Growing into academic French

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What is academic French?

The type of language use necessary for school-based academic success

Complex interaction between

  modality (spoken / written / texting)
  register (ranging from everyday colloquial to formal and distant)
  genre (narrative text, expository text, procedural text....)

Register is a key feature of communicative competence – using language appropriate to the context in which it is produced

Children native speakers early on, but proficient speaker takes time (Berman, 2011)

phonology, morphology, lexicon, syntax
Take-home story

• Communicative competence is a development over the life span
• Experience with different genres is important
• Children write as they speak, but they also learn to speak as they write
• Forms may emerge in writing before speech
• Development involves overcoming certain « natural constraints » of spoken language processing
Three constructions

• Passive
• Non-finite subordination
• Heavy Noun Phrases
2 projets

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<th>Spencer ¹</th>
<th>9-10 years</th>
<th>12-13 years</th>
<th>15-16 years</th>
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<td>Total</td>
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1. « Developing literacy in different contexts and in different languages. » Ruth Berman, PI, Spencer Foundation (USA).
2. « Renforcer la flexibilité lexicale et syntaxique dans l’expression orale et écrite des adolescents. » Harriet Jisa, PI, ANR NT 05-2_41686.
Data collection procedures

• The movie
  • A silent video presenting ordinary events
  • Topic: moral and social conflicts

• Texts to produce
  ▪ Narrative text
    Each participant wrote and related a personal story concerning a problem or a quarrel

  ▪ Expository text
    Each participant wrote and told a text in which s/he presented his/her ideas about problems between people.
Modality of production

• Written text
  • relaxed temporal constraint
  • more time available for planning
  • No immediate interlocutor

• Spoken text
  • Strong temporal constraint
  • Less time available for planning
  • Interlocutor present

• Important linguistic differences between the two modalities in many/most languages (Berman & Ravid, 2009; Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2009; Blanche-Benveniste, 1995; Gadet, 1989; Tolchinsky & Jisa, 2017)
Personal Narrative vs Expository Texts

Personal Narrative
- specific information (time, people, place)
- clear temporal and causal structure
- speaker involvement
- acquired early
- knowledge telling (Bereiter & Scardamalia 1987)

Expository
- generic information
- atemporal and non linear structure
- impersonal stance
- knowledge transforming (Bereiter & Scardamalia 1987)
Construction 1: Passive construction

Available?

Q: Qu’est-ce qu’arrive au chat? ‘What happened to the cat?’
R: Le chat est chassé par le chien. The cat/He was chased by the dog.

Function?

1. topicalize a patient
2. Downgrade the agent

(Keenan & Dryer, 2006, Givón 1981)
Preverbal Message  (Levelt 1989)

Semantic structure

- **predicat**: FRAPPER (‘HIT’)
- **agent**: Jeanne
- **patient**: Pierre

Pragmatic Structure

- **topicalization**
Formulator:
FRAPPER (‘hit’) (Jeanne, Pierre)

Jeanne a frappé Pierre. (‘Jeanne hit Pierre’)
Pierre a reçu un coup de la part de Jeanne. (‘Pierre received a blow from Jeanne’)
C'est Pierre que Jeanne a frappé. (‘It’s Pierre that Jeanne hit’)
Pierre, Jeanne l'a frappé. (‘Pierre, Jeanne hit him’)
C'est Jeanne qui a frappé Pierre. (It’s Jeanne who hit Pierre)
Pierre était frappé par Jeanne. (‘Pierre was hit by Jeanne’)
Pierre était frappé. (‘Pierre was hit’)

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Competition

SOLVE
(predicat)

someone problems
(agent) (patient/undergoer)

Les problèmes ont été résolus tout de suite.
(‘The problems were solved rapidly’)

On a résolu les problèmes tout de suite.
(‘One resolved the problems rapidly)

Les problèmes se sont résolus tout de suite.
(‘The problems resolved (themselves) rapidly.)
On (‘one’) (> l’homme)

Specific: « nous » (‘we’)
- on a passé les vacances dans le Midi
  (‘we spent our vacation in the Midi’)

Generic: « tu / vous » (‘you’); « tout le monde » (‘everyone’); « les gens » (‘people’)
- en France on mange les escargots
  (‘in France everyone/you/people eat snails’)

