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► To cite this version:

Pascale Leclercq, Ewa Lenart. Overspecification in advanced learner discourse in L2 French: a study of nominal, temporal and modal reference.. EUROSLA 24, Université de York, York, 3-6 Septembre 2014, 2014, York, United Kingdom. 2014. hal-03185378

HAL Id: hal-03185378

<https://hal.science/hal-03185378>

Submitted on 30 Mar 2021

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Overspecification in advanced learner discourse in L2 French and English: a study of nominal, temporal and modal reference



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Introduction

Though redundancy in native spoken language is a common phenomenon, often considered as a way to facilitate communication (Arts *et al.* 2011, Engelhardt *et al.* 2011), many studies point to the fact that **L2 learners tend to be overspecific compared to native speakers**, especially as regards the use of nominal reference (Williams 1988; Ahrenholz 2005; Chini 2005; Hendriks 2003; Yusun Kang 2004.)

We argue that the phenomenon of overspecification is not restricted to the nominal domain of reference, but that it is also found in temporo-aspectual marking, which could imply that learners make their choice of perspective on events more explicit than native speakers do. We wanted to check whether more explicit perspective-taking also implied overspecification in the use of modal markers.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Is overspecification a common referential strategy for adult L2 learners, irrespective of their source language and their proficiency level?

- To what extent do adult L2 learners overspecify nominal reference to entities ?
- To what extent do they overspecify temporal & aspectual reference in their narratives?
- To what extent are their choices of perspective made more explicit than those of native speakers?

Overspecification in the three referential domains

NOMINAL REFERENCE

- Full NPs (le garçon) or anaphoric NPs (il/lui...)

→ **Overspecification when a full NP is used where a pronoun would be acceptable.**

TEMPORAL REFERENCE

- Lexical aspect (state, activity, achievement, accomplishment)
- Tense (present, past) and aspect (unmarked, perfective and imperfective) markers
- Link words indicating sequentiality (et puis), simultaneity (pendant), marking a boundary (à ce moment-là)...

→ **Overspecification when tense and aspect markers (past/perfective/imperfective) are used where native speakers rely on the properties of the predicates (present tense, lexical aspect) together or not with temporal link words**

PERSPECTIVE TAKING

- Use of aspect (and related informational structure in discourse: presentation of events in foreground / background utterances)
- Use of modality

→ **Overspecification when use of modality + aspect.**

Methodology

CHOICE OF LANGUAGES

Our choice of languages was determined by the properties of their nominal reference system (Polish doesn't use articles while the three other languages do) and of their temporo-aspectual system (Polish has obligatory aspectual marking through a system of verbal prefixes, English and French mark perfective and imperfective aspect, while German doesn't use aspectual distinctions in oral narratives).

DATA COLLECTION

- Oral film retelling task (Reksio cartoon featuring two protagonists (the dog and a little boy) who go ice-skating on a frozen lake.
- Task: « Watch the movie and tell the interviewer what happened ».
- Data collection procedure from APN Project (Watorek 2004).
- Transcribed narratives are coded for:
 - Nominal reference
 - Temporal reference
 - Choice of perspective

Narrative example in French L1

*alors c'est un petit chien qui sort de sa niche # le matin # enfin ça semble être le matin puisqu' il se réveille donc il sort de sa niche il s'étire et il glisse il glisse sur une # une flaque d'eau # gelée donc il essaie de faire quelques pas puis il trébuche ## plusieurs fois il essaie d'aller se promener mais il tombe il décide de # revenir vers la maison (...)
donc il # se met à japper et # son maître # un enfant # sort # de la maison.*

