research with me. Several assistants joined us for shorter periods of time, contributing to the lively and endless work of coding: Justine Cassell, Maghiel van Crevel, Xu Ding, Lydia Humblot, Birgit Kaiser, Li Ping, Brigitte Löbach, Ester Messing, and Caroline Rek. I am also indebted to Madeleine Léveillé for her patient and devoted technical help with programming and formatting. Much of my inspiration came from stimulating discussions with members of the Max-Planck Institute throughout the years: Melissa Bowerman, Werner Deutsch, Wolfgang Klein, Clive Perdue, and Jürgen Weissenborn. I am indebted to Ruth Berman and Dan Slobin for constant encouragement and readiness to listen. Especially warm thanks go to Wolfgang Klein for his continuous support throughout.

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Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-06510-8 - Children's Discourse: Person, Space and Time across Languages

Maya Hickmann

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Abbreviations and conventions

Whenever necessary, literal and free translations of examples are provided. Free translations are somewhat arbitrary with respect to categories not encoded in a given language (e.g. tense in Chinese). Whenever relevant, the following conventions are used in examples in addition to those explicitly glossed in the text (except in examples that are quoted from another source): (1) for number, gender, and case; (2) for word order; (3) for temporal-aspectual morphology; (4) additional conventions specific to Chinese.

- (1) SG singular
 - PL plural
 - FEM feminine
 - MASC masculine
 - NEU neuter
 - NOM nominative
 - ACC accusative
 - DAT dative
 - GEN genitive
- (2) SOV Subject-Object-Verb
 - SVO Subject-Verb-Object
 - SSVO left-dislocated subject with coreferential pronoun
- (3) **English**
 - PR present
 - PRPG present progressive
 - PRT preterite (past non-progressive)
 - PAPG past progressive
 - PRPERF present perfect
 - PAPF past perfective (pluperfect)
 - PG untensed progressive
- French**
 - PR *présent*
 - IMP *imparfait*

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978-0-521-06510-8 - Children's Discourse: Person, Space and Time across Languages

Maya Hickmann

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*List of abbreviations and conventions*PC *passé composé*PS *passé simple*PQP *plus-que-parfait***German**PR *Präsens*PTT *Präteritum*PFK *Perfekt*PQP *Plusquamperfektum*(4) **Chinese**

1 to 4 tones

3p third person pronoun

CL classifier, distinguished when necessary as SCL (specific classifier)
vs. GCL (general classifier)

IMP imperfective marker

POS possessive marker

PCL particles

Some Chinese particles are not translated (e.g. *le*, *ba3*, and *gei3* are simply indicated as LE, BA, and GEI).