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## CHAPTER 11

### **The acquisition of referring expressions: from formal factors to communicative experience**

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This last chapter undertakes a general discussion of the results presented in Chapters 2 to 10. After recalling the overall distribution of referring expressions in the data of toddlers (age 1;7 to 2;6) and older children (age 3;6 to 7;5), we review the impact of formal factors (syntactic functions, lexicon, constructions), discourse-pragmatic factors (the referent type and its status in the discourse) and socio-discursive and dialogical factors (activity, speech genre, social and interactional setting and dialogue) on the use of referring expressions. More than each factor taken separately, their interaction accounted for the children's and the adult's uses of these expressions. Moreover, both the child and adult uses were strongly determined by the socio-discursive and dialogical context. These results thus appear to offer a consistent set of arguments in favor of a dialogical account of the process whereby children acquire and use referring expressions, one that should not only consider forms and cognitive development but also the way children experience forms in various meaningful and dialogical contexts.

**Keywords:** referring expressions, dialogical approach, discourse-pragmatic factors, syntactic function, activity, speech genre, social and interactional settings, dialogue, nouns, pronouns.

## 1 Introduction

The main purpose of this book was to describe the repertoire and uses of referring expressions by French-speaking children in naturally occurring dialogues, in line with previous studies on various languages, including French (for a review see Allen, Hughes, & Skarabela, 2015). Taking an interactionist (Bronckart, 1996; Bruner, 1983; Vygotsky, 1934/1962) and dialogical perspective (Bakhtin, 1979/1986; François, 1984; 1993), we aimed to explore the socio-discursive and dialogical factors that account for children's referential skills.

From this viewpoint<sup>1</sup>, language development involves an ever-growing communicative experience and social acculturation to various uses of language. In other words, the process of language acquisition has to be seen as evolving from socially-situated interactions and dialogically determined uses to the local acquisition of forms and structures. In this sense, our approach is akin to emergentist approaches (MacWhinney & O'Grady, 2015), the usage-based perspective (Lieven, 2014, 2016; Tomasello, 2003), and other interactionist and functionalist views (Budwig, 1995; Clark, 2015; Nelson, 2007, *inter alia*). This theoretical stance involves a multidimensional approach that is able to take into account the interaction between the formal (and statistical) aspects of the acquisition of grammatical morphemes, the referential dimension (in other words, the discourse-pragmatic dimension), and the socio-discursive, interactional and dialogical dimensions.

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<sup>1</sup> For a presentation of this theoretical framework, see Salazar Orvig, de Weck, Hassan & Rialland (Chapter 1, this volume).

This chapter brings together the results of the studies reported in the book. Building on these results and the discussions in Chapters 2 to 10, it is designed to be read as the unfolding of an argument in favor of a proposal that takes into account the way children experience forms and constructions in meaningful contexts. After summarizing the results on the overall distribution of referring expressions (Section 2), we discuss the impact of the various factors studied and their interactions. We then address the ways in which formal and discourse-pragmatic factors (Section 3), and communicative experience (Section 4) affect the use of referring expressions.

## **2 Overall distribution of referring expressions**

The various studies reported in this book concerned two groups of children, toddlers (ages 1;7 to 2;6 years) and “older children” (pre-school and school aged children, ages 3;6 to 7;5 years), including typically developing children (TD) and children with developmental language disorders (DLD) and adults in various settings. Bearing in mind that we focused on periods of grammatical emergence and development, one of the most relevant issues was children’s gradual mastery of pronouns (and determiners, although less so), including whether, and to what extent, it is possible to count fillers as referring expressions. The present section draws a panoramic picture of the use of referring expressions, by toddlers and older children as compared to adults when referring to entities (Lyons, 1977) and to discourse participants

(Benveniste, 1966)<sup>2</sup>. We focus on the use of nouns, personal pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, dislocation, null forms and fillers.

*Nouns*, which are the earliest referring expressions used, seem to evolve in a complex way. While nouns were the predominant category for the toddlers<sup>3</sup>, they were negatively correlated with MLU. The opposite trend was observed in the older children<sup>4</sup> (both for TD and DLD children): the proportion of nouns increased with age. While the toddlers' use can be easily explained by the increase in pronouns, the opposite trend for older children is intriguing. We will come back to this characteristic in Section 4. When compared to adult uses<sup>5</sup>, those of toddlers showed no significant differences, whereas older children tended to exhibit a higher proportion of nouns than their mothers.

The uses of *personal pronouns* differed across the age groups. Toddlers' proportions of clitic and strong pronouns (when referring to entities or participants) rose with MLU. Older children produced three times as many pronouns for entities than toddlers, but there was little variation due to age (from age 4 to 7). As expected (Salazar Orvig & de Weck, 2013), children with DLD used fewer and a narrower range of pronouns, but they used more than toddlers did. The results for the adults also painted a complex picture. Adults used more pronouns than the children with whom they were interacting. But for toddlers, the adults' proportion of pronouns did not vary with the children's MLU. Moreover, this proportion was substantially lower than that of mothers interacting with older children.

Concerning *demonstrative pronouns*, we observed a clear difference between toddlers and older children, with the former using more demonstrative pronouns, both strong and clitic, than the latter. But there was no difference

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<sup>2</sup> Recall that only referential uses were considered in this book. Non-referential uses, such as naming, attributive uses of nouns, and expletive pronouns, were excluded from the analysis.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapters 3 (da Silva-Genest, Marcos, Salazar Orvig, Caët & Heurdier, this volume) and 7 (Marcos, Salazar Orvig, de Silva-Genest & Heurdier, this volume).

<sup>4</sup> See Chapters 4 (Rezzonico, Vinel, de Weck, Hassan & Salagnac, this volume) and 5 (Rezzonico, Bernasconi, de Weck, da Silva-Genest & Jullien, this volume).

<sup>5</sup> See Chapters 7 and 8 (Hassan, de Weck, Rezzonico, Salazar Orvig & Vinel, this volume).

between TDs and DLDs. Adult use of demonstrative pronouns did not differ from that of the children.