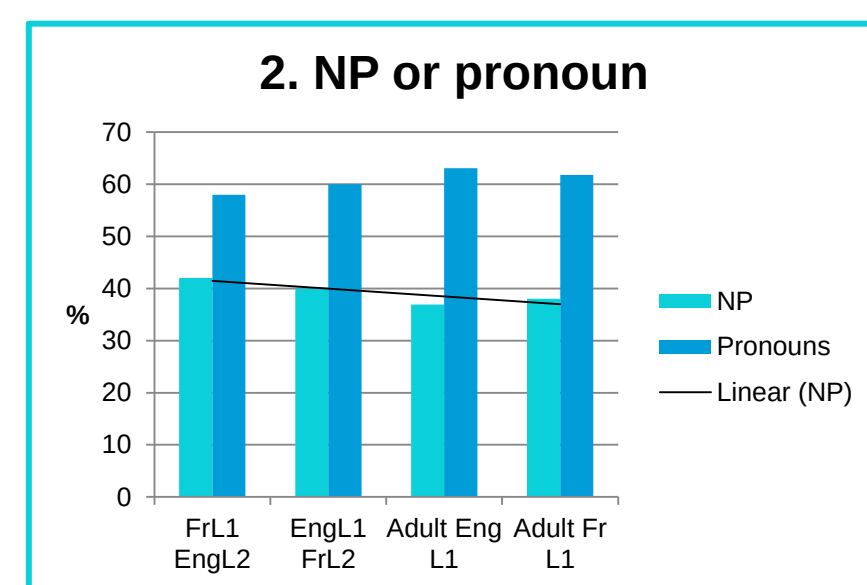
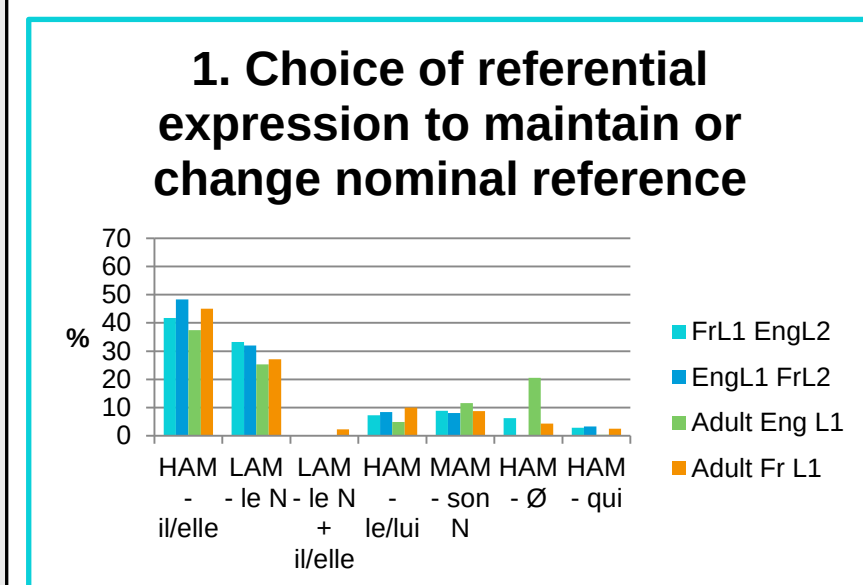


Narrative example in English L1

It is a story about a dog and he wakes up one morning and ehm Ø comes out of his kennel and there has been ehm ice so frost cause the ground is very icy. And and ehm he slides on the ice And Ø falls over and ehm Ø goes and Ø calls his owner who comes out to see (...)

ANALYSIS 1: NOMINAL REFERENCE

- **Participants:** 10 English, 10 French native speakers
10 French advanced learners of English, 10 English advanced learners of French
- **Ex 1:** *he [the boy] puts salt on the ice so that **the dog** can walk again and then **the dog** complains that **he** is cold. (FrL1 EngL2)*



