

Perspectives on Language and Language Development

**Essays in Honor of
Ruth A. Berman**

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Kluwer Academic Publishers

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Perspectives on language and language development: essays in honor of
Ruth A. Berman/

Dorit Diskin Ravid and Hava Bat-Zeev Shyldkrot, editors.

p. cm.

English with one contribution in French.

Bibliography of Ruth Aronson Berman's works: p.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-4020-7903-6 (alk. paper) -- ISBN 1-4020-7911-7 (ebook)

1. Linguistics. 2. Language acquisition. I. Ravid, Dorit Diskin. II.

Shyldkrot, Hava Bat-Zeev. III. Berman, Ruth Aronson.

P26.B424P47 2004

410—dc22

2004050704

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Printed in the United States of America.

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

SPIN 11374787

springeronline.com

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INTRODUCTION

While direct observation of an individual's conceptualisation of an event is impossible, it is possible to examine aspects of conceptualisations by studying how speaker/writers actually verbalise events through the use of options provided by their language. Encoding meaning in a given utterance involves an interaction between the speaker's mind and the world. The information, or the event to be communicated, is a complex entity composed of participants related via the predicate and it is the task of the speaker to convert his/her conceptualisation of the scene into a linearly organised utterance (Croft, 1991, 1994).

Languages provide mature speakers with a variety of grammatical options, the choice among which depends on the speaker's conceptualisation or point of view and his/her communicative intention in a given discourse context. The notion of "competition" will be used here to refer to the idea that there is no single way to verbalize the contents of any given situation in the world (of reality or fantasy), and that speaker/writers have a range of options for describing the selfsame scene (Berman & Slobin, 1994: 516–517; Slobin, 1996, 2001). Speaker/writers select semantic roles they wish to express in describing a given situation, and also which participant or component of the scene will be foregrounded or backgrounded.

From a developmental point of view, it is important to consider the range of structural options available for expressing a given function in the target language (Berman, 1993; Clark, 2001). The developmental study undertaken here attempts to characterize

French children's gradual mastery of constructions which contribute to speaker distancing, in particular the family of grammatical voice constructions, or the options available for the expression of alternative relations between the verb and its associated nominals (Klaiman, 1991).

A fruitful way of studying what children know about language is by studying what they can do or can not do with language and how usage, or choice among various constructions, varies depending upon the situation in which they are asked to produce. For the study to be presented, children and adults were asked to produce monologue expository texts in both a spoken and written modality. Production of monologue texts requires that speaker/writers engage in planning at different levels (Levelt, 1989). Individual messages must be elaborated and encoded into a linear form for articulation in a propositional format. These individual propositions are packaged using the syntactic means available for their combination. In turn, the various packages of information are structured into more global text components, such as beginnings and conclusions. The ability to plan a monologue text does not emerge full-blown from one day to the next. Rather, this capacity develops very gradually over the many years of childhood and adolescence.

Crucial to understanding the forms used in a text is the time allotted to text planning. Processing language in a written modality, in contrast to a spoken modality, alleviates some of the time pressure involved in language production, allowing more time for the work of converting information into words. Becoming a proficient writer involves gaining mastery over more compact means of establishing the flow of information, resulting in texts that show densely integrated packages of information (Chafe, 1994). For example, syntactic subjects in written expository discourse do not obey Chafe's (1994) "light subject constraint" characteristic of spoken discourse. It is for this reason, for example, that written French shows more lexical noun phrases than pronouns (Blanche-Benveniste, 1990, 1995; Lambrecht, 1984). Heavy subjects, often the result of syntactic packaging through nominalization or subordination, are characteristic of mature written expository discourse (Ravid et al., 2002). Written texts generally show more lexical diversity than do spoken texts, given that writing allows more time for planification and consequently more time to search one's mental lexicon for different and less frequent lexical items (Ravid & Tolchinsky, 2002; Strömquist et al., 2002).

Of course both speaking and writing call upon a number of shared cognitive activities. In most writing activities, however, writers can allot more resources to planning activities. It is for this reason that the study of what children know about language can be fruitfully approached by observing their text production in both written and spoken modalities. Once children are over the major hurdles of letter formation and spelling or what Ravid and Tolchinsky (2002) refer to as aspects of 'writing as a notational system', writing may actually facilitate the use of less frequent and more complex constructions, and thus give a somewhat different picture of what children know about language and how to use it.

This study will examine French children and adults producing expository texts, a text genre which calls upon the speaker/writer to package information in a

generic, generalizable fashion. In contrast to personal narrative texts, for example, where speaker/writers report highly individualised and specific experiences, expository texts require generic reporting with a certain personal detachment between the speaker/writer and the content of his/her propositions (Berman, Ragnarsdóttir, & Strömquist, 2002; Berman, in press). Languages provide their users with a variety of options for encoding such detachment. In this study, various distancing constructions will be studied in the expository texts of monolingual French children and adults.