*Dislocations*<sup>6</sup> combine a strong form (a noun or a demonstrative or personal pronoun) and a resumptive pronoun (a clitic personal or demonstrative pronoun). They correspond both to a productive syntactic construction (the same lexical or grammatical forms are used by themselves or in dislocations) and to a paradigmatic choice, in contrast with the other, simple referring expressions (De Cat, 2007; Klein, 2019). They are typical of both oral French and child language. The results for the toddlers showed that they used slightly more dislocations than did the adults, and also more than the older children did. Among the latter, we observed little variability due to age or linguistic development. On the contrary, the adults addressing older children presented more dislocations than the children did.

Because French is a non null-subject language, the issue of *null forms*<sup>7</sup> in children's discourse is critical to the development of pronominal paradigms, and more specifically to personal pronouns in the subject or object function (see Section 3). The toddlers produced at least three to four times as many null forms as the older children. The older children exhibited a strong decrease in null forms between the ages of 4 and 7 years, while the children with DLD had a higher proportion of null forms than did the TD children. However, there was considerable variability in each group, with some children producing few or no null forms, and others, many null forms. Mothers of TD children as well as mothers of children with DLD produced few null forms, which were mostly prompts.

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<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 6 (Klein, Jullien & Fox, this volume) for toddlers, Chapters 4 and 5 for older children, and 6 and 8 for adults.

<sup>7</sup> In most of the chapters, null forms corresponded to subject or object omissions, and to non-verbalized referents. See Chapter 2 (Yamaguchi, Salazar Orvig, Le Mené, Caët & Rialland, this volume) and Chapter 3 for toddlers, Chapter 4 for older TD children, Chapter 5 for DLD children, and Chapter 9 for adults. For adults, prompts and zero anaphora were also included.

*Fillers* have often been virtually disregarded in studies on referring expressions. One of the goals of our research program was to identify and assess the importance of this transitional phenomenon in the paradigm of referring expressions. In order to grasp the gradual construction of morphological paradigms, fillers<sup>8</sup> were investigated in the prenominal and preverbal positions alike. The use of fillers proved to be a pervasive phenomenon, reaching a third of the prenominal position and almost a fourth of the preverbal position. In addition, the proportion of filler syllables was higher in the prenominal position (and the determiner-omission rate in front of nouns was lower) than in the preverbal position. This suggests emergent differentiation between the prenominal and preverbal positions. Also, the form of filler syllables, and in particular the realization of the consonants in them follows specific patterns. Indeed, a comparison of consonant realization in filler syllables and in lexical words, pointed out differences in terms of age of emergence and phonological nature. The transitional status of fillers showed up in the underspecified phonological nature of filler consonants and vowels.

Furthermore, the corpus analysis showed that the use of fillers did not vary significantly with MLU. For all toddlers, fillers alternated with both null forms and adult-like forms. More specifically, we can consider our group of toddlers to be in the midst of the transition from a proto-morphological stage to a morphological stage.

### **3 The interaction of formal and discourse-pragmatic factors**

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<sup>8</sup> Only Chapter 2 investigated both positions. Chapter 3 dealt only with the preverbal position.

So far, we have showed that the distribution of the various referring expressions was unevenly affected by age and linguistic development. However, this overall picture does not reflect the impact of any other factors. Let us now examine the way in which the use of referring expressions was impacted by formal (Section 3.1) and discourse-pragmatic factors (Section 3.2), considered separately; Section 3.3 addresses their interaction.

### *3.1 Formal factors*

The impact of three kinds of formal factors was investigated in this book: syntactic function (mainly the subject function), verb frames, and distributional features. In the toddler corpus (see Chapters 2 and 3), clitic pronouns occurred almost exclusively in the subject function but they were not the most prevalent form in this position. We also found null forms and fillers. Because in French, the presence of an overt subject<sup>9</sup> is mandatory, null forms in the subject position are considered, together with fillers, as corresponding to a transitional step in the acquisition of both the subject function and pronouns. Consistent with their linguistic-development stage, the toddlers used few object clitic pronouns. Nouns, strong demonstrative pronouns and strong personal pronouns occurred more often in complement functions and in verbless utterances. However, not all strong forms were absent from the subject position: the children used dislocations preferentially in the subject function (see Chapter 6).

We saw in Section 2 that typically developing older children (see Chapters 4 and 5) produced a higher proportion of third-person pronouns than toddlers

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<sup>9</sup> Clitic pronouns are considered here as an overt expression of the subject. The debate on their status as either inflectional morphemes (Culbertson & Legendre, 2008) or true arguments (De Cat, 2005) was not addressed in this book.

and children with DLD. These pronouns accounted for the great majority of subjects. However, this association could also be age-related, with older children over 87 months presenting fewer pronouns in the subject function. This result suggests a U-shaped curve, with older children integrating the use of other referring expressions in the subject position. Moreover, nouns tended to be used more often for other functions, mostly as objects. Null forms were few in number and were mostly used in functions other than subject or object. But children with DLD, who produced fewer pronouns, used significantly more null subjects than TD children did.

The above considerations regarding syntactic factors could imply that children possess abstract adult-like syntactic categories of subjects or objects. Yet, as usage-based approaches contend, this is far from being certain, particularly for toddlers (see Pine & Lieven, 1997, *inter alia*). It is highly likely that toddlers, who are in the midst of the syntactic development, build their utterances from recurrent constructions or frames rather than from fully productive syntactic combinations. Although this issue was beyond the scope of our research project, we obtained some partial indications about the weight of the recurrent association between referring expressions and frequent verbs and/or pre-built constructions.