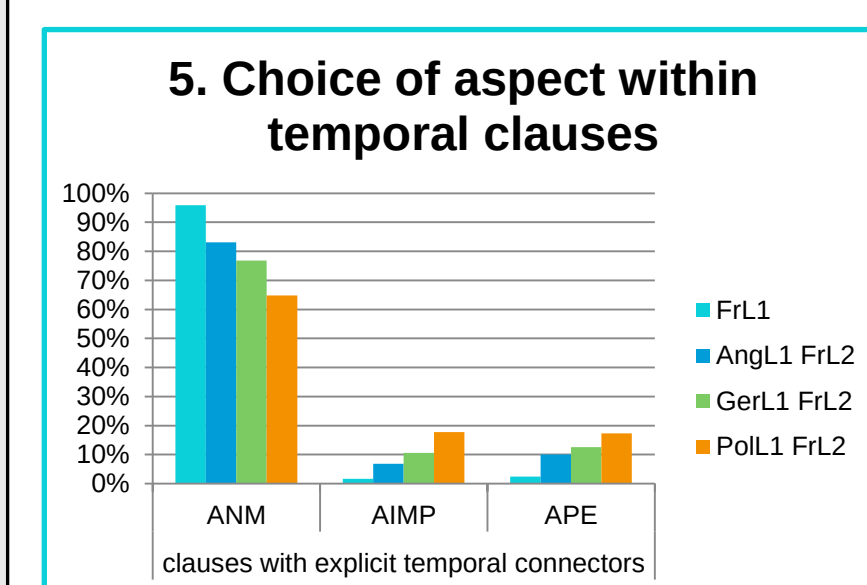
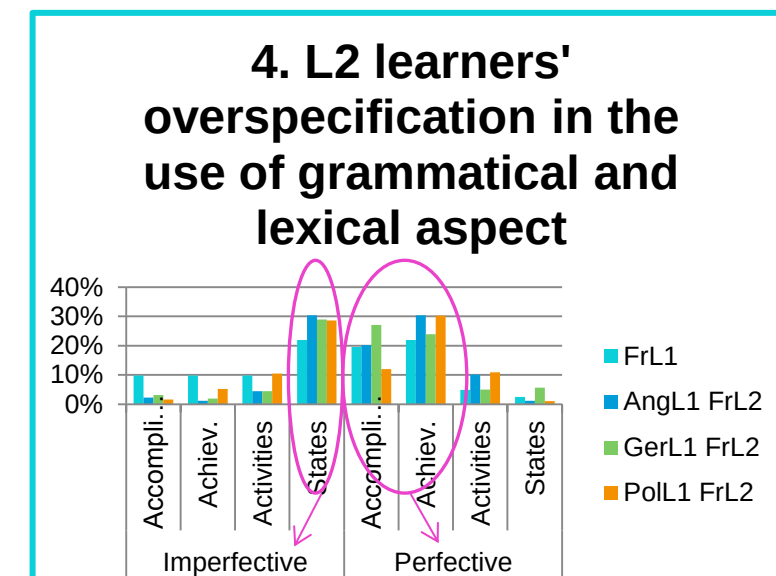
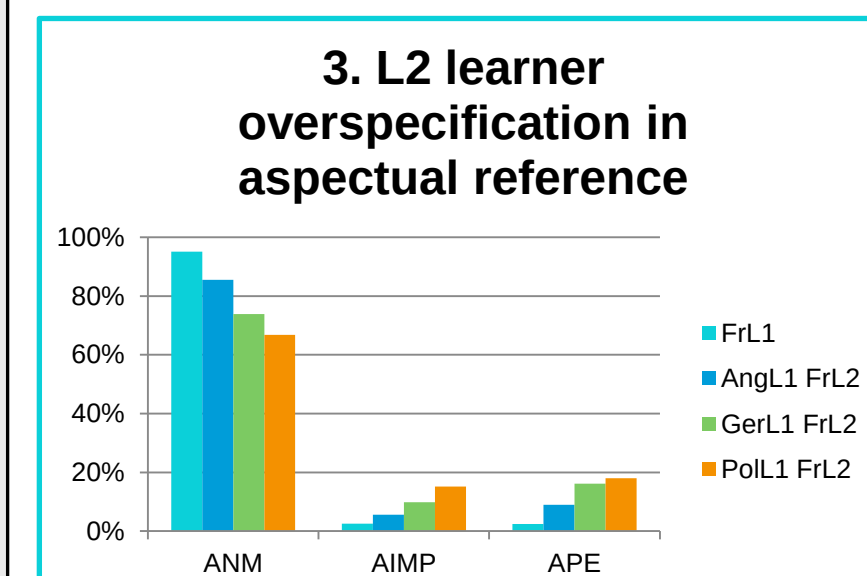
LAM = low accessibility marker (definite NP: referent not easily retrievable from context)
MAM = middle accessibility marker (possessive NP)
HAM = high accessibility marker (pronouns: referent easily retrievable from context)
See Ariel (1988, 2004).