EVENT PACKAGING

A given event can be expressed in various ways, such as shown in (1) where different renderings of the event "resolution of a conflict" can be ranked on a continuum of speaker involvement in, or responsibility for, the contents of the utterance, from the highest in (1a) to the lowest degree in (1e).

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| (1) a. <i>J'ai résolu le problème.</i> | 'I resolved the problem' |
| b. <i>On a résolu le problème.</i> | '(Some)one~We resolved the problem' |
| c. <i>Le problème a été résolu (par moi).</i> | 'The problem was resolved (by me)' |
| d. <i>Le problème est/était résolu (par moi).</i> | 'The problem is/was resolved (by me)' |
| e. <i>Le problème s'est résolu</i> | 'The problem resolved (itself)' |

In (1a) the speaker takes full responsibility for the information in the predicate by use of the first person pronoun as subject. The alternatives, (1b) to (1e) are the focus of concern in this paper. In the *on* construction (1b), the agent of the activity encoded in the event is necessarily human, but *on* can either attribute responsibility to the speaker or not – that is, it may, but need not have a reading that is close to (1a). In the passive construction in (1c), the speaker can shift responsibility for the action encoded in the predicate to an agent or omit the agent altogether. The predicating adjective construction (1d) is very close to the passive construction in that it is possible to include or exclude an agent. In the remaining example, the middle voice construction (1e), there is no explicit mention nor any attribution of an agent potentially responsible for the resolution of the problem. All of these constructions contribute to creating a speaker/writer's perspective on events and the stance taken in the text.

"Discourse stance" has been defined as referring to three interrelated dimensions of text construction: (1) *Orientation* – sender, text, recipient; (2) *Attitude* – epistemic, deontic, affective; and (3) *Generality* – specific or general reference or quantification (Berman, et al., 2002; Berman, in press). Of particular importance for the study to be undertaken here are the first and last of these dimensions. *Orientation* in this context concerns the relations between three participating elements in text production and interpretation – sender, text and recipient. The dimension of *generality* refers to how generalised or specific is the reference to people (including the sender), place and/or times referred to in the text.

The *on* construction shares some of the functional load carried by agentless passives and middle voice constructions in French and in other languages (Ashby, 1992; Berman, 1980; Jisa et al., 2002; Koenig, 1999; Lyons, 1995; Tolchinsky & Rosado, in

press; Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995). Agentless passive constructions as in (1c) and middle voice constructions as in (1e) have in common the fact that the patient participant is foregrounded and the agent participant is backgrounded. A human agent is implied in both cases, but explicit reference to this participant is typically absent in passive constructions and is disallowed in middle voice constructions. The *on* construction as shown in (1b) does not eliminate the agent, but definitely downgrades its individuation. The *on* construction resembles the passive in that it foregrounds the patient participant and downgrades the agent. And it contrasts with the middle voice to the extent that human agentivity is clearly encoded with *on*, but totally eschewed in middle voice constructions. The constructions given in (1) contribute to encoding a spaker/writer's stance and are crucial markers of both orientation and generality. In the following section, a brief description of these constructions will be given.

COMPETITION: GRAMMATICAL OPTIONS FOR SIMILAR FUNCTIONS

It is often claimed that the passive construction is used less frequently in French than it is in English (Jones, 1996). Two explanations are given for the less frequent use of passive construction in French. One concerns the tighter syntactic restrictions on passives in French in comparison to English. The second is that French shows a wider variety of grammatical options that compete with the passive construction for the same functional load.

The most important syntactic constraint is that only direct objects of transitive verbs can be promoted to subject in French. Thus, a sentence such as **Pierre a été donné un livre par Marie* ('Pierre was given a book by Mary') is not grammatical. Objects of prepositions are also excluded from subject position in a passive construction. A French translation of *The doctor was sent for*, for instance, would require a construction using either the generic pronoun *on*, as in *On envoya chercher le docteur* (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995: 140), or a strictly transitive verb, *Le médecin a été appelé* ('The doctor was called').

Thus, if a French speaker wants to promote an argument other than a direct object to subject position, other grammatical means must be employed, such as a topicalizing construction, *C'est à Pierre que Marie a donné le livre* ('It's Pierre that Mary gave a book to') or a dislocation (Lambrecht, 1994) or an "as for" construction (Kuno, 1972; Reinhart, 1982), (*Quant à Pierre, Marie lui a donné un livre*, ((As for) Pierre, Marie gave him a book'). Another possibility is an infinitival pronominal verb construction, consisting of the morpheme *se* and a limited number of verbs (*faire* 'make', *laisser* 'let', *voir* 'see', etc.) which can have either a passive (2) or a benefactive ((3) and (4)) meaning (Creissels, 1995).

- (2) *Jean s'est fait attraper (par la police)*. ('John got (himself) caught by the police')
- (3) *Jean s'est fait construire une maison (par l'architecte)*. ('John got (himself) a house built by the architect')
- (4) *Jean s'est vu donner un livre par Marie* ('John saw (himself) given a book by Marie')

Thus, some of the patient topicalizing effects of passive constructions can be accomplished through the use of alternative grammatical options (Jones, 1996).