Firstly, forms in preverbal position proved to be non-lexically specific. In fact, fluctuation among forms for the same lemma was as frequent as having the same type of prelexical form. Moreover, fillers were very often involved in these cases. The use of fillers thus exhibited some degree of productivity. Fluctuation had a mild, negative correlation with the frequency of adult forms and thus, with linguistic development. Secondly, the impact of constructions on the use of referring expressions in the complement position was investigated (see Chapter 6) for the three most frequent verb frames (*Mettre*+*X*, '*put*+*X*'; *C'est*+*X*, '*it's*+*X*' and *Vouloir*+*X*, '*Want*'+*X*') for both adults and children. Not all categories were equally distributed along the three

frames: whereas common nouns appeared in strong proportions in the three frames, strong personal pronouns were only used in *C'est+X*. The children employed a reduced subset of categories with *Mettre+X* and *Vouloir+X*. These two frames increased the proportion of nouns in the children's utterances, whereas nouns were less often used in *C'est+X*.

### 3.2 *Discourse-pragmatic factors*

The choice of referring expressions depends on various discourse-pragmatic factors, including the type of referent and its status in discourse. The distinction was made between reference to entities (mainly first-order entities, Lyons, 1977) and reference to discourse participants (first and second person, Benveniste, 1966). The latter, for instance, are always highly accessible in dialogue (Ariel, 1988), whereas the former cover the entire range from non-accessible to highly accessible referents. In reference to entities, accessibility results from the interaction of various factors such as joint attention, previous mention in the discourse, presence in the situation, shared knowledge, and absence of contrast (Allen et al., 2015; Allen, Skarabela & Hughes, 2008). In narrative discourse, referent's characteristics (animacy and primacy) also affect the use of referring expressions.

#### 3.2.1 *The influence of the referent's characteristics on the use of referring expressions*

For toddlers, we expected reference to entities and reference to discourse participants to paint two different pictures (see Chapters 2 and 3). When considering only the preverbal position, clitic pronouns appeared to be used

more often to encode entities than to encode participants. For referring to a participant, personal pronouns were used more often for the addressee (*tu*, ‘*you*’) or to refer jointly to the addressee and the self (*on*, ‘*we*’) than to the self alone. Null forms and fillers were more frequent when the children referred to themselves than when they referred to an entity. This sensitivity to the type of referent was found even when the data was narrowed down to verbs used with both types of referents. These results confirm that the development of the pronoun paradigm is strongly impacted by referential features (Budwig, 1995; Caët, 2012; Salazar Orvig & Morgenstern, 2015).

The influence of two other features of referents, animacy and primacy, was explored (see Chapter 4) as part of the study of narrative discourse in older children. Overall, the main character was preferentially encoded with third-person pronouns, whereas secondary inanimate referents were mostly referred to using nouns. Secondary animate characters were encoded with both pronouns and nouns, in the same proportions. The main trends in these contrasts are partly consistent with the results presented in previous studies (for a review, see Hickmann, Schimke & Colonna, 2015). This issue was not addressed for adult discourse. However, de Weck, Salazar Orvig, Rezzonico, Bernasconi & Vinel (2019) showed, in the same corpus, that mothers telling a story with their children produced more dislocations for both the main character and secondary inanimate referents, and fewer nouns and more personal pronouns for secondary animate characters than their children did.

### 3.2.2 *The impact of the referent’s status in the discourse*

One of the main pragmatic factors affecting the paradigmatic choice of referring expressions is known to be the status of the referent in the discourse (Ariel, 1988; Givon, 1995; Gundel, Hedberg & Zacharski, 1993; Halliday & Hassan, 1976). This issue was examined here from a cognitive perspective

(see Chapters 3 and 7) (attentional and discursive status of the referent) and from a textual perspective (see Chapters 4, 5, 8, 9 and 10) (position in the referential chain), particularly in narratives. Despite their differences<sup>10</sup>, the results of the first type of analysis are comparable to the second. For instance, the proportion of referents considered to be new or activated, but not yet mentioned, in the cognitive analysis was comparable to the proportion of referents considered as first mentions in the textual analysis; subsequent mentions could be interpreted as discourse-given.

Personal pronouns were used significantly less often, if at all, for *first mentions*, both in the toddlers' and the older children's discourse. The older children exhibited a higher proportion of nouns than did the toddlers in these cases. Among the older children, age interacted with first mentions to entail a higher proportion of nouns. This is consistent with studies showing that older children tend to come closer to canonical adult performance (Hickmann, 2003). However, the results for the adults suggest a more complex picture. When adults were talking with the toddlers, their discourse did not differ from their children's (see Chapter 7) whether in the proportion of nouns or in the use of personal pronouns for new referents. Moreover, mothers and teachers interacting with older children (see Chapter 8) had lower proportions of nouns and higher proportions of personal pronouns among their first mentions than their children did (see Chapters 4 and 5). We will return to this surprising result below in Section 4.3.

Furthermore, a prosodic analysis conducted on a subset of the toddler corpus (see Chapter 6), confirmed that adults tended to mark the first mention of a referent via intonation (a movement contour), in contrast to subsequent mentions (a plateau contour). Although the children's distribution on

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<sup>10</sup> One of the main differences between these two analyses concerns first mentions of a referent in narratives. Given that the participants are looking together at a picture book, all referents are under the attention of both interlocutor, there cannot be any brand-new referents. But at the same time, the narrative genre "requires" the first mention of a mutually known referent, as if it were brand new.

intonational movements did not yield significant results, there was no statistical difference between adults and children, whether for first or subsequent mentions.

Let us now turn to *given referents* (or *subsequent mentions*). The various chapters converge to show that given referents are conducive to the use of weak forms such as personal pronouns. For the older children, personal pronouns prevailed, but the children with DLD exhibited proportionally fewer personal pronouns than TD children. For the toddlers, personal pronouns alternated with null forms and fillers. This last result suggests thus that the acquisition of personal pronouns is grounded in the experience of using these earlier forms in high continuity contexts.

