

The acquisition of definiteness distinctions by L2 learners of French*

Petra Sleeman
University of Amsterdam

1. Introduction

In this paper I will be concerned with the acquisition of the pragmatic-syntactic interface by L2 learners of French. For pragmatic features it might be the case that they have a universal character, but the interface with for example syntax has in every case to be learned, both in L1 and in L2 acquisition. Furthermore, for L2 learners it might be necessary to learn that relations between pragmatics and syntax in L2 are different than relations between pragmatics and syntax in L1.

Ferdinand (2002) shows that the acquisition of the French dislocation construction, a pragmatic-syntactic interface structure emphasizing the topic of a sentence, is not difficult for Dutch L2 learners (secondary school pupils in her study), because Dutch also has a dislocation construction with the same pragmatic value as the French one. Ferdinand tries to show that there is a relation between the use in Dutch and in French: the Dutch learners use the dislocation construction in both languages or in neither of the languages. Ferdinand concludes therefore that there is transfer of a style of topic marking from Dutch to French. Sleeman (2004) shows that although transfer may play a role, another aspect is important for the acquisition of the dislocation construction, viz. a stay of some months in France, French dislocation being mainly used in the spoken language.

In this paper I discuss the acquisition of another pragmatic-syntactic interface phenomenon, viz. the syntactic expression by means of the article of new and old information in L2 French. Whereas Dutch also expresses newness

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by means of the article, so that the pragmatic-syntactic interface relations for the article might be transferred from Dutch to French, Japanese does not have articles, so that transfer is not possible. In this paper I compare the acquisition of definiteness distinctions by Dutch and Japanese guided L2 learners of French. But before discussing the acquisition by the Dutch and Japanese L2 learners of French, I show how definiteness distinctions are acquired in L1 French.

The paper is organized as follows. In section 2 the acquisition of definiteness distinctions in L1 French is discussed. The acquisition of definiteness distinctions in L2 French by Dutch and Japanese guided learners is studied in section 3. In section 4 the results are discussed, followed by a conclusion in section 5.

2. The acquisition of the use of the article in L1 French

De Cat (2004) claims that children learning L1 French do not have any problems at all with the acquisition of the syntactic expression of newness in French. Her paper is a reaction to a study by Hickmann et al. (1996) on the acquisition of the article by French L1 learners. In Hickmann et al.'s experiment children from three age groups (on average 4;10, 7;1 and 10;6 years old) were asked to tell two picture stories to a blindfolded person. Hickmann et al. showed that even seven-year-olds regularly used the definite article for a newly introduced referent. Their data suggest that the discourse-internal function of indefinite/definite determiners for the contrastive marking of new/given information is learned late.

According to De Cat however, the data resulting from studies on L1 acquisition of the syntactic expression of newness by means of the article have to be treated carefully. In the first place, in spite of a strong correlation between indefiniteness and information newness, as in (1),

- (1) *J'ai trouvé une noix.*
I have found a nut
'I've found a nut.'

there are cases in which a definite article can be used for a seemingly newly introduced referent, as is the case for a unique instantiation (2)-(3) or associative anaphora (4)-(5):

- (2) [*Le/*un*] *soleil sèche ses habits.*
the/a sun dries his clothes
'The sun dries his clothes.'

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- (3) *Il rentre à [la/*une] maison.*
He returns to the/an house
'He goes back home.'
- (4) *J'ai acheté une nouvelle voiture mais j'ai déjà perdu les clés.*
I have bought a new car but I have already lost the keys
'I've bought a new car but I've already lost the keys.'
- (5) *Il pêchait bien tranquillement puis tout à coup il est tombé dans la rivière.*
He was fishing peacefully then suddenly he is fallen in the river
'He was fishing peacefully and then suddenly he fell in the river.'

A second reason for treating the data resulting from studies on L1 acquisition of the article carefully, is that children sometimes have another perception of the world than adults. Although in Hickmann et al.'s experiment the listener was blindfolded and could not see the pictures, the children regularly used the definite article for a newly introduced referent. De Cat's interpretation is that children do not always realize that another person, for instance someone they are talking to on the telephone, cannot see everything they see. This might be the explanation for the children's use of the definite article for newly introduced referents in Hickmann's experiment. The children saw the picture book, so for them the referent was not new but present in the physical context, viz. the picture book. The use of the definite article is appropriate in that case. The children forgot, however, that the listener could not see the referent. The erroneous use of the definite article for newly introduced referents by children seems thus to be due to a cognitive problem with respect to shared knowledge.

De Cat suggests thus that Hickmann et al.'s results are due to the experimental techniques used. She found corroborating evidence for this interpretation of Hickmann et al.'s results in the study of children's spontaneous production. De Cat examined the use of the article in her corpora, which contain data from five monolingual French children, who were recorded for a period of 18 months on average, with ages ranging from 1;10 to 3;6, which means that the children throughout the study were younger than even the youngest participants in Hickmann et al.'s elicitation experiment. De Cat distinguishes three types of errors that the children could make. A Type I error is the use of a new, non-unique definite instead of an indefinite in a focus position in typical referent-establishing constructions like (1).¹ In Hickmann et al.'s study, the children made only a very small number of Type I errors, in De Cat's interpretation of the data. In De Cat's corpora of spontaneous speech the children did not make mistakes of this type and furthermore definiteness distinctions were used in a target-like fashion in the presentational construction from the earliest attested cases, which

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indicates that children master the structural marking of referent newness at a very early age. A Type II error is the use of an indefinite for a topic, which in the adult language must be definite.² If new information and indefiniteness are not inextricably linked in the mind of children, it can be expected that they use indefinites in dislocated DPs, which are always topics:

- (6) **Un clown, il arrive.*
a clown he arrives

The children of De Cat's corpora did not make Type II errors: when indefinites are dislocated in their speech, it is with a generic or a D-linked interpretation. A Type III error occurs when the child uses a definite to introduce a new referent, although this referent is not salient enough to be identifiable by the hearer, for instance as a topic in the dislocation construction:

- (7) *Le clown, il arrive.*
the clown he arrives

According to De Cat, the children in Hickmann et al.'s study especially make Type III errors. Because of the situation, the picture book they can see, they consider a non-salient referent to be salient and encode it as a (definite) topic. In De Cat's corpora of spontaneous speech production, type III errors were not noticed, which indicates again that children master the structural marking of referent newness at a very early age, contra Hickmann et al.'s claim.