In addition to a topicalizing function, passive constructions also contribute to background the agent of an event, either by demoting it to an agentive, oblique argument or by eliminating it altogether, through the use of an agentless passive (5).

- (5) *Les documents ont été volés*. ('The documents were stolen')

A particularly important construction which comes into competition with an agentless passive is the indefinite or generic *on* construction (6) (Jisa et al., 2002).

- (6) *On a volé les documents*. ('Someone stole the documents')

The chameleon character of *on* has been studied from many different angles, including its social and demographic distribution in everyday discourse and in interviews, its use and perhaps abuse in the mass media, both for Canadian French (Laberge, 1978; Laberge & Sankoff, 1980) and for European French (Ashby, 1992; Atlani, 1984; Koenig, 1999; Simonin, 1984). An important conclusion emerging from such analysis is that *on* is extremely multifunctional, and that the reference of *on* varies, depending entirely on the particular discourse context and communicative setting. As a colloquial alternative to *nous* 'we', *on* has first person plural reference, as in sentences like *on a passé les vacances dans le Midi* ('we spent our vacation in the Midi') (Jones, 1996). As a generic form, *on* refers to people in general, e.g., *en France on mange les escargots* ('in France one eats snails') and corresponds approximately to English 'one' or impersonal 'they' and to French impersonal *ils* ('they'), or other generic expressions such as *tout le monde* ('everyone'). In yet another use, *on* corresponds to an indefinite *quelqu'un* ('someone'), e.g., *on a volé mon stylo* ('someone stole my pen'), or to the understood subject of a passive construction, e.g., *mon stylo a été volé* ('my pen was stolen'). In all cases – except as a variant of first person plural *nous* – reference is non-specific, but it is restricted to human referents.

It is not always easy to classify different uses of *on*, but several studies note that features of the verb with which it is associated are critical for how it is interpreted. Verb tense, for example, is important for determining the type of *on*. The generic interpretation is available only when the verb has a non-punctual tense, e.g., the present or imperfect, denoting a state or habitual event (Jones, 1996: 287). When used with a verb in the specific past tense (French *passé composé* corresponding roughly to English simple past), as in *on a volé son sac* 'someone~we stole her/his purse', as shown by the gloss, *on* can have either a first person plural or an indefinite interpretation.

Verb semantics are also important in determining the indefinite interpretation of *on*. For example, Koenig (1999: 238) argues that the referent of indefinite *on* must be an active, volitional participant in the situation encoded by the sentence in which it has the subject role, as shown in (7b) compared with (7a).

- (7) a. *On a reçu des lettres d'insultes* ('*Somebody~We received letters of insult.')
- b. *On lui a envoyé des lettres d'insultes* ('Somebody~We sent him letters of insult.')

The subject of *recevoir* ('to receive') in (7a) does not entail agentivity, given that no causal role of semantic agency is needed in order to 'receive' something. In contrast,

indefinite *on* can occur as the subject of a verb such as *envoyer* ('to send') in (7b), which does involve volitional agentivity. This semantic restriction requires that in order to be interpreted as an indefinite subject, the clitic *on* "must be the subject of a verb whose agentive or actor semantic role it satisfies" (Koenig, 1999: 237).

In sum, *on* can be characterized as having three basic functions (Jones, 1996). It can refer 1) to first person plural *nous* 'we' or 2) to a generic referent, particularly when used with a verb in a non-punctual tense, and 3) in its indefinite usage, *on* can be a variant of *quelqu'un* ('someone') or of an agentless passive construction. In this last function, *on* indicates a change of verb valence by eliminating an agent without promoting any other participant. Ashby (1992) points out that this use of *on*, when it demotes an agent, but does not promote any other participant, serves to foreground the predicate.

An additional family of constructions that are available for defocusing an agent in an activity are the pronominal verbs used in middle voice constructions. Jones (1996: 111–120) identifies three categories of pronominal voice: intrinsic pronominal verbs, neutral, and middle. Intrinsic pronominal verbs are verbs which do not exist in transitive constructions (*s'évanouir* 'faint', *se souvenir* 'remember') and contrast to reflexive and reciprocal constructions in that they typically do not take an explicit reflexive –*même* ('-self') or reciprocal *l'un l'autre* ('each other') marker. Jones also includes in this category verbs which change their meaning when employed with *se* (*passer* 'to pass', *se passer* 'to happen') and impersonal constructions *il se peut que Jean soit là* ('It is possible/likely that Jean will be there').

Neutral constructions (Jones, 1996) with *se* contain verbs which have a transitive counterpart and are used more frequently as transitives. These 'spontaneous event' constructions (Kemmer, 1993) can be used with a punctual or non-punctual tense and thus compete with passive constructions. The different renderings of the same event in (8) show a transitive (8a), middle (8b) and passive (8c) version.