Indefinite: quelqu’un (‘someone’)
- on a volé mon stylo (‘someone stoled my pen’)
- mon stylo a été volé (‘my pen was stolen’)

on peut voir enfin tout le monde en a conscience euh enfin quand vous vous côtoyez les uns et les autres que vous êtes amenés à rencontrer certains problèmes même dans le cadre scolaire [Adult11, Exp, Sp]

‘(One can see well everyone is conscious eh well when you mix yourself with others you are brought to encounter some problems even within the school context’)
Expectations

1. On (generic/indefinite) diminishes in written discourse:

Written French tolerates lexical noun phrase subjects:

On a résolu les problèmes. (‘One resolved the problems’)
Les problèmes ont été résolus (‘the problems were resolved’)

2. Generic/idefinite on and passive constructions come into competition for expository texts: distant speaker stance

J’ai une solution simple pour les problèmes (‘I have a simple solution for the problems’)
On peut trouver une solution simple pour les problèmes (‘One can find a simple solution for the problems’)
Une solution simple aux problèmes peut être trouvée. (‘A simple solution for the problems can be found’)

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

*on* decrease with age
$(F_{(3,152)} = 2.59, p < 0.05)$

*on* characteristic of spoken texts
$(F_{(1,152)} = 5.61, p < 0.01)$

Figure 3. Distribution of passive constructions in spoken and written expository texts (in %)

Passive increase with age
$(F_{(3,152)} = 8.33, p < 0.0001)$

Passive characteristic of written texts
$(F_{(1,152)} = 23.63, p < 0.0001)$
Donc je vais parler des sujets euh conflictuels euh ou euh affectifs qu’on pourrait rencontrer dans la vie de tous les jours [adult33, Exp, Spoken]

‘So I’m going to talk about conflictual eh or eh affective subjects that one can encounter in everyday life’

Les problèmes entre les gens, rencontrés durant leur vie scolaire et leur vie professionnelle de tous les jours, sont finalement les mêmes. [adult33, Exp, Written]

‘Problems between people, encountered during their academic life or their everyday professional life, are after all the same’

Il y a d’autres problèmes qu’on a tendance à négliger [adult11f, Exp, Spoken]

‘there are other problems which one tends to neglect’

Les autres difficultés de rapports entre les personnes au niveau collège sont par contre un peu oubliées [adult11f, Exp, Written]

‘Other difficulties in personal relations in junior high are on the other hand somewhat forgotten’
Conclusions

• Gradual control over the multiple options provided by the language
• Later language development influenced by grammatical knowledge exercised in written modality
• Children learn to speak as they write, passive constructions in written discourse before spoken discourse (9-10-year-olds) and then transfer into spoken discourse (12-13-year-olds)
Construction 2: Non-finite subordination

Continuum of Clause packages

isotaxis – parataxis – finite hypotaxis – non-finite hypotaxis
(Haiman & Thompson, 1988, Hopper & Thompson, 2008)

A window on language development
(Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2009)

Texts divided into modified Unit-T (cooreferential subjects) main clause and all its dependent clauses
(Hunt, 1970; Aparici, Tolchinsky & Rosado, 2000)
• Isotaxis – no dependency
  • Juxtaposition
    
    *Mon père les a injuriés / Une demi-heure plus tard mon père est parti* (10-year-old 01, narrative written) « *My father insulted them / Half an hour later my father went away* »
  
  • Coordination
    
    *Elle me l’a mis dans ma poche / et elle m’a accusée de vol.* (10-year-old 01, narrative written) « *She put it in my pocket and she accused me of stealing* »

• Parataxis – dependent strings
  
  • Juxtaposition/coordination with subject ellipsis
    
    *Quand une personne a les dernières baskets ou le dernier portable / et _ fait envie à une personne.* (12-year-old 32, written exposition) “*When a person has the latest tennis shoes or the latest cell phone / and ___ makes someone jealous.*”
  
  • Complement clause
    
    *Sur le racisme moi j(e) pense / que c’est une chose euh totalement inutile.* (12-year-old 13, expository spoken) «*Concerning racisme, me I think / that it is something useless* »
Hypotaxis – syntactic dependency

- Finite: relative clauses, adverbials

  Un jour, dans mon ancien collège qui s’appelait Olivier de Serres, une fille est venue me chercher et commençait à me pousser. (12-year-old 25, narrative written)

  “One day in my old middle school which was called Olivier de Serres, a girl came to get me and started to push me.”