But strong forms, like nouns and strong demonstrative pronouns as well as dislocations were also observed in this context. Dislocations (see Chapter 6) were more strongly associated with previously mentioned referents than with nouns or demonstrative pronouns. This result is consistent with De Cat (2007), who found that children used them to mark the topic of the utterance. However, their frequency in subsequent mentions here was not higher than the frequency of all subsequent mentions in the corpus. This suggests that they do not play a specific role among subsequent mentions in short-term continuity, and therefore, meet other interactional or discursive needs (see Section 4).

As a whole, these findings are consistent with studies on various languages (for a review, see Allen et al., 2015) showing that children tend to use weak forms to refer to highly accessible referents and strong forms for less accessible ones. This can be explained in terms of early pragmatic skills, but, as we have seen above, it can also stem from other factors, such as syntactic constraints (Section 3.1) and the referent's characteristics (Section 3.2.1). Let us turn now to the interaction between these formal and referential factors.

### 3.3 *How do formal and discourse-pragmatic factors interact?*

According to a functionalist approach, formal and discourse-pragmatic factors are intertwined in adult's and children's uses of referring expressions. More specifically, the subject function is devoted to the expression of topic, agency, and given referents (Chafe, 1976; Hickmann et al., 2015; Lambrecht, 1994; *inter alia*), which favor weak forms. Moreover, according to Du Bois's Preferred Argument Structure (Du Bois, 2003), speakers tend to avoid producing more than one lexical form per clause (either in the subject for intransitive clauses, or in the object for transitive ones) and more than one new referent per clause. This means that grammatical subjects, and more specifically subjects of transitive clauses, are preferentially encoded by null or weak pronominal expressions. Clancy (1993, 2003) and Allen (Allen, 1998, 2000; Allen & Schröder, 2003) first pointed out the impact of this pattern for young children.

Our findings (see Chapters 2 to 6) confirmed this intertwining between syntactic function and discourse-pragmatic features. For the toddlers, the probability of using a strong form was higher when the referent occupied a non-subject function and was mentioned for the first time, either as brand new for nouns or activated for demonstrative pronouns. This was also the case when the expression occupied a non-subject function and referred to a participant, the addressee, or the self for strong personal pronouns. Reciprocally, the probability of finding a weak form was higher in the subject position and for given referents (or reference to participants). For the older TD children, syntactic function interacted with the referent's status and position in the referential chain. The probability of using nouns was higher when the expression had the object function, provided it was not the main character, whereas for third-person pronouns, only the characteristic of the

referent (main character) and its position in the referential chain proved to be relevant.

The interaction of discourse-pragmatic features with non-subject functions was also explored in the context of frequent *verb frames* in the toddlers' data. The impact of verb frame raises the crucial issue of finding out whether the "choice" of a referring expression is determined either by formal factors and frequency or by discourse-pragmatic ones. The results yielded a complex picture. In the children's discourse, nouns were preferred for first mentions in two of the frames (*Mettre+X*; *C'est+X*), but not for the third (*Vouloir+X*) which was more often linked to subsequent mentions. A qualitative analysis suggested that the strong association between nouns and subsequent mentions in *Vouloir+X* could also be accounted for in terms of interactional factors (see Section 4). Concerning clitic personal pronouns, the prevalence of subsequent mentions was confirmed for adults both in the overall non-subject functions and in the two frames in which they occurred (*Mettre+X* and *Vouloir+X*).

So far, we have seen that children exhibit referential strategies which overall are similar to those of the adults speaking with them<sup>11</sup>. However, one of the lingering questions in the literature is whether these uses reveal an actual discourse-pragmatic skill. When "choosing" a referring expression, to what extent do children attend to shared knowledge and to the referent's accessibility to the interlocutors? Experimental studies have shown that when confronted with complex contexts, young children fail to take into consideration these aspects, particularly the interlocutor's perspective (Kail & Hickmann, 1992; Matthews, Lieven, Theakston & Tomasello, 2006, *inter alia*). Several cognitive accounts such as the immature development of a theory of mind or executive functions (De Cat, 2015; Gundel & Johnson, 2013; Serratrice & De Cat, 2019) have been proposed to explain these partial skills. Moreover, these difficulties would not be visible in naturally occurring

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<sup>11</sup> See Chapters 6 and 7 for direct comparisons, and Chapter 8 for a study on adults talking with children.

situations for various reasons, for instance adult scaffolding and children's conformity with adult models. According to Hickmann, Schimke, and Colonna (2015), early uses do not reveal the actual competence of children:

(...) With respect to reference maintenance, although they associate light forms with highly accessible entities, they do so at first in rigid strategies reflecting general discourse principles whereby particular types of entities (animate, main), roles (agency, subjecthood), and discourse contexts (same-subject coreference) coalesce to favour the selection of light forms. In other contexts, however, only older children are able to mark distinct types of reference maintenance: referent reintroductions (in non-coreferential contexts), as well as other types of topic shifts (in coreferential contexts), patient topicalization, and (in some languages) topic promotion (Hickmann et al., 2015: 201).

Indeed, the strong association of forms, syntactic functions, and discourse-pragmatic features was confirmed by statistical analyses in our studies. However, mixed-model analyses and binary partition trees showed that the syntactic factor could not alone account for the “choice” of referring expressions. It always combined with the discourse-pragmatic factors without overriding them. Indeed, among the toddlers the former was secondary with respect to the latter, insofar as the set of personal pronouns among toddlers was almost exclusively made up of the subject pronouns, *il*, *elle*, and *on* (‘*he*’, ‘*she*’, ‘*we*’). But, for the older children, who possess a wider range of personal pronouns (object and dative functions), the subject function did not appear for the main character and this referential feature interacted only with the position in the referential chain; for the other referents, the subject function was a second-level factor, subordinate to the referent's characteristics (which was the main factor), and the position in the referential chain was at a lower level. For children with DLD, the syntactic function was subordinate to the

position in the referential chain. These statistical analyses therefore showed that even if the subject function was a relevant factor, it could not, alone, account for the choice of weak forms for previously mentioned referents. These results are consistent with a functional approach to language, in which the convergence of the subject function and accessibility stems from the pragmatic foundation of the argument structure (Ariel, 2008; Du Bois, 2003). But as we have seen, some observations point to the opposite associations, that is strong forms for subsequent mentions and/or in the subject position. Other functional aspects might play also an important role in the use of referring expressions.