- (8) a. *Le gouvernement a transformé la situation économique* ('The government transformed the economic situation')
 b. *La situation économique s'est transformée.* ('The economic situation transformed (itself)')
 c. *La situation économique a été transformée (par le gouvernement)* ('The economic situation was transformed (by the government)')

In what Jones (1996) terms "middle" constructions and Kemmer (1993) "passive middle", the grammatical subject corresponds to the patient or undergoer of the event and the involvement of a human agent is implied.

- (9) *Ce vin se boit chambré* ('This wine drinks at room temperature')
 (10) *Ce journal se lit en cinq minutes* ('This newspaper reads in five minutes')

This productive syntactic process closely resembles the passive construction, but differs from it in two ways (Jones, 1996). First, the agent cannot be mentioned, **Ce vin se boit chambré par tout le monde* ('This wine drinks at room temperature by everyone')

and second, only non-punctual tenses can be used, **Ce vin s'est bu hier soir* ('This wine was drunk last night'). In addition, human noun phrases are generally avoided as the syntactic subject of middle constructions. However, if the patient in the situation is a generic reference, it can be used in a dislocation construction (Jones, 1996).

- (11) a. *Un bébé s'embrasse sur le front* ('A baby kisses itself on the forehead')
 b. *Un bébé, ça s'embrasse sur le front* ('A baby, that's/it's kissed on the forehead')

(11a) can only receive a rather absurd reflexive meaning. The potential confusion between a reflexive and a middle voice reading is probably the reason why human noun phrases are avoided as syntactic subjects.

To summarize, these passive middle constructions detransitivize verbs which are used more frequently as transitives and with a human agent. They usually describe habitual or normative situations and are incompatible with a punctual tense (Jones, 1996: 111–113), and thus generally imply a generic agent, although explicit mention of the agent is disallowed. Given these distributional characteristics, the middle voice construction comes into competition with the generic *on* construction.

- (12) a. *On boit ce vin chambré.* ('One drinks this wine at room temperature')
 b. *On lit ce journal en cinq minutes.* ('One reads this newspaper in five minutes')

DISCOURSE STANCE

In the following section the various constructions which have been considered so far will be discussed in terms of the contributions they make to two elements of discourse stance – orientation and generality (Berman et al., 2002; Berman, in press). The constructions to be examined include: 1) the *on* construction (13a), 2) the passive construction (13b), 3) the infinitival pronominal verb construction (13c), and 4) the middle voice constructions (13d).

- (13) a. *On a résolu les problèmes* ('(Some)one/we resolved the problems')
 b. *Les problèmes ont été résolus (par les autorités).* ('The problems were resolved by the authorities')
 c. *Les problèmes se laissent résoudre* ('The problems let themselves be resolved')
 d. *Les problèmes se sont résolus* ('The problems resolved (themselves)')

With respect to orientation, it can be argued that the *on* construction (13a) can either include or exclude the sender and/or recipient, so that the assignment of responsibility for the information given in the text is somewhat ambiguous. The agentless passive construction (13c), in contrast, is neutral with respect to the involvement of either the sender or the recipient in the event. The passive construction, then, can be taken as an indication of text orientation, while the *on* construction can be an indication of either a sender or a recipient orientation. In terms of the grammatical expression of commitment concerning the propositional context of a message (Biber & Finegan,

1989), the agentless passive contributes more distance between the sender and the message than does the *on* construction.

Kemmer's (1993) passive middles (corresponding to Jones' "neutral constructions"), encode situations in which an unmentioned external entity (most typically human) causes the situation and the grammatical subject is affected. The *on* construction (13a), the passive construction (13b) and the middle voice construction (13d) contrast in how participants in an event are characterized. As Kemmer (1993: 205) points out, the passive middle is halfway between a two participant event in that, like a prototypical transitive event it has two participants, in this case 'problems' and 'problem solvers', but like an intransitive construction the event is treated as having only one salient affected participant, 'problems'.

The agentless passives (13b) and the middle voice (13d) have in common the fact that no agent is mentioned as being responsible for the resolution. They differ, however, in that (13b) can grammatically accept an agent which (13d) can not. While attribution of responsibility for an action by mentioning an agent is an option for the passive construction, the middle voice construction (13d) disallows mention of an agent. The event simply happened with not even an implicit causing agent being potentially mentioned. In this respect the middle voice can be argued to be an even stronger mark of agent detachment.

Faltz (1985) describes "facilitative" middles (equivalent to Kemmer's (1993) 'passive middles'), such as *ces problèmes se résolvent facilement* ('these problems resolve themselves easily, these problems are easily resolved') which make reference to the ease or difficulty of the occurrence of an event. These constructions express situations in which an external causer, usually human, is understood to exist, but is pragmatically deemphasized, being judged unimportant from the speaker/writer's point of view, as compared to the patient. The element which is emphasized is the patient or undergoer. In addition, with respect to discourse stance, these constructions allow for the encoding of a judgement of quality with no indication as to who is making the quality judgement.

In these situation types, encoded by the middle voice, the affected entity is being emphasized. The agent is always generic and the event itself can be considered as non-specific, non-individuated and lower in elaboration than a specific event (Kemmer, 1993). As mentioned above, these constructions can be used only with a non-punctual tense such as the simple present or imperfect (Jones, 1996: 116) and thus the encoding of generic or habitual events using a middle construction is very similar to the use of a generic *on* construction.