- **Results**
- Tendency to overspecification among adult advanced and intermediate L2 learners, who favour LAM (definite NPs) even where pronouns could be envisaged (ie when the referent is easily accessible).
- Choice of anaphoric forms still influenced by L1 properties at advanced level:
 - EngL1 FrL2 start using object pronouns and relative pronouns only at advanced level.
 - Zero anaphora is seldom used by FrL1 EngL2, even at advanced level.

See Leclercq 2013, Leclercq and Lenart 2013a, Lenart and Leclercq 2013b for more detail.

ANALYSIS 2: TEMPORAL REFERENCE

- **Participants:** 10 French native speakers (control group), 10 English, 10 German, 12 Polish advanced learners of French.
- **Ex 1:** *Et après il a donné le patin à son copain et mais tout d'un coup le garçon est # le la glace s'est brisée et le garçon est tombé dans l'eau. (PolL1FrL2)*
- **Ex 2:** *Donc maintenant c'était au chien mais cette échelle était pas assez long même s'il avait peur. (AilL1FrL2)*



ANM= unmarked aspect
AIMP= imperfective aspect,
APE= perfective aspect

Clauses with explicit temporal connectors:
- Coordinate clauses marking sequentiality (et puis, ensuite...), simultaneity (pendant ce temps), or anteriority (avant).
- Subordinate clauses marking simultaneity (pendant que), anteriority (avant que), but also causal (parce que) or aim (pour que) relations.

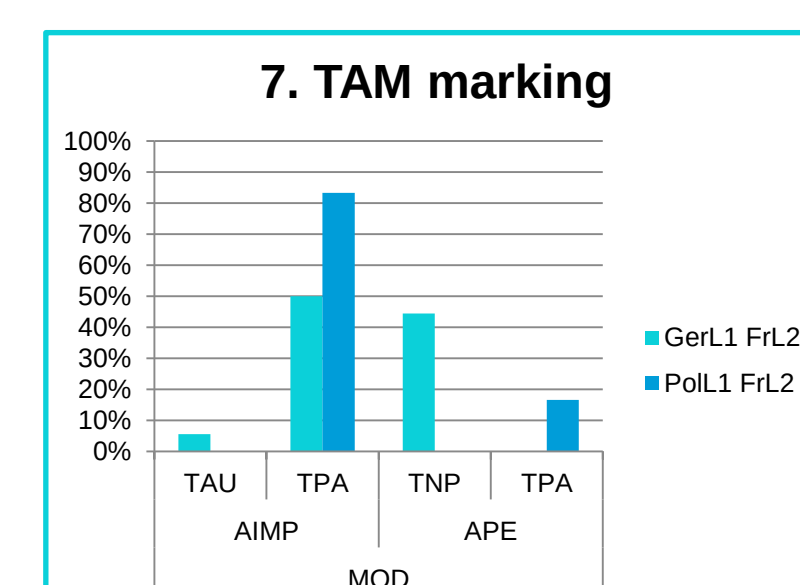
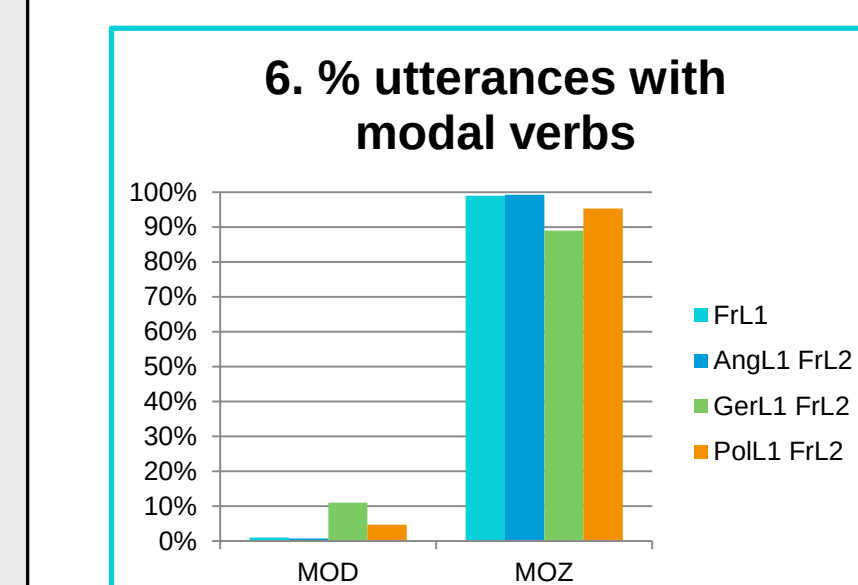
Results