#### **4 Communicative experience and dialogue**

According to a dialogical approach (Bakhtin, 1975/1982, 1979/1986; Vološinov, 1929/1986), but also, in a complementary perspective, based on the notion of language games (Wittgenstein, 1953, adopted by Nelson, 2007, and Tomasello, 1999), linguistic forms are not the starting point but the ending point of a process that goes top down from social interactions and speech genres, and defines the use and choice of units and structures. The main goal of the second part of the book (Chapters 7 to 10) was to understand the uses of referring expressions in terms of their anchoring in meaningful, culturally, and socially-determined contexts. It deals with various facets of the children's communicative experience<sup>12</sup> and the way in which it impacts

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<sup>12</sup> As presented in Chapter 1, the notion of communicative experience is not considered here only in terms of children's exposure to preferred forms (constructions, frames) in the input. The main point here is that children grasp and take up these forms in the context of meaningful, recurrent situations (such as formats, Bruner, 1983). Those uses (as well as adults' productions) must therefore be regarded

the acquisition and use of referring expressions. We will begin by discussing how discursive contexts affect the use of referring expressions, by considering two, tightly-embedded levels: a) the activity<sup>13</sup>, which is determined by its goals, and in turn determines structured actions and discourse forms (Bronckart, 1996; Levinson, 1979) (Section 4.1), and b) speech genre<sup>14</sup> (Bakhtin, 1979/1986), which determines the preferred forms of utterances (Section 4.2). We will then discuss the role of interactional, social, and dialogic factors. Firstly, the social (institutional or familiar) and interactional settings (Sections 4.3 and 4.4, respectively) involve different roles and social actions for the participants, which in turn shape the accomplishment of activities and speech genres. Secondly, dialogue is the arena where children meet adult discourse: while taking part in the co-construction of a joint discourse, they experience the recurrent forms of their language and the models that adults are offering them (Section 4.5).

#### *4.1 Activities and use of referring expressions*

Few studies specifically address the impact of the activity on the use of referring expressions (but see de Weck & Rosat, 2003; Salazar Orvig, Marcos, Heurdier & da Silva-Genest, 2018)<sup>15</sup>. Most studies have used a single activity, either narratives or an experimental task, and they have seldom considered comparing them as a relevant independent variable. Instead, they

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as part of the cultural and social contexts in which their frequency of occurrence is related to the actions participants accomplish and the way in which they interact.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion on the notion of activity see Chapter 9 (de Weck, Hassan, Heurdier, Klein & Salagnac).

<sup>14</sup> As discussed in Chapter 10 (Vinel, Salazar Orvig, de Weck, Nashawati & Rahmati) the literature presents a wide range of definition of “speech genre”, which can refer to registers, types of texts and interactions, or patterns of discourse. We adopted the Bakhtinian definition in this book.

<sup>15</sup> See Chapter 9 for a more general review of the impact of the activity on verbal productions.

have focused on the conditions for carrying out the activity (Kail & Hickmann, 1992; Kern & Raffara, 2012; de Weck & Jullien, 2013), such as the structure of the targeted narrative or the type of interlocutor. The studies on naturally occurring dialogues, mostly with toddlers, were usually conducted on a single activity. When the family dialogues included various activities, the activity was not considered as a relevant factor either.

The studies presented in this book covered various activities. The toddler data reflect the variety of activities they experience in everyday life<sup>16</sup>, ranging from daily routines to different ways of playing with toys and activities based on pictorial material. These activities have a number of common features: they are all mainly embedded in the “here and now” of the current interactions (with the exception of some occasional storytelling and conversations about past or future events), and they can be contrasted in term of their goals, the extent to which they involve object manipulation, and their main speech genres (see below Section 4.2). By contrast, the data for the older children (see Chapters 4, 5, 8, 9 and 10) correspond mainly to a joint storytelling activity. This activity involved a complex interaction between the “here and now” of handling the book, the gradual discovery of the book and the story, and the construction of an imaginary world. The storytelling activity was compared, for each dyad, to a symbolic play activity (see Chapter 9). The latter could combine the handling of miniature figures and objects, which entails a “here and now” discourse and the construction of an imaginary world, as in narratives.

The results for the toddlers showed that the activity affected the relative proportions of the different types of referring expressions. For instance, the proportion of nouns and null forms was greater in daily routines, and the proportion of strong demonstratives was greater in picture-based activities and when playing with toys. Third-person pronouns tended to be less frequent

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<sup>16</sup> For details on the activities see Appendix I “Corpora” and Chapters 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, and 10.

in daily routines than in the other two types of activities, and dislocations were used less when the children were playing with toys. These results can be related to the main actions that compose these activities. Picture-based activities such as lotto or puzzles, for example, involve a great amount of labelling utterances where a deictic demonstrative pronoun (the clitic in *c'est*, '*it is*' or a strong demonstrative like *ça*, '*that, this*') refers to the labelled entity. Among the dislocations, the proportion of demonstrative dislocations (*ça c'est*, '*that it is*') was also greater in this activity. Children used these demonstrative forms to bring new entities to the attention of their interlocutor. This use appeared as an opposite move to the use of null forms, which implied an achieved state of joint attention and which were in fact less frequent in picture-based activities. Daily routines triggered the greatest proportion of nouns for first mentions and the lowest proportion of third-person pronouns in subsequent mentions. This could correspond to the fact that, in situations such as snacking, various objects can be mentioned without being taken up in the referential chain.

