Children's discourse: Person, space and time across languages.

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This monograph explores the universality and variability of the language acquisition processes. Arguing that universal learning mechanisms on the one hand, or innate capacities within specific domains on the other, are incomplete as theoretical explanations, this book addresses two major questions regarding first language acquisition: What structural and functional factors determine the acquisition process? What are the universal and language-specific aspects of this process?" (2003: 1).

These questions are explored through cross-linguistic analysis of children's narratives elicited from two picture sequences in an experimental study. The study involves four languages (Chinese, English, French and German) and 200 subjects across a wide age span; 4- to 10-year old children and adults. Specifically, it focuses on the acquisition of referent introductions, spatial-semantics and time-aspectual markings.

The underlying concern of this book is to account for the effect that the multifunctionality of linguistic devices has on first language development. Noting that linguistic devices simultaneously contribute to syntactic-semantic and discourse-pragmatic levels, the author suggests that this type of multifunctionality is a fundamental problem for children to be solved as part of their language acquisition. Accordingly, the author argues that when examining the acquisitional process, studies must attend to both the sentence and the discourse level of language.

Inspired by theoretical perspectives originating in Vygotskian developmental psychology, and Whorf's linguistic relativity hypothesis, the study endorses a functionalist

framework. Nonetheless, the book is designed to be accessible to researchers of different theoretical paradigms, and it combines a critical overview of previous research in linguistics and developmental psycholinguistics (part 1) with a crosslinguistic study of children's narrative development (part 2).

Chapter 1 presents the overall organisation and introduces some general theoretical orientations of the study. Here, the author spells out some more specific developmental questions in the three domains of language to be examined.

Chapter 2 lays out different theoretical perspectives on first language acquisition. The emphasis here is on the issues debated in the light of contradictory views on the relation between language and cognition in language development, including the assumptions held by recently revived research on linguistic relativity (cf. Gumperz & Levinson, 1996).

Chapter 3 offers a concise overview of general typological dimensions in languages, specifically pointing to cross-linguistic invariants and variations in each of the three domains, that is, person, space and time.

The groundwork for the study is further laid out in Chapter 4 with an up-to-date survey of studies on children's narrative development, their acquisition of discourse coherence, as well as cohesion skills. The important issue explored here is how particular linguistic devices simultaneously contribute to two aspects of discourse organisation, indicating important interrelations between children's knowledge of cognitive schemata for stories and their linguistic realisation in discourse activity, all of which indicates the need to relate coherence to cohesion skills in language development.

Chapters 5 and 6 offer a review of previous research concerning children's acquisition of referent introductions, spatial and temporal-aspectual devices. Importantly, it presents studies that invoke universal cognitive determinants to account for similar developmental

patterns, and recent cross-linguistic studies demonstrating that language-specific factors affect the rate and course of development.

The methodological choice of the present study is thoroughly discussed in chapter 7, which also deals with matters of longitudinal versus cross-sectional experimental design, showing an unmistakable preference for the latter. It follows the tradition of studies of children's narrative development on the basis of picture sequences (cf. Berman & Slobin, 1994). Here, the author presents her basic methodological point, namely that research on acquisition of discourse organisation skills must be conducted in an experimental situation, where the listener cannot see the picture sequence, which forms the basis for the subjects' narrations. Thereby, the subjects have to rely on language *in vacuo*, as it were. The author maintains that, at large, these requirements have rarely been fulfilled in functional studies. In consequence, some prior studies have demonstrated children's precocious discourse-internal skills, whereas the author argues, that despite such early uses, there is evidence that children, in fact, do not master particular linguistic devices fully until rather late age.

The strength of the present method is that it allows for control of a number of variables that have implications for the abilities that may or may not be displayed by children. Variables include same discourse situations, minimal task and adult interventions, minimal reliance on extra-linguistic context. In effect, such an approach allows us to determine the timing of children's expository skills (discourse-internal uses of linguistic devices). However, the book does not discuss the social dynamics of an experimental set up for the study of children's narratives. Considering, that this is the central method of the study, this lack of reflection is somewhat notable. Although the author in the analysis of information dynamics goes beyond sentence boundaries, the role of prosody for marking information status (given–new principle) should have received some consideration (cf. Linell, 2005). What is not marked syntactically or on the discourse level, can, at times, be marked prosodically.

The analyses and results of the study are presented in Chapters 8 through 10. The empirical focus is on children's and adults' uses of referential expressions and clause structure for referent introduction and maintenance, situation types denoted by various predicates across languages and ways of grounding spatial information in narratives, the defective tense hypothesis and development of temporal anchoring in discourse.

Finally, chapter 11 seeks to answer the question: how developmental patterns observed across the languages are related across the three domains. Here, we learn that multiple factors influence the rhythm and path of acquisition, revealing that some aspects of development are universal while some others are clearly language specific. We find that children are sensitive to key typological properties of their languages from early age on in that they encode form-meaning relations in ways which are similar to how this is done by adult speakers of the same language rather than by children of the same age in other languages.

The overall patterns of developmental changes demonstrate that children's acquisition of discourse-internal functions of linguistic devices to organise information is a protracted process, probably stretching beyond ten years of age. This developmental progression is similar in all languages and it is attributed to universal cognitive factors, demonstrating children's late ability to regulate the information flow in extended discourse.

With regard to the general impact of cognitive factors on the patterns of development, the author holds a partially 'relativistic' view, pointing out that the cognitive complexity of linguistic devices is due to the special properties of the language being acquired. Further, even though universal cognitive processes are involved, they are constrained by language specific properties.

The orientation of this monograph stands out in the field of developmental research in that the focus is not limited to one determinant factor, instead, it combines multiple factors involved in later language development. The analyses provide evidence and new arguments

that the rhythm and path of the acquisition in the three domains is best explained in terms of an interplay between universal and language-specific factors.

One of the strengths of the book is that it brings together different theoretical approaches to first language acquisition and previous research in the relevant domains of child language. This offers the reader a nuanced picture with regard to the rhythm, path, and determinants in first language acquisition. The book generously provides examples both from previous research, typological distinctions of the language involved, and the data from the study, including full-length narratives. It provides thought-provoking and interesting reading for anyone working in the area of child language. Thanks to the extensive overview which is offered in part one, it is even be accessible for novices in the field.

I did encounter some problems in reading this book, mostly related to the organisation and disposition of the chapters, resulting in overlapping information and occasionally, in outright tedious reading. Although the first part lays the groundwork for the study in the second part of the book, the balance between the two parts is not optimal. One of such examples can be seen in the presentation of typological properties of languages, which appears under several headings in chapters 3, 7 and chapters chapters 8, 9, and 10 in connection with results in specific domains. We could easily do away with at least some of these sections.

In sum, this rich monograph achieves its aim to rise our awareness of the importance of rethinking and broadening the empirical scope in child language acquisition, clearly demonstrating how crosslinguistic analyses provide us with a more complete view of first language acquisition.

Berman, Ruth, & Slobin, Dan (eds.). 1994. *Different ways of relating events in narrative: a crosslinguistic developmental study*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Gumperz, John & Levinson, Stephen (eds.) (1996). *Rethinking linguistic relativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Linell, Per. (2005). *The written language bias in linguistics*. London: Routledge.