

## The acquisition of focus: Production and comprehension

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Focus in natural language has an important communicative function. Different definitions of focus are available in the literature. Some take it to be the part of an utterance that answers a corresponding *wh*-question (Reinhart 2006). Others (Schwarzschild 1999) take focus to be material that is not discourse-linked. Yet others distinguish exhaustive and/or contrastive focus from new information focus (É. Kiss 1998). What these accounts share is that focussing is a universally available tool in languages to highlight a certain part of an utterance. Focus marking indicates to the hearer what the speaker intended to assert. Given this highlighting function, it is not surprising that focus is often marked prosodically: for instance, in English by shifting the pitch accent to the focal constituent. Even in languages like Hungarian, where there is obligatory syntactic focus marking (Szendrői 2001, 2003; Gervain 2009), it is accompanied by focal accent.

The acquisition of focus shows seemingly paradoxical behaviour: children have been found to employ prosodic focus marking correctly at least in certain pragmatic contexts as young as 2 years (Wieman 1976; Furrow 1982; Hornby & Hass 1970; Baltaxe 1984), while they seem to find it problematic to interpret focal accent at least until the age of 6 (Lahey 1974; Bates 1976; Paterson et al 2003; Szendrői 2004). In fact, Hornby (1971) found that the very same children who showed good production, had comprehension problems.

Earliest accounts attributed comprehension problems to perceptive problems (Atkinson-King 1973; Vogel & Raimy 2002). But this is unlikely, given evidence suggesting that even younger infants have a high sensitivity for intonational prosodic information (Mehler et al 1988). Later, children have been shown to be able to perceive focal accent, but fail to interpret it as such (Cutler & Swinney 1986). This was interpreted as a lack of full competence for focus. A third account was presented in Szendrői (2004, 2010). Here, it was argued that children have the concept of focus at their disposal and an understanding of prosodic focus-marking. This explains their adultlike production. Comprehension of focus presents an interpretative ambiguity problem, which children find problematic to resolve. This conclusion has been brought into question by Chen (2010) who argued that a closer investigation of 4-6-year-olds' production and comprehension revealed partial competence in both domains.

Much of previous research involved explicit judgment tasks on the part of the children. But there is reason to believe that the nature of these tasks may have had a detrimental effect on the results. Hüttner et al (2004) found unadultlike performance in a classical picture selection task with German children, whereas Höhle et al (2009) found adultlike competence from eye tracking. They attributed this variation in children's performance to their inability to put to use their adultlike knowledge in certain tasks (Höhle et al 2009: 36).

Given previous findings, our hypothesis is that children have an adultlike knowledge of focus from an early age, but task-specific constraints sometimes stop them from putting their knowledge to full use, especially in comprehension experiments. Our proposal is to perform two experiments with English, French and German children: a production and a comprehension task. In the latter, we plan to use eye-tracking to avoid verbal responses.

We will take a cross-linguistic perspective to study the effect of *how* focus is marked: only prosodically, as in English; prosodically and, in addition, also optionally syntactically, as in German; or obligatorily syntactically (and prosodically), as in French. Different markers might be acquired at different ages (Sauermann et al, in press). Further, different markers may show different behaviour in comprehension experiments: it is possible that a misplaced prosodic accent is less likely to be interpreted as incorrect in a judgment task than an ill-applied syntactic construction.

We are planning to administer the two tasks to children in two age groups: 3-year-olds and 5-6-year-olds. Investigating these two ages allows us to track the developmental trajectory of focus comprehension and production. The younger children are at a developmental stage where the production-comprehension discrepancy has been demonstrated, whereas the older children are at a more adultlike stage.