For the older children also, the impact of the activity showed up for the main referring expressions. Two contrasted distributions were observed. In joint storytelling, the children used many more third-person pronouns than in symbolic play, although nouns were still the second most frequent type of referring expression. In symbolic play, the children tended to use more nouns, more dislocations, and more demonstrative pronouns. Moreover, these diverging proportions interacted with the referent's position in the referential chain. In storytelling, for instance, nouns were the prevailing category among first mentions, whereas this was not the case in symbolic play, where more demonstrative pronouns were used. Thus, for first mentions, we observed more demonstrative pronouns in symbolic play than in storytelling. Nouns in storytelling introduced characters that were to be described, whereas demonstrative pronouns in symbolic play drew attention to new referents without naming them (in the same way as toddlers did in similar activities).

The activity also had an influence on the use of referring expressions in subsequent mentions. In joint storytelling, the distribution was more canonical, with third-person pronouns accounting for the majority of occurrences, whereas in symbolic play the proportion of nouns was higher than the proportion of third-person pronouns. Demonstrative pronouns and dislocations in symbolic play were associated with object manipulation, labelling, and contrastive utterances (e.g., opposition, topic change, reiteration). A mixed-model analysis and a binary partition tree confirmed that the activity, the position in the referential chain, and age significantly affected the use of nouns: position was the main factor, and it interacted with activity for both first and subsequent mentions. Age was only relevant for first mentions in storytelling, with older children using nouns proportionally more often.

Let us now return to the substantial difference between toddlers and older children in noun uses observed in Section 2. This difference could be explained initially in terms of linguistic development. But the results of the comparisons across activities suggest that it could be related to the impact of the activity in which the children were involved. The toddlers used substantially more nouns than the older children did. But the older children tended to use fewer nouns in symbolic play than in storytelling. For the toddlers, the symbolic play involved playing with toys, where nouns were less frequent than in the other activities. Moreover, when storytelling was analyzed for these two age groups (see Chapter 10), age did not have an effect on noun use. The proportion of nouns, then, seems to be mainly determined by the activity.

Variations in the use of third-person pronouns can be accounted for in similar terms. Indeed, there seems to be an interaction between age and/or linguistic skills (the toddlers used substantially fewer personal pronouns than the older children did) and the activity. We observed significant activity-related

variations in third-person pronoun use, for both toddlers and older children (see Chapter 9). More specifically, in daily routines toddlers used significantly fewer third-person pronouns than in picture-based activities and in playing with toys. For the older children, storytelling entailed a significant higher use of these pronouns than symbolic play did. However, within the same storytelling activity, age was a determinant factor of the use of third-person clitic pronouns.

What about the adults? In Section 2, we noted that adults interacting with toddlers used about the same proportion of nouns as their children, and a significantly higher proportion of pronouns than their children, but this proportion did not vary with the children's linguistic development (see Chapter 7). On the other side, mothers interacting with older children produced fewer nouns and more pronouns than their children did (see Chapters 4, 5 and 8). Again, what might account for this apparent inconsistency is what participants were actually doing, the activity being carried out. Indeed, as we saw above, the toddler discourse was mostly embedded in the "here and now" of the current interaction, whereas the older children's discourse mainly corresponded to the construction of an imaginary world.

#### *4.2 The impact of speech genre*

Speech genre was considered at two complementary levels: the level of the discursive sequence (in this book, narration and "here and now" discourse) and the level of the utterance genre (in this book, state and action descriptions, labelling, explanations and arguments, and negotiation). Given that the speech genre was in turn determined by the activity in which it was embedded, the analyses (see Chapter 10) were conducted only on picture-

based activities (games and storytelling). One study compared the way in which discursive sequence and utterance genre affected the toddlers' use of referring expressions; a subsequent study considered only narrative sequences but compared the toddlers' data to the older children's ones. The results of both studies shed a complementary light on previous results.

The proportions of the different referring expressions were consistently influenced by speech genre. When considering, for toddlers, two kinds of discursive sequences, we saw that the effect of the discursive sequence was overridden by that of the utterance genre. Mixed-model analyses and binary partition trees indicated a consistent interaction between speech genre and position in the referential chain. For instance, utterance genre was the main factor determining the use of both third-person pronouns (more frequent in action descriptions) and nouns (more prevalent in state descriptions). Older children and toddlers were compared for narrative sequences only, which reduced potential variability. This brought out more complex interactions. Strong demonstrative pronouns were solely determined by utterance genre (labelling), thus confirming the association that was qualitatively observed in the study on the impact of the activity. Nouns and third-person pronouns were influenced by the interaction of the genre and the position in the referential chain. For instance, whereas third-person pronouns were excluded from the first mention position, when it came to the other positions, the proportion strongly depended on the utterance genre, with action descriptions being a determinant factor in narratives. In short, the proportion of third-person and demonstrative pronouns did not depend solely on age or linguistic development. Moreover, when we considered only narrative sequences, age did not impact the choice of demonstrative pronouns. In contrast, they were largely sensitive to speech genre and were very frequently used in labelling utterances.

In conclusion of Sections 4.1 and 4.2, our exploration of the impact of activity and genre suggested that culturally shared situational and discursive patterns that determine what speakers do when interacting with others mediated how children apprehend and use referring expressions. Moreover, the “choice” of an expression to encode a referent is determined not only by its accessibility but also by the moves speakers accomplish in meaningful situations. An interesting case in point on this issue is narration, insofar as it revealed preferences for certain referring expressions that were seldom used in other situational contexts.

### *4.3 The influence of social setting*

The social context is known to influence the way participants interact and communicate: it determines the roles of participants, their perspectives, and the purposes for which interlocutors are addressed. In turn, these parameters, which characterize the context, determine the uses and acquisition of forms and structures (Ervin-Tripp, 1994; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1995). In this section, we look more specifically at how social variables affect the ways in which a given activity, such as storytelling or symbolic play, is carried out. An adult’s discursive productions and how children will grasp them may vary with the place where the activity is performed, here, either at home or at school.

