How do young English-speaking children acquire verb-particle constructions?

Abstract. Phrasal verbs represent a typical feature of English. Construction-Grammar theories emphasized the status of phrasal verbs as constructions (Goldberg 1995, 2003). However, little or no studies have been carried out on verb-particle constructions in L1 acquisition. My research investigates the acquisition of phrasal verbs by young English-speaking children. This study explores the gradual development of verb-particle constructions in child language by examining longitudinal data from the spontaneous oral speech of two English-speaking little girls from CHILDES (MacWhinney 2000). Naima and Ella were respectively followed between ages 0;11 and 3;10 and between ages 1;00 and 3;06. My findings support the claim that input and interaction play a major role in the language acquisition process. By analyzing the emergence and usage of phrasal verbs by Naima and Ella, I will compare the top ten phrasal verb types used by the children and the adults. I will show the correlation between the most frequently used phrasal verbs in adult's speech and the earliest constructions acquired by the child. This work presents a wide-coverage investigation of the acquisition of phrasal verbs and their usage in child's speech. This study examines the linguistic factors and the acquisition in young children's discourse of an example of grammatical or configurational variation: the movement of the adverbial particle in transitive constructions. Recent works have shown that, in adult's language, numerous linguistic – syntactic, semantic, pragmatic – factors seem to influence the speaker's choice with respect to the order of the constituents, more particularly to particle placement (Gries 1999, 2003; Wasow 2002). Two alternatives are possible; the particle can precede or follow the direct object. This work explores particle placement in young children's discourse. I will examine longitudinal data from the spontaneous speech of Naima and Ella. I will investigate and compare the usage and distribution of both configurations – continuous [V-Prt-O] and discontinuous [V-O-Prt] – in adult's and child's language to see if the child reproduces the same linguistic environment than that to which he is exposed. To determine whether the use of the particle in child's language varies according to the same linguistic features as in adult's language, I will conduct a multifactorial analysis of several linguistic variables (Gries 2003; Diessel & Tomasello 2005). Finally, I will show that contrary to adults who most frequently use the continuous configuration, young children paradoxically overuse the discontinuous configuration – although far more complex – because of the stranded-particle stage in the acquisition of phrasal verbs.

Selective bibliography

Diessel, H. and Tomasello, M. (2005). Particle placement in early child language: a multifactorial analysis. *Corpus Linguistics and Linguistic Theory*, *1*(1), 89-112.

Forrester, M. (2002). Appropriating cultural conceptions of childhood: Participation in conversation. *Childhood*, *9*, 255-278.

Goldberg, A. E. (1995). *Constructions: A construction grammar approach to argument structure*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Goldberg, A. E. (2003). Constructions: A new theoretical approach to language. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 7*(5), 219-224.

Gries, Stefan Th. (1999). Particle placement: A cognitive and functional approach. *Cognitive Linguistics*, *10*, 105-145.

Gries, Stefan Th. (2003). *Multifactorial Analysis in Corpus Linguistics. A Study of Particle Placement*. New York, NY: Continuum.

MacWhinney, Brian. (2000). *The CHILDES Project. Tools for Analyzing Talk, vol. 2, The Database*. 3rd ed. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Wasow, Thomas. (2002). *Postverbal Behavior*. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.

Name and affiliation : Emilie RIGUEL, Ph.D. student, University La Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3
Email address :emilieriguel@live.fr
Oral presentation, session 3. Usage-based approaches to language acquisition