

Linguistic development in classroom learners of French

Florence Myles¹

Newcastle University

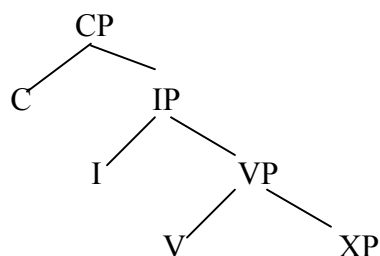
In this talk, I will present some of the work we have been carrying out in the context of the series of FLLOC (French Learner Language Oral Corpora) projects funded by the AHRC, ESRC and British Academy². These projects all had the dual aim of (a) constructing a large database of oral learner French, and (b) documenting and analysing linguistic development in classroom learners of French from beginners to advanced. After briefly presenting the database, fully downloadable for research purposes from the project website, www.flloc.soton.ac.uk, I will explore the development of various aspects of the linguistic system in learners ranging from the early stages of learning French in UK classrooms to A level (baccalauréat equivalent), before analysing the relationship between these different aspects of development.

The view of learning underpinning this paper distinguishes between three different tasks facing learners: (1) the acquisition of L2 phonological realisations of lexical and functional categories which are part of the mental grammar of learners (L2 vocabulary); (2) the acquisition of uninterpretable functional features (e.g. grammatical gender); (3) the acquisition of computational mechanisms enabling learners to combine lexical and functional items.

The production of 60 classroom learners of French (20 beginners, 20 post-beginners and 20 intermediate) performing a one-to-one semi-structured interview is compared using a range of measures aiming to assess development in each of these sub areas, as follows:

- lexical diversity (index of Guiraud)
- gender assignment
- Mean Length of Utterance (as a general measure of morphosyntactic complexity)
- syntactic projections (XP, IP, CP).

Lexical diversity and gender assignment aim to measure the development of (1) and (2) above, i.e. the development of lexis and the development of an uninterpretable feature respectively. The development of syntactic projections is thought to reflect the developing processing ability in learners who are able to combine and/or co-index linguistic elements to form increasingly more complex syntactic structures, as illustrated below:



These developmental stages can be illustrated from our corpus by the following examples:

XP: *la mère en ville* (the mother in town)

VP: *le garçon regarder le lac* (the boy look –fin the lake)

¹ This presentation is based on the work of the whole team, in particular Rosamond Mitchell, Annabelle David, Sarah Rule and Vivienne Rogers, and I wish to thank them.

² Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) award numbers R000223421, RES000220070, Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) RE-AN9057/APN-15456, AR112118, British Academy award number SG 41141.

IP: *ils regardent la télé* (they watch +fin television)

CP: *la grand-mère dit que le monster est faux* (the grandma says that the monster is fake)

The calculation of correlations between all these measures shows that they all develop in parallel except for gender. This seems to suggest that the learning mechanisms underlying the acquisition of lexis and of syntactic computations are general learning mechanisms. Syntactic computations are UG driven and universal and thus transfer to the L2, but what learners need to acquire is the ability to gradually increase the structural domain in which they operate, from XP to VP to IP to CP. Gender assignment, on the other hand, does not correlate with any other aspect of development measured here, suggesting that the acquisition of uninterpretable features such as gender is the result of a different mechanism.