

The development of morphosyntax in classroom learners of French

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This paper 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 which host this conference. As well as the construction of a large database of oral learner French, one of the aims of the FLLOC projects is to document development in classroom learners of French from beginners to advanced, in a range of areas. Some of the detailed work on the development of syntax, lexis and discourse is being presented at this conference by my colleagues, and what I will do in this paper is explore what we mean by morphosyntactic development, and how it relates to development overall in our learners. I will explore the relationship between the development of morphosyntax and other aspects of development such as lexical development and MLU (Mean Length of Utterance). I will investigate both the development of syntactic complexity as evidenced by the projection of lexical and functional phrases on one hand (XP; IP; CP), and the development of so-called uninterpretable features such as gender or verb-raising in French (Hawkins 2001).

I will argue that two different tasks seem to be confronting the learner in their acquisition of morphosyntax: on the one hand, the ability to produce functional projections increasingly higher up the syntactic tree, starting with lexical projections and graduating to functional projections such as CP over time. On the other hand, they have to acquire the uninterpretable features which are part of functional categories and differ from one language to another.

Our data show that the acquisition of syntactic complexity correlates with general measures of development such as MLU and lexical diversity, but that the acquisition of uninterpretable features does not seem to be linked with these more general measures nor with the ability to project functional categories.

This would seem to suggest these two tasks facing learners are different in nature, with the development of some areas of morphosyntax linked to general learning mechanisms unlike the acquisition of uninterpretable features, which are formal properties of Universal Grammar.

Hawkins, R. (2001). *Second language syntax: a generative introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.