The comparison of joint storytelling at home and at school (see Chapters 8 and 9) showed that the overall distribution of referring expressions and the proportions of nouns and pronouns at the main positions in the referential chain varied according to the social setting, for both adults and children. Teachers produced more nouns, and fewer personal and demonstrative

pronouns than did the mothers. More specifically, the teachers used more nouns and fewer pronouns for subsequent mentions. In addition, even though both groups used interrogative pronouns to introduce or reintroduce referents, this behavior was more frequent in the teachers' discourse: they used fewer demonstrative pronouns and more interrogative ones to elicit the categorization of a referent by the children. Similar differences were found for the children: in the school context, they produced more nouns and fewer third-person pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, and null forms than at home. Nouns were also the preferred device for reactivations in school (but not at home). The youngest children in the school study also often used nouns for subsequent mentions, especially when their contribution involved a change of perspective.

These findings provide some insight into the way children build their referential strategies. We have seen that their experience with various activities provides them with diversified uses of referring expressions. In the same vein, it appears that in their socialization process, children experience various social contexts which differently shape their activities and therefore their uses of referring expressions. Through participation in these new contexts, they take up these new uses and therefore expand their referential skills. This process could also offer us some cues, beyond cognitive development, for understanding the overall differences between the younger and older children observed in Section 3, since, all other things remaining equal, children attending school may have incorporated a higher proportion of nouns in their storytelling activities. More specifically these findings suggest a possible route children might take in adopting a more canonical, adult-like use of referring expressions in narratives, in addition to relying on their mothers' dialogical models, addressed below.

#### *4.4 The influence of the interactional setting: towards reconsidering models*

The “choice” of referring expressions does not depend only on accessibility or shared knowledge but also on the interactional context of discourse production, and more specifically, depends on for whom and with whom the activity is being accomplished. Based on this assumption, variations in the adults’ uses were examined according to the interactional setting of the storytelling (see Chapter 8). Two comparisons were made. The first was the difference for participants (women) between telling a story to (and with) their child and telling the story to an experimenter (de Weck et al., 2019); the second was the difference between telling the story to (and with) a typically developing child and telling it to (and with) a child with DLD. The participants’ discourse revealed contrasting referential strategies: whereas the adults telling the story to the experimenter used referring expressions in a canonical way, the mothers presented a varied, and sometimes unexpected, range of referring expressions. For instance, mothers interacting with their child used fewer nouns and some third-person pronouns when mentioning a referent for the first time (or reactivating it). They also used more dislocations and interrogative pronouns. In the second comparison, there was no significant difference between the referential strategies of the mothers of the two groups of children (TD and DLD), thus providing some evidence of the general character of the strategies pointed out by de Weck et al. (2019). Besides, the mothers of children with DLD used more dislocations than the mothers of TD children, and therefore seem to tune their discourse to their children’s comprehension level. These two comparisons showed that mothers exhibit referential strategies that were probably linked to the interactional conditions of storytelling, e.g., the need to enlist their children in the task and

to use scaffolding devices, such as dislocations, to highlight some aspects of the characters or their actions for the child.

These results are crucial because they put in perspective expectations regarding child development and prompt us to reconsider children's early uses. The mothers' referential strategies found here do not correspond to the more canonical referential models children will be exposed to throughout the socialization process. Thus, we can reasonably contend that children's first targets tend to be closer to maternal strategies than to the adult canonical model (Karmiloff-Smith, 1985; Hickmann, 2003).

#### 4.5 *Reference in the dynamics of dialogue*

This section focuses on how the dynamics of dialogue can also account for early referential skills in naturally occurring interactions. We only deal here with the toddler data, but observations made in the two previous sections suggest that similar processes can still be hypothesized in older children's development.

In line with the findings of other studies (Guerriero, Oshima-Takane, & Kuriyama, 2006; Huang, 2011; Hughes & Allen, 2013, *inter alia*), children's uses of referring expressions in toddlers' data (see Chapter 7) were similar to those of their interlocutors. Three possible accounts for this similarity were considered. Firstly, the immediate impact of the interlocutor's discourse was assessed through two types of relation. On the one side, the possibility of imitation of, and priming by, the interlocutor's discourse was explored: did the child preferentially take up the form or category of the antecedent in the interlocutor's speech? The results showed, in line with Salazar Orvig, Marcos, Morgenstern, Hassan, Leber-Marin & Parès (2010), that referring

expressions were not significantly affected by the forms in the interlocutor's speech. However, nouns and third-person pronouns were likely to be preceded by an antecedent of the same category (e.g., for the object pronoun *le*, 'him' as the antecedent of *il*, 'he'). On the other side, the analysis concerned the impact of the dialogical-context constraint, such as question answering and repetition, both of which are known to be prevalent moves in adult/child interactions (Clark & Bernicot, 2008; McTear, 1985; Ninio & Snow, 1996). Nouns and strong demonstrative pronouns were more often used in repetitions than third-person clitic pronouns were. Whereas nouns were elicited by questions, third-person pronouns were used for the common topic of a question and its answer.

Secondly, the impact of continuity and contrast relations between utterances was examined. Third-person clitic pronouns were used mostly in the case of topic continuity for all types of replies (following a question or a statement). The context of dialogical contrast (opposition, topic change, reiteration) accounted for the use of nouns and demonstrative pronouns for discourse-given referents. Mixed-models analyses and binary partition trees showed that continuity was the main factor favoring the use of third-person clitic pronouns and disfavoring the use of demonstrative pronouns. At the same time these statistical analyses confirmed that continuity combined with the other factors (answering/elicitation, or the antecedent category) to account for the use of referring expressions. The fact that accessibility, givenness, and shared knowledge are not the only factors accounting for the use of referring expressions, and that they interact with dialogical or interactive factors, has been observed in adults' interactions (Pekarek Doehler, 2000, *inter alia*) and child discourse (Klein, 2019). In this book, it was also qualitatively observed on various occasions where interactional functions appeared to motivate the use of strong forms for previously mentioned referents.