The pronominal verb construction (13c), consists of *se*, a limited number of verbs and the main verb in infinitive form. It is very similar to a passive construction in that it encodes a prototypical transitive situation. In fact (13c) is rather strange because the grammatical subject or affected patient is nonhuman. Most often, the subject in these constructions is a human. In this respect it differs from the passive middle in that when the affected patient is human – most often the case – he is both the affected patient or benefactor, as well as the instigator or the causer of the event. It is also possible to encode an agent in these constructions, such as in (14) and (15). This structure often corresponds to English *get* passives (Budwig, 2001; Jisa & Kern, 1995).

(14) *Jean s'est fait mordre (par le chien)* ('Jean got (himself) bitten (by the dog)')

(15) *Jean s'est fait construire une maison (par l'architecte)*. ('Jean got (himself) a house built (by the architect).')

A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

The present study will investigate the various options available to French speaker/writers for marking discourse stance. The constructions to be examined are the *on* constructions, passive constructions, pronominal infinitival and middle voice constructions. In addressing this issue, we take a developmental perspective by examining the distribution of these constructions in spoken and written expository texts produced by French monolingual children at three age levels (9–10, 12–13, 15–16 years of age) compared with university educated adults. Expository discourse requires that speaker/writers generalize across individuated experiences and events, presenting information as objective generalities. The constructions examined here can be used by speaker/writers to step back from attributing clear and unique responsibility for the information contained in their utterances, and thus, are important indicators of speaker/writer stance.

In early stages of language acquisition, the first events to receive grammatical treatment are expressed as highly manipulative activity scenes in which a prototypical, highly individualised agent brings about a change of state in a patient (Berman, 1993; Budwig, 1995). The prototypical agent of a basic causal event is one who carries out a physical and perceptual change of state in a patient by means of direct body contact or with an instrument under the agent's control. This kind of agent is clearly in the domain of narrative texts. Mature expository texts, to the contrary, require generic agents, which can be marked by the use of *on* constructions, by passive middles, by spontaneous event middles, or by agentless passives. The prediction of Berman et al. (2002) is that the overall stance of more mature speaker/writers in expository texts will be "by and large more distanced, detached, and objective than that of children". It is this prediction which will be explored here.

METHODOLOGY

Subjects

The monologue texts examined here are part of a larger cross-linguistic, developmental study of spoken and written text production in seven languages (Dutch, English, French, Hebrew, Icelandic, Spanish, Swedish).¹ Subjects in four age groups (9–10-year-olds, 12–13-year-olds, 15–16-year-olds and university graduate students) were asked to produce both narrative and expository texts in spoken and written modalities, with half of the subjects producing first the spoken text, followed by the written text and the other half producing the texts in the reverse order. Only the spoken and written expository texts produced by the French monolingual subjects are considered

¹ This project was made possible through the Spencer Foundation (Chicago, Illinois) funding of a major grant "Developing literacy in different contexts and different languages" (Professor Ruth Berman, PI).

Table 1. Length of written and spoken expository texts in clauses

| | 9-year-olds | 12-year-olds | 15-year-olds | Adults |
|-----------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|--------|
| Written mean | 8 | 13 | 17 | 28 |
| range | 4–17 | 4–23 | 8–32 | 13–67 |
| Spoken mean | 17 | 14 | 17 | 50 |
| range | 5–49 | 6–30 | 7–51 | 15–114 |

here. The French child subjects were recorded in two private schools in Lyon. The adults are graduate students from two universities in Lyon.

Procedure

To elicit the expository texts subjects were asked to discuss “the problem of violence in schools”. For the spoken modality, subjects were instructed to use as much time as necessary to prepare a talk to be given in front of their class. Texts were recorded once the subject indicated to the researcher that s/he was ready to begin. For the written modality, subjects were given scratch paper and as much time as needed to write their texts. Both the written and spoken texts were fully transcribed using CHILDES.

