

Subject omissions in monolingual French- and monolingual English-speaking children: Evidence for parameter hierarchies and consequences for intervention

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French and English are languages in which subjects generally must be expressed. Based on Dryer (2013), Roberts (2019: 193) has recently pointed out that languages which do not allow omission of subject pronouns are significantly less widespread (11.5%) than languages which do. This fact can be interpreted as being a more marked option, i. e. distributional markedness in terms of Hoekstra (1990: 68).

Inter alia Roberts (2019: 193) proposes a stepwise granularity of argument omissions across languages, which is reflected in a parameter hierarchy. A parameter hierarchy includes languages which result from macro-parametric decisions as well as languages like French and English which are decided at the nano-parametric level. The hierarchy shows a markedness hierarchy, allowing more than a binary distinction in language variation as conventional parameters did. Assuming continuity (Pinker 1984: 6f.) and assuming that grammatical features are part of Universal Grammar, this null-argument taxonomy results from the interaction of a linguistic feature, in this case phi-features, and non-language-specific cognitive optimization strategies. The latter is leading the child from starting with the least marked language at the highest (macro-parametric) level, continuing downwards via meso- and micro-parametrical levels to the nano-parametrically specified languages French and English. In other words, French and English are long-route languages.

The long route to the target-like system of French and English is reflected in the study of the early acquisition process. Although researchers use different yardsticks for the evaluation of target-like (pronominal) subject realisation, observations of monolingual French and English children indicate late convergence to the target language (MLUw 3.5-4.49 for French, Jansen 2015: 258 and MLUw >2.5 for English, Valian 1990)¹. In addition to illegitimate (pronominal) subject omissions (*veux bains et mes clefs* (2;9) and *swim with her* (2;9)) that can intermittently occur at rates of 70% (Prévost 2009: 151), monolingual children produce postverbal subjects (*est tombé chienchien* (1;9) and *play rabbit* (1;11)) as well as elsewhere forms (*moi, je v[a] t'effrayer* (2;5) and *dolly take books* (1;11)), in particular during a time when (pronominal) subject omissions are independent of grammatical person.

We merged and (re-)analysed data from longitudinal studies and one experimental study (Hojati Hamedani 2023, Lutkewitz 2023, Schneegans 2022). The longitudinal observation of six monolingual French children Léonard, Madeleine, Théophile (Morgenstern & Parisse 2007), Max (De Cat & Plunkett 2002), Philippe (Suppes, Smith & Leveillé 1973), Grégoire (Champaud 1994) and two monolingual English children Naomi (Sachs 1983) and Nina (Suppes 1974) from the CHILDES database (Mac Whinney 2000) were compared regarding (pronominal) subject realisations and subject positioning using a common benchmark in

¹ Convergence to the adult norm is not standardized. Thus researchers have used different threshold percentages. Valian (1990) assumed that English children have acquired the languages necessity of (pronominal) subject realisation when children use them at 90% of all observed utterances. Jansen (2015) however uses 85% of children's (pronominal) subject realisations. It is therefore difficult to compare the data which come from different studies. In order to be able to compare monolingual children with different languages, we used the 90% criterion, originally suggested by Brown (1973: 258).

language acquisition – the mean length of utterance in words (MLUw). The elicited data of 26 monolingual French and 10 English monolingual peers reinforce the longitudinal findings, especially for null subjects in 3rd person contexts.

Differences of person-specific (pronominal) subjects are apparent from the beginning. While referential 3rd person (pronominal) subjects are produced early, probably since self-reference is initially carried out with 3rd person pronouns (Prévost 2009: 135), realisation of 1st person subject pronouns is delayed (Patuto 2012:355, Schneegans 2022: 58, Lutkewitz 2023:63). At the same time, when referential 3rd person (pronominal) subject omissions decrease, postverbal subjects decrease as well, but there still remain several cases of 1st person subject omissions. Interestingly, Schneegans (2022) also attested postverbal subjects in the English corpora, as found for French monolingual children.

Within the model of parameter hierarchies, the child data can be accounted for by the child's "proceeding" from a consistent null-subject language, like Spanish and Italian allowing referential null-subjects and postverbal subjects in any person-number combination, and decided at the meso-parametrical level, towards the target system. On this way, children pass through partial null-subject languages, like Finnish or Hebrew, which exhibit person- or tense-specific null-subjects through micro-parametrical settings. For example, null subjects in Hebrew are possible in those tenses (future, past) in which the verb is morphologically marked for person and in 1st and 2nd person only (Matushansky 1998: 60).

The article will highlight the way monolingual French- and English-speaking children acquire that their language is a semi-pro-drop or a non-null-subject language, delivering empirical evidence for a stepwise acquisition process directed downwards. Therefore, the markedness hierarchy by Roberts (2019) will be applied to the corpora briefly described above.

Research on multilingual children suggests that the rather long route to adult French and English can be shortened by the simultaneous acquisition of the less-marked consistent null-subject languages Italian and/or Spanish or the partial null-subject language German: The subject omission stage is overcome earlier in English by bilingual children as opposed to monolinguals (Liceras & Fernández Fuertes 2019, Sorace, Serratrice & Paoli 2004) and by bilingual and trilingual children, acquiring French simultaneously or sequentially with a consistent or a partial null-subject language, already with an MLUw of 2.5 (Jansen 2015, Arnaus Gil, Stahnke & Müller 2021). These results will be discussed in the light of intervention for instructed 2L1/L2-language learning contexts, emphasising the potential of any kind of multilingualism and paving the path for a new language acquisition model as proposed by Müller (submitted).

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