One can assume, then, that the use of referring expressions is deeply grounded in the experience of dialogue. This brings us to our third possible account: do certain properties of dialogue scaffold children's uses of third-person clitic pronouns which children of this age cannot use in an autonomous way? Based on the assumption that children might learn to use these pronouns by experiencing continuity in dialogue (Clancy, 1996, 2008), the data were scrutinized to identify sequences affording evidence of a plausible path in the acquisition of third-person clitic pronouns (see Chapter 7). The possible sequences ranged from ones containing highly induced uses (answers to questions and repetitions of the interlocutor's discourse, in a format-like mode; Bruner, 1983) to ones exhibiting autonomous uses (spontaneous chaining of a new predication with a pronoun) via uptake of a previous distant sequence. However, this path is necessarily associated with the earliest experiences of discourse continuity. From the onset, a child makes a predication about a given referent with null forms and fillers. In accordance with Slobin (1973: 184), for whom "new forms first express old functions, and new functions are first expressed by old forms", the emergence of third-person pronouns appeared here to be at the crossroads of a previously acquired function in dialogue (continuity via null forms and fillers) and the grasping, in adult's discourse, of the use of a new form. This complex path has yet to be investigated in longitudinal data.

In this fourth section, we gave an overview of how the use of referring expressions is impacted by the activity, the speech genre, the social and interactional setting, and at a more local level, some aspects of dialogue dynamics, for both toddlers and older children. Three conclusions can be drawn.

Firstly, the various chapters of this book provided evidence of the interaction of formal, discourse-pragmatic, socio-discursive and dialogical factors in

both the adults' and the children's discourse. These factors together determine the nature of referential strategies (and therefore, grammatical and syntactic uses). Secondly, there seems to be a hierarchy among the factors: interactional and social settings shape the way activities are carried out and speech genres are achieved; and discourse-pragmatic factors such as accessibility (or givenness, or shared knowledge) are intertwined with socio-discursive levels. For instance, a narrative entails presenting a character as if it were new and less accessible, even when it has been previously mentioned (in the title of the story, for example). However, we have seen that, because their narratives were grounded in the "here and now" context of an interaction with their child, the mothers used pronominal devices to introduce new referents, as if they preferred a deictic basis for the narrative. By contrast, teachers overspecified the encoding of accessible referents by using nouns: this might be linked to their attention to the development of the lexicon. This could also be explained by the high frequency of repetitions aimed at assessing and confirming the children's answers to questions. The specificities observed in the teachers' discourse may be related to their pedagogical goals which probably take prevalence over discourse-pragmatic ones. And finally, at the dialogical level, the influence of the speech act (such as a question) and topical continuity interacted with the formal influence of the adult's discourse, which cannot account by itself for the toddlers' uses of referring expressions. This suggests that their early skills are intertwined with the ways in which they participate in a dialogue.

## **5 Conclusion**

At the end of this concluding chapter, we can set forth some hypothesis on the use and acquisition of referring expressions. One of the findings concerns the fact that, within the nascent paradigms of pronouns and determiners, transitional forms, such as null forms and fillers, can be accounted for on the same functional bases as adult-like forms. This has implications for theories of grammatical and pragmatic acquisition: integrating transitional forms not only pushes back early skills to proto-morphological stages but also provides insight into pragmatics in construction.

A second important finding concerns the complex interactions observed between various factors for the different referring expressions, at all ages. As expected, formal factors (such as the lexicon and syntax) proved to have a real impact on the use of nouns and pronouns (but in contrasted ways). However, these factors were not the only active ones, nor did they override discourse-pragmatic factors. For instance, the observed asymmetry in the development and use of first, second, and third-person pronouns argues in favor of a pragmatic conception of the emergence of morphological paradigms. In line with functional linguistics, which sees grammar as the result of a compromise between various communicative motivations (Du Bois, 1985), this asymmetry suggests that referential skills are built on a coalescence of distributional, syntactic, lexical, semantic, and referential features.

We also contend that formal and discourse-pragmatic factors can be related to socio-discursive and interactional factors. Children seem to experience linguistic units not only through the input they receive, which implies both frequency and distributional features, but also through discourse in dialogue, that is, in various activities, speech genres, and interactional and social settings. These last levels proved to be relevant to understanding the uses of referring expressions. Moreover, the act of referring is shaped by the socio-discursive context in which it is grounded. That is to say that preferential

associations of forms with discourse-pragmatic features (such as the position in the referential chain) are also dependent of the context with which they intertwine.

Finally, our findings brought out the importance of interactional and dialogical levels, beyond the issue of input. Communicative experience is also dialogical, and the construction of reference can be a matter of positioning in dialogue: either in the collaborative construction of a joint discourse or in the dynamics of the alignment and misalignment involved in verbal interaction.

These conclusions allow us to speculate about some possible developmental paths. Our results suggest that the development of reference is not linear. For instance, at the onset of verbal production, children have already experienced the contrast between focusing on new objects (following another person's pointing or gaze, attracting the attention of the interlocutor to a new object) and the continuity of joint-attention episodes. Of course, as several studies have shown, children do not master all of the aspects of these communicational events, and in particular, the possible dissociation of perceptual availability and shared knowledge. But a basic referential contrast is acquired, which itself is grounded in particular socio-discursive and dialogical contexts. Gradual acculturation to other socio-discursive contexts and dialogue dynamics will give children the experience of other language practices, and thus, other relevant features. As we have seen, a good example is the use of referring expressions in narratives. Throughout their childhood, children get involved in various contexts of storytelling and move from maternal models, grounded in the "here and now" of dialogue, to school practices and literacy which familiarize children with the monological organization of discourse.

Drawing from both Tomasello's (2003) and Nelson's (2007) proposals when discussing syntactic and grammatical acquisition, we can conclude that

socialization gives children the opportunity to build more general practices - if not rules - in the use of referring expressions. In this sense, the developmental path at stake confirms the idea that social, cultural, and discursive processes take precedence over linguistic units and rules, as predicted by a dialogical conception of language (Vološinov 1929/1986; Bakhtin 1979/1986; François, 1984, 1993).

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