

On the status of the French pronominal clitic SE in children's speech

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to account for the status of the French Clitic SE in children's spontaneous speech production and to show how its acquisition may be informed by the Maturation Hypothesis as defined by Borer et al (1987).

As it provides insights into both syntax/semantics and syntax/morphology interfaces, the study of the French Clitic SE has raised many debates. This study relies on the following classification adopted by Wehrli (1986, 268):

	Internal Argument	External Argument
Non-lexical	Reflexive/Reciprocal	Middle-Passive
Lexical	Inherent SE	Neuter SE

The account of SE-constructions adopted in this study extends Wehrli's (1986) account, which enables us to draw the following implications:

1. In French, the unmarked form of the Ergative alternation is best captured as a lexical derivation which requires *depronominalization*.

2. Although Middle-Passive SE and Reflexive/Reciprocal SE share the same surface structure, it is only the former which requires A-chain formation.

The two linguistic features mentioned above and the adoption of the Maturation Hypothesis (Borer et al, 1987) according to which children's early grammar is deprived of access to A-chain representations lead to the formulation of the following hypotheses:

1. The overgeneralization of Ergative alternation is interpreted by Borer et al (1987) as a consequence of children's absence of A-chain representations until about age 5. In French, given the lexical derivation of Neuter SE mentioned above, the following phenomena are expected to occur in children's speech:

– Transitivity of Inherent-SE constructions which are to result in *overgeneralized depronominalization*.

– *Overgeneralized Pronominalization* of two types, namely:

- i) Affixation of SE applied to intransitive verbs when assigned a Reflexive/Reciprocal interpretation.
- ii) SE-affixation applied to those verbs the Neuter forms of which do not require SE-affixation.

2. Since, in contrast to Middle-Passive, Reflexive/Reciprocal and Inherent SE do not involve A-chain representations, they are expected to be acquired earlier than Middle-Passive SE.

METHOD

The analysis of a corpus of spontaneous speech constituted the empirical evidence on the basis of which the hypotheses listed above were tested. This cross-sectional corpus was collected (by M. T Le Normand, 1994) on 360 monolingual children aged between 2 and 4 and divided into the following age groups (each of which included 20 boys and 20 girls): 2;0, 2;3, 2;6, 2;9, 3;0, 3;3, 3;6, 3;9, 4.

Each child was individually observed while carrying out a *symbolic play* (Le Normand, 1986; 1994) with the following toys: the Fisher Price Family House which includes 5 family members. 20-minute video-recordings of the sessions were made and these speech samples were subsequently divided into utterances and transcribed orthographically following the criteria defined by Rondal et al (1985) by M. T Le Normand (1994).

ANALYSIS

Those speech samples which included at least 50 utterances were analysed. Since SE-constructions can only occur in verbal clauses, the percentage of clauses which contained verbal forms (including finite and non-finite forms, past participle, gerund) was calculated. Secondly the percentage of verbal clauses which contained SE-constructions was calculated. The results of this preliminary analysis are presented in Table I.

Age	Number of Subjects	Number of Utterances	(SD)	Number of Verbal forms	% Verbal forms	Number of Occurrences of SE	% Occurrences of SE
2	21	1917	100.49	664	34.63	6	0.90
2;3	22	2064	103.21	861	41.71	26	2.78
2;6	30	3008	106.37	1668	55.45	35	2.09
2;9	24	2642	112.94	1728	65.40	56	3.24
3	20	2072	106.19	1404	67.76	52	3.70
3;3	27	3549	144.94	2387	67.25	82	3.43
3;6	25	2591	108.91	1784	68.85	114	6.3
3;9	18	2100	126.52	1514	72.09	85	5.61
4	21	2495	131.68	1719	68.89	123	7.15

Table I shows that the speech production of the older children differs from that of the younger subjects in two ways; it displays a higher percentage of both verbal clauses and SE-constructions. This difference is particularly striking between the children aged between 3;3 and those aged 3;6.

Testing the hypotheses listed in the introduction required a second step in the data-analysis which consisted in categorising the occurrences of SE under the following headings:

- Inherent SE
- Reflexive/Reciprocal
- Extra-dative
- Since no criteria could be used to systematically distinguish between Middle-Passive and Neuter SE, they were included in the same category.
- Overgeneralized Pronominalization
- Overgeneralized Depronominalization
- Those SE-constructions which could not be classified under the above headings appear under ‘Uninterpretable’.

The results of this analysis appear in Table II

Age	Number of Occurrences of SE	Number of Reflexive/Reciprocal	% of Inherent	% of Neuter/Middle-Passive	% of Extra-dative	% of Overgeneralized Pronominalization	% of Overgeneralized Depronominalization	% of Uninterpretable
2	6	66.66	16.66	0	0	0	0	16.66
2;3	26	92.30	7.69	0	0	0	0	0
2;6	35	85.71	8.57	5.71	0	0	0	0
2;9	56	87.50	8.92	1.78	0	0	0	1.78
3	52	69.92	13.46	3.84	1.92	1.92	1.92	0
3;3	82	91.46	2.43	4.87	0	0	0	1.21
3;6	114	69.29	15.78	8.77	3.50	0	0	2.63
3;9	85	88.23	3.52	8.23	1.17	1.17	0	1.17
4	123	81.30	5.69	8.94	1.62	0	0	2.43

Table II shows that the hypothesis regarding the Ergative alternation is borne out by the occurrences of Overgeneralized Pronominalization (3;0) and Overgeneralized Depronominalization (3;0 and 3;9) found in the corpus. Furthermore, the two types of Overgeneralized Pronominalization predicted by the hypotheses were found. The examples presented below under a) are those uttered by children found in the corpus while examples under b) provide the adult forms.

i) Reflexivization of intransitive verb:

1 a) (*) il se nage (3;0)

he 3RD PERS SING SUBJ PN himself 3RD PERS SING REFL swims INTRANS.

he himself swims

1 b) il nage

he 3RD PERS SING SUBJ PN swim-INTRANS 3RD PERS SING

2 a) (*) la bébé aussi va se dormir (3;9)

the baby too will himself 3RD PERS SING REFL sleep-INTRANS

the baby too will himself sleep

2 b) le bébé aussi va dormir

the baby too will sleep

ii) SE-affixation applied to Neuter forms which do not require it.

3 a) (*?) la glace se fond (3;9)

the ice itself 3RD PERS SING NEUTER melt-NEUTER 3RD PERS SING

the ice itself melts

3 b) la glace fond

the ice melts

Table II also demonstrates an increase in both the number and the types of SE-construction found in the speech produced by 2 to 4 year old. Notably, the only types of SE-constructions clearly identified which occur in the production of the 2 and 2;3 year old are those whose representation does not require A-chain representations. This result confirms the second hypothesis according to which those pronominal forms that do not require the formation of A-chain are available in the child's early grammar. However, the results of this data-analysis do not enable us to verify whether Middle-Passive SE is acquired after 5 years of age as no distinction between Neuter SE and Middle-Passive SE could be drawn.

This data analysis has enabled us to provide two types of empirical evidence in favour of the Maturation Hypothesis, namely: instances of overgeneralization which constitute deviations from the adult-grammar and which the absence of A-chain representation in young children's grammar accounts for and the early production of Reflexive/Reciprocal and Inherent SE, both of which do not require access to A-chain representations.

In addition, this study illustrates the limit of the analysis of spontaneous speech production as a mean to gain access to children's grammar as it does not allow us to verify whether Neuter SE is acquired before Middle-Passive constructions.

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