- Non-finite: infinitive, gerund, participial clauses

  Arrivée au vestiaire des femmes, j’attendais un instant qu’une cabine se libère. (Adult, expository written)

  ‘Having arrived in the women’s dressing room, I waited a minute for a room to open’
Non Finite Hypotaxis (1)

Modality (F=15.127; p>0.000)
Non Finite Hypotaxis (2)

‘Having arrived in the women’s dressing room, I waited a minute for a room to open’
Discussion

Modality and age impact the syntactic packages observed

Syntactic development AND writing development
Comparisons subject by subject

*alors j'arrive.* et y avait énormément d'monde dans les vestiaires. donc j'attends (Adult, Oral, Narration)

‘So I get there and there was a lot of people in the dressing room. So I wait’

*Arrivée au vestiaire* des femmes, j'attendais un instant qu'une cabine se libère. (Adult, Written, Narration)

‘Having arrived in the women’s dressing room, I wait a minute for a room to open’ (Adult, Written, Narration)
Construction 3 “Heavy” Noun Phrases


Syntax
One lexical NP per clause
Non lexical subject/agent

He hit the dog
preferred to
The man hit the dog.
A man hit the dog.

Pragmatics
One new element per clause
Old information in subject position

He hit a dog.
pREFERRED to
The man hit a dog.

Window on language development

(DuBois, Kumpf, Ashby, 2003; Ravid & Berman, 2010; Skarabela, 2007)
‘Natural language’ - Avoid heavy subjects

1) Length of Noun Phrase in words
2) Quality and number of Noun Phrase modifiers
3) Syntactic depth
4) Syntactic variability (Mazur, 2005; Ravid, et al., 2002)
Parce que si la terre était comme ça, ça ferait des énormes dégâts. (Fg20, EW, 9 years)
(Because if the world was like that, that would make enormous problems)

Les autres difficultés de rapports entre les personnes au niveau collège lycée sont par contre, eux, un peu oubliées. (Fs11, EW, adult)
(The other difficulties of relations between people at high school level are, them, in opposition somewhat forgotten)

C’est la note du voisin. (Fg23, EW, 9 years)
(It's the grade of the neighbor)

Il est également possible d'intégrer un médiateur au sein d'école qui ferait le tour des écoles. (Fs03, EW, adult)
(It is also possible to integrate a mediator within the school who would visit all the schools.)
General complexity of lexical noun phrases

Age:
F (3,304) = 22.46, p <.0001

Text type:
F (1,304) = 26.889, p <.0001

Modality:
F (1,304) = 67.036, p <.0001

Age:
F (3,304) = 21.439, p <.0001

Text type:
F (1,304) = 24.126, p <.0001

Non significative

Population

Subject position

Non subject position

9 years 12 years 15 years adults

9 years 12 years 15 years adult

Subject position

Non subject position

0 0,5 1 1,5 2 2,5 3 3,5

0 0,5 1 1,5 2 2,5 3 3,5

ns es nw ew

ns es nw ew

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• Lexical Noun Phrases more frequent in non-subject position
  • New information carried by the lexicon
  • New information at the end

• Not simply a linguistic development
  • Children can produce long, complex (« heavy ») lexical noun phrases, but not in subject position

• Lexical Noun Phrases more frequent in expository texts than in personal narratives
  • Expository texts need ideas, generalities, not specific reference to people, places
Language development for academic success

• Communicative competence develops over the life span

• Requires experience in different modalities (spoken, written)
  • Written language impacts spoken language

• Requires experience with different genres
Thank you!!
Isotaxis

« My father insulted them / Half an hour later my father went away »
« She put it in my pocket / and she accused me of stealing »

Text Type (F=88.113; p>0.000); Age (F=5.205; p>0.003)
Text Type*Age (F=5.496; p>0.002)
“When a person has the latest tennis shoes or the latest cell phone / and ___ makes someone jealous.”

«Concerning racism, me I think / that it is something useless »
“One day in my old middle school which was called Olivier de Serres, a girl came to get me and started to push me.”
Finite Hypotaxis (2)

Modality (F = 48.037; p > 0.000)
Discussion

• Is learning to speak as you write important? Are children in grammar school and middle school encouraged to give presentations? How are they judged?

• Are narrative genres (personal or fictional) more prevalent in primary curriculum? What is the role of other genres? Argumentative? Procedural?