Coding

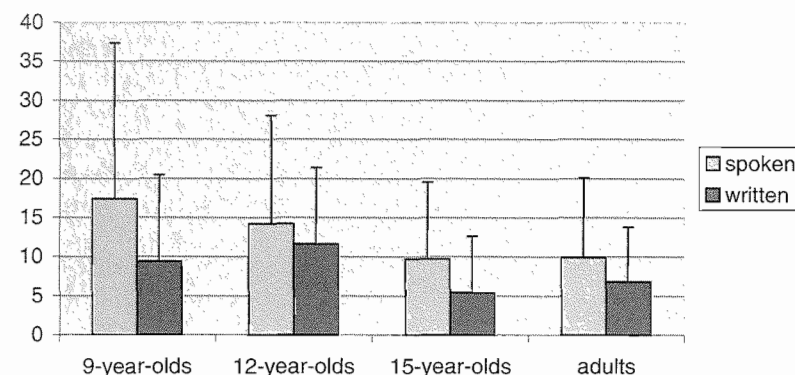
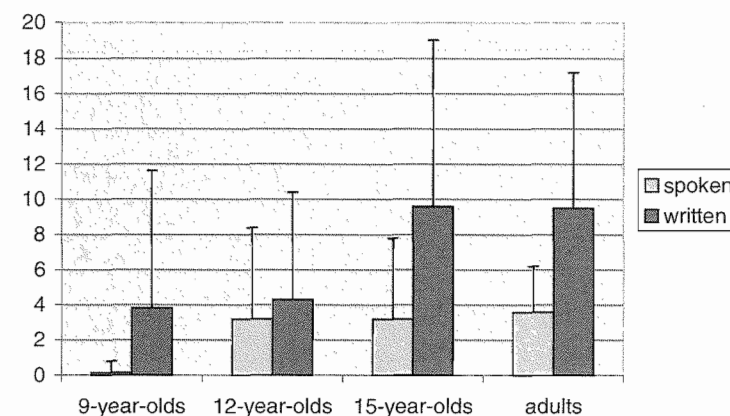
The spoken and written expository texts were coded for 1) generic, indefinite *on*; 2) passive voice constructions (with and without agents); 3) infinitival pronominal verb constructions; and 4) middle voice constructions. “Middle voice” constructions will be used in the remainder of this text to refer to Kemmer’s (1993) passive middles and spontaneous event middles and to Jones’ (1996) impersonal middles. Two coders completed the coding individually. Coding differences between the two were resolved through discussion.²

RESULTS

Table 1 summarises information concerning the length of the spoken and written texts. Because of the wide variation in text lengths the results will not be reported in absolute numbers. Rather, the proportion of a given construction is reported as a percentage of total clauses in the text.

On

Figure 1 shows the distribution of *on* constructions in the written and spoken texts. Overall, *on* is more frequent in the spoken modality than in written ($F_{(1,152)} = 5.61$, $p < 0.01$) and the higher frequency of *on* in spoken texts is attested in all age groups. Age is a significant variable in the distribution of *on* ($F_{(3,152)} = 2.59$, $p < 0.05$) with generic, indefinite *on* being more frequent in the two younger groups as opposed to

**Figure 1.** Distribution of *on* constructions in spoken and written expository texts (in %).**Figure 2.** Distribution of passive constructions in spoken and written expository texts (in %).

the two older groups. Thus, the use of *on* decreases with age and this is particularly true of the written modality. As will be shown, one of the reasons that the use of *on* decreases is that the other forms in competition for the same depersonalising function become more productive.

Passive

Because the overwhelming majority (91%) of the passive constructions were agentless, passives with and without agent arguments are not distinguished. The distribution of passive voice constructions is given in Figure 2. This construction is more frequent in the written modality than it is in the spoken modality ($F_{(1,152)} = 19.24$, $p < 0.0001$) and this is true for all age groups. The use of passive constructions increases with age ($F_{(3,152)} = 5.06$, $p < 0.002$) and this is particularly clear in the written modality.

² Special thanks is expressed to Anne Viguié and Carole Vinson for their invaluable help with coding.

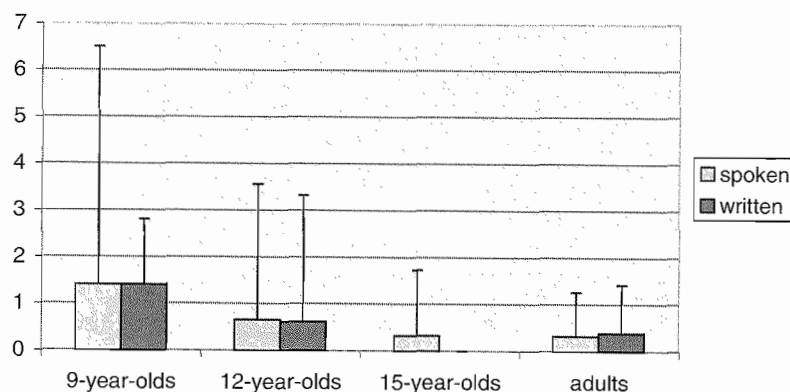


Figure 3. Distribution of infinitival pronominal verb constructions in spoken and written expository texts (in %).

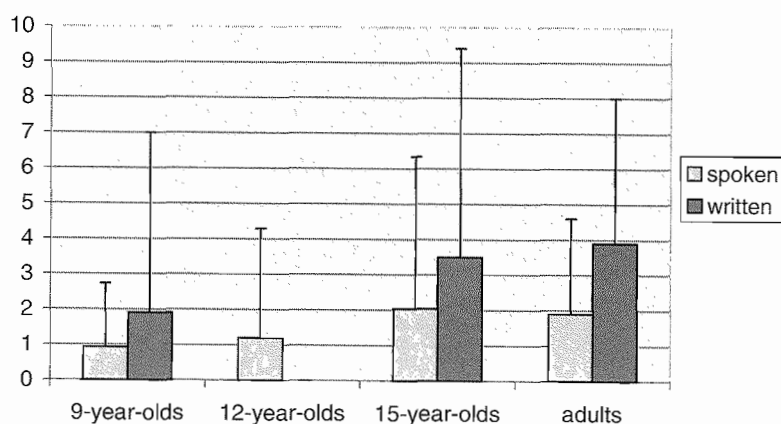


Figure 4. Distribution of middle voice constructions in spoken and written expository texts (in %).