Native speakers : lexical aspect + unmarked aspect (+ temporal connectors)
Learners : lexical aspect + perfective/imperfective (+ temporal connectors)

The overexplicitation of temporal links seems a strategy shared by the three groups of advanced learners, in spite of diverse typological properties in their source languages : native speakers mostly rely on unmarked aspect (= the properties of predicates) to advance the narrative, whereas learners overuse temporo-aspectual marks, whether morphological or syntactic.
See Leclercq and Lenart (in press) for more detail.

ANALYSIS 3: PERSPECTIVE TAKING

- **Participants:** 10 French native speakers (control group)
10 English, 10 German, 12 Polish advanced learners of French.
- **Ex 1:** *Il essaye de sonner. (PolL1FrL2)*
- **Ex 2:** *Il a pu aider le garçon avec l'écharpe. (GerL1FrL2)*



TAU = gerund or infinitive (non-finite form)
TPA = past tense
TNP = non-past tense (usually present tense in our database).
AIMP= imperfective aspect,
APE= perfective aspect
MOD = predicate with a modal verb
MOZ = predicate without a modal verb
TAM = tense, aspect, modality

- **Results**
- French speakers and English learners of French almost never use modal verbs within this database.
- German and Polish learners of French do use them, especially in combination with imperfective and perfective aspect, whether in the present or past tense. They combine two perspective markers (modality and aspect) and overspecify their choice of perspective. **Surprising since German and Polish have opposed aspectual properties.**
- **Crosslinguistic influences > general learner strategy.**

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Conclusions

The phenomenon of overspecification is not restricted to the nominal domain of reference (see Analysis 1), but it is also found in temporo-aspectual marking. In Analysis 2, we observed a tendency for learners of advanced proficiency level to use explicit tense and aspect markers sometimes also combined with temporal connectors where native speakers mostly rely on the semantic properties of predicates. (ex. 1).

- (1) Et après il a **donné** le patin à son copain et mais tout d'un coup la glace **s'est brisée** et le garçon **est tombé** dans l'eau. (PolL1FrL2)

In other words, learners make their choice of perspective on events more explicit than native speakers do. We wanted to check whether more explicit perspective-taking also implied overspecification in the use of modal markers (ex. 2, 3).

- (2) Il **essaie de sonner**. (PolL1FrL2)
(3) Il **a pu** aider le garçon avec l'écharpe. (GerL1FrL2)

Our analysis shows that this is the case for German and Polish, but not for English learners of French. On the whole, our results show overspecification in temporal and nominal reference as a cognitive strategy deployed by all learners to make sure their interlocutor interprets their message correctly. The domain of modal reference seems to be more sensitive to source language properties.