"Il avait un p'tit bobo": the development of reference time in child language

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If as suggested by Boas (1911), Gumperz and Levinson (1991), or Lucy (1997), language shapes experience, language can also create worlds of its own, out of our remembrance of things past, our projects or dreams of things to come and the figments of our imagination, worlds that are inhabited and shared with others thanks to linguistic forms such as the French *imparfait* to refer to past or fictive events.

Example 1 *(Anaé 4;00)* CLICK to watch the video extract
MOT: pourquoi ? *why ?*
CHI: parce+que quand [/] quand ⟨j(e) v(ais)⟩ [///] j' ai joué à ça bah [/] bah **il avait un (pe)tit bobo**. *because when [/] when ⟨I 'll⟩ [///] I played with this well [/] well **he had a little scratch*** (referring to the toy animal she is holding)
MOT: à ça quoi ? quand tu as joué à quoi ? *with this what ? When you played with what ?*

STATE OF THE ART

Linguistic constructions used by caretakers refer to or index events, processes, notions that children grasp through their use in dialogue, grounded in everyday experience. They learn "modes of experiencing the world" (Ochs, 2012: p.149) through sound, texture, visual and embodied forms. The constructions children use themselves in context progressively integrate features that depend on their culture as well as their social and language experience.

Usage based Construction grammar (Tomasello, 2003) allows us to capture
- how exemplars of constructions are generalized and organized thanks to daily use;
- how children learn to use very abstract semantic notions or speak about elements that only exist in or through language.

Weist (1986) suggests that in the course of child language acquisition, the concept of time develops in several stages organized according to Reichenbach's principles (1947). In the final stage, children master reference time and have the ability to tell stories or talk about imaginary people, objects or events.

RESEARCH QUESTION

It is fundamental to understand how children can learn to use complex functions to refer to absent or abstract entities or displaced events such as the French past imperfective *imparfait*, (Parisse et al., 2018) as they do not correspond to referents in the here and now: they cannot be perceived or manipulated. **Our hypothesis is that children can productively use conventional forms to express displacements and abstract reference around their fourth year because they have been socialized to them very early on thanks to their interactive input.**

CORPUS AND METHOD

We tested this hypothesis on the longitudinal data of seven French-speaking children videotaped monthly with their parents (*Paris Corpus*, Morgenstern & Parisse, 2012). We focused on a form that is mainly used to mark a displacement between the speaker and the here and now, the *imparfait* (Patard, 2007). Our goal was to understand how children can learn its function. We categorized the sequences into several genres that were either displaced and good candidates for switches of reference time (we called them **Langspace situations**), or grounded in the here and now. We coded all the verb forms in the adults' and children's productions.

Example 2 *(Anaé 1;06)* CLICK to watch the video extract
MOT: ouh@i c'est dur ! *oh that's hard!*
    CHI is holding the string and MOT is pulling on the music box to help CHI
    CHI sourit *CHI is smiling*
MOT: ça c'était quand tu étais tout petit bébé ! *that was when you were a tiny little baby!*
CHI: mm *mm*
MOT: hum ? *huh?*
MOT: **c'était la musique** ! ***It was the music !***
CHI: hum. *huh.*

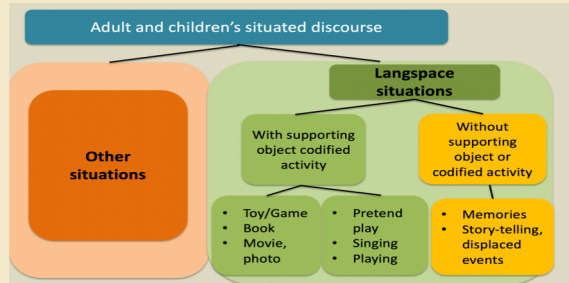**Langspace situation-WITH supporting objet-other support**

Figure 1: Coding system

Example 3 (Antoine 3;09) CLICK to watch the video extract
GDM: et [/] et raconte à [/] à [/] à tonton_Christophe +/. *and tell Uncle Christophe the story*
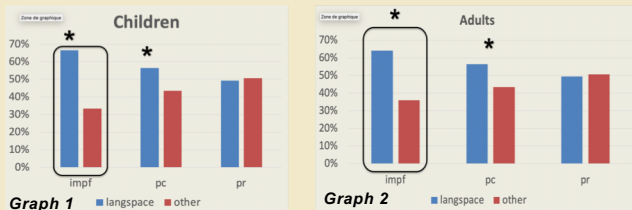CHI: +< et Flora elle **était pas là** . *and Flora **wasn't there***
OBS: ah pourquoi, tu crois qu' elle est malade ? *ah why, do you think she's sick?*

Langspace situation-WITHOUT supporting objet-Memories

RESULTS

Graph 1

Graph 2

Graph 1 indicates the percentage of **langspace** and **other** situations for each tense. The percentage of *imparfaits* used for langspace situations is thus visually more spectacular. Graph 2 illustrates a similar trend for adults.
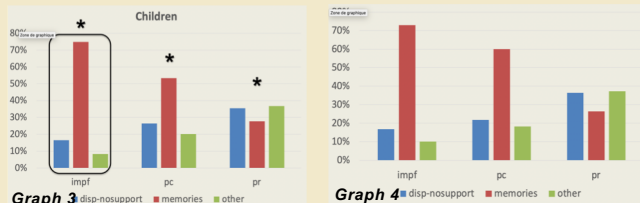
Graph 3

Graph 4

Graph 3 and 4 illustrate the significant role played by memories in the use of the *imparfait* as well as the *passé composé* in both the children and adults' productions.

Table 1

		adult					
		disp-no-support	memories	book	pretend-play	game	other
child	disp-no-support	0.98	0.63	0.90	0.86	0.90	0.92
	memories	0.46	0.96	0.35	0.09	0.14	0.17
	book	0.76	0.43	0.92	0.80	0.81	0.74
	pretend-play	0.93	0.47	0.94	0.83	0.94	0.89
	game	0.62	0.04	0.68	0.79	0.75	0.76
	other	0.88	0.28	0.93	0.94	0.97	0.93

Table 1 indicates very strong correlations (in green) between children's and adults' use of tenses in the same type of situation. This confirms and complements the previous statistics.

CONCLUSIONS

The *imparfait* is especially used in situations when people are talking about memories (this is true for all families).
The adults use the *imparfait* in specific situations, even when the children are too young to use it themselves.
Other tenses are used in other situations. Tense use can be family specific (for example the present or the past can be used for story-telling).

Children experience the use of **examplars** in **specific interactive situations**. The situations involve social actions, cognitive mindsets, and languaged spaces.
The examplars will later be re-used and **generalized** to a larger range of situations with similar features, allowing the children to express meanings that they have experienced before with the same specific linguistic forms.

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