Infinitival pronominal verb constructions

While infinitival pronominal verb middles are observed – particularly in the 9-year-olds – this construction shows no significant difference in distribution according to age or modality.

Middle voice

Middle voice constructions are relatively infrequent, even in the written texts. The overall use of middles increases with age ($F_{(3,152)} = 3.28$, $p > 0.02$). Although the effect of modality is not significant, more uses of passive middles are observed in the written modality for the 9- and 15-year-olds and the adults.

DISCUSSION

This study was undertaken to explore the gradual development of grammatical constructions contributing to a distanced discourse stance. The two most frequent constructions, the *on* and passive constructions, show clear age and modality effects. *On* is more frequent in spoken French and decreases with age. Passive is more frequent in written French and increases with age. This illustrates a well-established pattern in the general domain of language development (Slobin, 1973), as in other areas of cognitive development (Werner & Kaplan, 1963: 60): new forms take on old functions and old functions receive new forms. New forms taking on old functions is illustrated by the development of passives taking over some of the functional load of *on* constructions. Old forms taking on new functions can be observed by considering that earlier uses of *on* as the spoken French equivalent of *nous* take on generic and indefinite uses with advancing age and schooling. In both cases, we find expanding repertoires along the dimension of form–function mappings with age. Of course, not all indefinite uses of *on* are replaced by a passive construction. Rather, what emerges is a gradual development of control over the multiple options provided by the language – very much as demonstrated by Tolchinsky and Rosado's (in press) study of five different devices for agent-downgrading in Spanish.

One of the goals behind this study was to ascertain how learning to write modifies children's use of grammatical constructions. Nine-year-olds use some passive constructions in written discourse, but almost never in spoken discourse (Figure 2). Starting from 12 years of age, the subjects used the passive in spoken, as well as written expository texts. Across all age groups passive constructions are more frequent in the written modality. It is often claimed that children write as they speak. These results suggest that children also learn to speak the way they write. It may be the case that the exercise in usage of passive constructions in the written modality increases their accessibility in the spoken modality.

One of the advantages of the methodology adopted in this study is that the written and spoken texts are produced by the same subject. This allows for comparison of text content with contrasting forms of information packaging. The excerpts in (16a) and (16b) contrast use of an *on* construction in a spoken expository text and an agentless passive in a written text produced by the same woman.

- (16) a. *Il y a d'autres problèmes qu'on a tendance à négliger* [A 11, Exp, Sp]³
 'There are other problems which one tend(s)~we tend to neglect'
 b. *Les autres difficultés de rapports entre les personnes au niveau collège sont par contre un peu oubliées* [A 11, Exp, Wr]
 'Other difficulties in personal relations in junior high are on the other hand somewhat forgotten'

³ The examples contain subject identification codes. The first number or letter refers to age group: 9 refers to 9–10-year-olds, 12 to 12–13-year-olds, 15 to 15–16-year-olds and A refers to adults. The next number makes reference to the individual subject in the age group. Finally, Exp refers to expository, followed by an indication of modality, either SP (spoken) or WR (written).

In the *on* construction in (16a), responsibility for the negligence can be ambiguous between a specific or a generic agentive meaning. The passive construction in (16b) leaves responsibility for forgetting unassigned. In this respect, the agentless passive eliminates the sender role, whereas the *on* construction leaves it somewhat more ambiguous between a generic 'one' and an inclusive first person plural 'we'. This modality contrast is consistently observed across all age groups. That is, when there is a change in construction choice, it is always the case that the passive is found in the written modality. Not a single case of *on* in the written modality corresponding to a passive in the spoken modality is observed.

This result highlights the importance of studying children performing in both the written and spoken modalities. Generalisations based on just a single modality may fail to do justice to the developing linguistic knowledge of school age children, particularly in later stages of development, when they have had extensive experience with literacy-based activities and with reading and writing different types of academic discourse. Some forms are more characteristic of the written modality, such as the passive construction in French. The distributional analysis provided here demonstrates that in addition to acquiring productive use of the two competing forms – generic *on* and the passive construction – children must also develop the competence necessary for deploying them in their most appropriate contexts.

The infinitival pronominal verb construction is rare across all age groups. Interestingly, the 9-year-olds use generic *on* as the subject of these constructions.

- (17) *le plus intelligent c'est celui qui arrête le premier quand on se fait racketter.* [9 1 Exp Wr] ('the most intelligent is the one who stops first when(ever) one gets blackmailed')

The pronominal verb used in these constructions across all age groups is almost exclusively *faire* ('make'), which emphasises the grammatical subject's double role of instigator of the activity, as well as affected patient.

