Recent research (Tomasello, 2003) have suggested that children’s syntactic knowledge starts with simple constructions and grows progressively towards more complex and abstract constructions.

We propose that subject dislocations (e.g. la fille elle dort) could be a marker of such development in children with normal language development.

This development would go through a four-step process.

1. First, children would produce words (X) that correspond to bare forms (e.g. a word with no morphosyntactic markings) such as ‘dort’. TYPE 1
2. Second, children would produce constructions with one open slot (aX) or two open slots (aXbY) that are each made of a word and a highly frequent morphosyntactic marker which is produced automatically, without integrating its meaning and functional value in the utterance. Morphosyntactic markers will not necessarily agree in gender or number (e.g. la fille elle dort). TYPE 2
3. Third, children would produce the same type of constructions as before, but they would take into account the meaning and functional value of the markers and morphosyntactic markers would agree in gender or number (e.g. la fille elle dort). TYPE 3
4. Finally, children would produce complex constructions with two open slots (aXY) without dislocations (e.g. la fille dort). TYPE 4

Experimental task: sentence repetition

The task comprised 80 experimental sentences and 15 trial sentences. All the sentences were syntactically simple constructions that contained a vocabulary appropriate for 3-4-year-olds’ comprehension and production abilities.

Two psycholinguistic variables were manipulated:

1) length: half the sentence (n=40) were short (max. 3 syllables before the verb and 7 syllables for the sentence) while in the other half (n=40), sentences were long (7 syllables before the verb and 12 syllables for the sentence).
2) gender: in half the sentences (n=40) the subject was feminine while in the other half (n=40), the subject was masculine.

Results

Compared to children matched on morphosyntactic productive level, the children with SLI do not produce more dislocations (no group effect on type 2 or 3) even with gender errors.

For type 3 dislocations, the group by gender interaction (F(1, 38)=4.14, p < .05) is significant: a gender effect (more dislocation with a masculine form) is found only in children with SLI.

Conclusion

The results argue in favour of construction-based theories of language acquisition. The number of dislocations produced in a repetition task tends to demonstrate that this is a robust grammatical construction because children often did not follow the provided model, which did not contain any dislocations.

References