- (18) ... *car certains jeunes entendant les récits de faits violents imitent afin d'eux aussi faire parler d'eux et donc se faire remarquer* [A 11 Exp Wr] ('... because some young people, hearing stories of violent happenings, imitate in order to be talked about and thus to get themselves remarked upon/draw attention to themselves')
- (19) *les plus timides ils oseront jamais euh même si ils se font embêter ou quoi que ce soit.* [A 21 Exp Sp] ('the shyest ones they will never dare even if they get themselves hassled or whatever')
- (20) *la copie peut être une réelle source de conflit entre étudiants surtout s' ils se font prendre.* [A 23 Exp Wr] ('copying can be a real source of conflict particularly if they get caught')

Somewhat disappointing is the fact that the middle voice constructions examined here were used infrequently. It was expected that these constructions would take over some

of the functional load of downgrading the agent of an activity. The constructions do indeed fulfil this function, as show in the examples below, but it would appear that the *on* and passive constructions are options chosen more often. The two first examples (21) and (22) come from texts written by the youngest subjects. It is interesting to note the use of an explicit reciprocal marker (*l'une à l'autre*) in the subject noun phrase (*le respect des personnes l'une à l'autre*) in (21).

- (21) *Nous voyons que le respect des personnes l'une à l'autre se perd durant les années.* [9 33 Exp Wr] ('We see that respect for people one and the other is being lost over the years')
- (22) *Les bagarres peuvent se finir en drame ou encore en dégradation des bâtiments scolaires.* [9 21 Exp Wr] ('Fights can end up in dramas or in deterioration of school buildings')
- (23) *Je ne pense pas que la triche puisse apparaître comme un problème car elle cessera à un certain niveau scolaire lorsque s'effectuera une certaine prise de conscience.* [15 11 Exp Wr] ('I don't think that cheating can constitute a problem because it will stop at a certain school level when a certain consciousness is reached')
- (24) *L'apprentissage de cet art de vivre se fait dès l'enfance.* [A 1 Exp Wr] ('The learning of this way of life begins in childhood')
- (25) *Les mêmes comportements se retrouvent dans un contexte adulte mais de façon beaucoup plus discrète.* [A 35 Exp Wr] ('The same behaviours are found in an adult context but in a much more discrete fashion')

Although the variable of modality did not show a significant effect in the usage pattern of middle voice constructions, they were observed more in the written texts. All of the above examples are taken from the written texts and show other characteristics of this modality. For instance, (24) contains a particularly heavy subject with a nominal derived from the verb *apprendre* ('to learn/to teach'). (23) shows inversion of the verb (*s'effectuera*) and the subject (*une prise de conscience*).

SUMMARY

It is probably impossible to predict exactly when one construction will be chosen over another by a given French speaker/writer. However, comparisons of actual usage can bring us closer to understanding what is important in estimating probability. A number of factors can be advanced as being important – including the availability or productivity of a given structure in an individual's repertoire, the discourse context, register and the inventory of competing structures in form/function mappings within the language.

From a developmental viewpoint, it is important to ascertain at what age given structures are available in the individual's productive repertoire. The youngest age-group in our sample (9–10-year-olds) constitute a relatively advanced stage for the study of language acquisition as such. *On* is a very early acquired subject clitic as it is used instead of *nous* for first person plural in spoken French. *Se* is also very early acquired

as a reflexive and reciprocal marker. The work presented here is not concerned with the initial acquisition of structures; rather, it concerns the actual use of constructions for new functions in spoken and written monologue texts.

The use of a structure in a monologue text requires a high degree of automatised grammatical constructions (Levelt, 1989). Marchman et al., (1991) have shown that, in dialogue situations, English-speaking children as young as three years are able to use passive constructions like *The cat was chased by the dog* in response to questions specifically requiring answers which foreground the patient of the action (i.e. *What happened to the cat?*). But use of the same construction in the context of on-going monologic text construction may emerge considerably later, since children are then required to create the discourse context that motivates the passive construction, as well as the passive construction itself.

The middle voice marker *se* is acquired early by French children and is used frequently as a marker of reflexive and reciprocal relations. Thus, it would be difficult to evoke formal complexity involved in using middle voice *se* as an explanation for its late development. The use of *se* as a middle voice to downgrade the role of the agent in an activity is, in fact, very infrequent, even in the adult written texts.

The data reported on here do not support the claim that French does not rely heavily on the passive voice construction. While it is true that French has other grammatical options, in particular the *on* construction and the middle voice construction, the passive construction is used frequently in the written modality. And indeed, in a study of written narrative and expository texts (Jisa et al., 2002), no significant difference was observed in the use of passives by adult writers of Dutch, English and French.

We have also seen that the analysis of this expanding repertoire of forms is fruitfully informed by comparison of the written and spoken modalities. Passive constructions are rare in spoken discourse (Figure 2), even among adult subjects. In contrast, in the written texts, use of passive voice increases with development, and eventually overtakes generic and indefinite use of *on* among the adult subjects.

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