De Cat takes it as uncontroversial that children can distinguish new from old information appropriately from the onset of language production, a point argued for by Baker and Greenfield (1988) among others. What children have to learn, is to use the correct syntactic encodings for the expression of new or old information. According to De Cat children have acquired this at a very early age already.

In the next section I study the acquisition of the syntactic expression of the pragmatic notions of new and old information by adults learning L2 French.

3. The acquisition of the use of the article in L2 French

In order to see how L2 learners of French acquire the pragmatic-syntactic interface rules that relate the pragmatic notions of old and new information to definite and indefinite DPs, I tested a group of Dutch and a group of Japanese learners of French.

As in Hickmann et al.'s study, the test was an elicitation test based on a picture book. All subjects had the picture book *The Frog Story* before them and were asked to tell the story in French and, although this was not important for the present research, to use past tenses. The subjects were allowed to quickly leaf through the booklet before telling the story. Words that were supposed to be difficult were given in French, but without the article. These were the French words for almost all referents that had to be used to tell the story properly, apart from the French words for 'boy', 'dog' and 'hole'. Although there was no blind-folded listener, the subjects were told that their story would be recorded on tape, and would be heard later by someone who did not know the story and would not see the pictures.

3.1 Dutch learners of L2 French and the acquisition of definiteness distinctions

The Dutch group was composed of 6 female students studying at Utrecht University. All students had learned French during at least 4 years at school, so that they had had at least 400 hours of instruction in French, and four of them were students majoring in French at university since two, three or four years. One of them had been working in France during one year.

In most cases the Dutch students used the article correctly. There were, however, some incorrect uses, which might just as in Hickmann et al.'s test be attributed to the fact that an elicitation test based on a picture story was used. In (8), *la taupe* 'the mole' is used as a definite topic, although it is newly introduced. This is a Type III error, the only important type of definiteness error the children made in Hickmann et al.'s test, in De Cat's interpretation of the data:

- (8) *Mais la taupe mordrait le jeune garçon.*
but the mole would-bite the young boy
'But a mole bit the boy.'

The students made, however, also Type I errors. They used definites for newly introduced referents in focus. The children in Hickmann et al.'s test made very few Type I errors, in De Cat's interpretation of the data. In (9) *le bocal*, 'the jar', is newly introduced, in (10) *le tronc d'arbre* 'the tree-trunk', in (11) *le grand trou* 'the big gap' and in (12) *le cerf* 'the deer':

- (9) *La grenouille est escapée le bocal.*
the frog is escaped the jar
'The frog escaped from the jar (in which he was).'

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- (10) *Le jeune garçon regardait le tronc d'arbre.*
the young boy watched the tree-trunk
'The boy watched a tree-trunk.'
- (11) *Et le cerf a tombé le garçon dans le grand trou.*
and the deer has fallen the boy in the big gap
'And the deer has thrown the boy in the big gap.'
- (12) *Et il prend dans sa main la tête du cerf.*
and he takes in his hand the head of-the deer

The Dutch students did not make Type II errors, i.e. they did not use an indefinite DP for an already introduced or salient referent. They only made some Type I and Type III errors: they used 7 (= 7.2%) definite DPs for 96 newly introduced referents in focus (Type I error: 1 occurrence) and in topic position (Type III error: 6 occurrences), which means that there were 1.9% errors for a total number of 370 referential DPs in the Dutch corpus of L2 French utterances. According to De Cat, the children in Hickmann et al.'s test especially made Type III errors, i.e. they only used definite DPs for newly introduced referents in topic position.

In the previous section it was shown that according to De Cat children have problems with respect to shared knowledge, which might explain the type III errors. They use new referents as topics, i.e. as definite DPs, because for them they are salient. Adults should not have problems any more with respect to shared knowledge. It seems to me therefore that the type I and III errors that the Dutch learners of French make are due to another factor, viz. the fact that they are not telling a story to another person, but are just describing the pictures they see. They are thinking aloud. This favors the use of definite determiners instead of indefinites.

De Cat takes it as uncontroversial that children can distinguish new from old information appropriately from the onset of language production. What children have to learn, is to use the correct syntactic encodings for the expression of new or old information. I interpreted the saliency violations by the Dutch students as being extra-linguistic. The many correct uses of the article in their speech production suggests that they possess the required competence of French to encode new referents appropriately. The question that can be raised is how the adult L2 learners have acquired this competence. Have they learned the correct syntactic encodings in L2 French for the expression of the possibly innate competence to distinguish new from old information or does their L1 play a role? To answer this question I first turn to the acquisition of definiteness distinctions by Japanese L2 learners of French.

3.2 *Japanese learners of L2 French and the acquisition of definiteness distinctions*

Contrary to Dutch, which has both definite and indefinite articles, Japanese does not have articles. In order to study the acquisition of the syntactic encoding of definiteness by Japanese learners of L2 French, I asked nine Japanese students of French to tell the Frog Story in French. The stories were recorded and analysed. All Japanese students were participating in a French language course for which a minimum of 100 hours of previous guided acquisition was required. Most of the students however had had at least 300 hours of formal instruction and most of them had been living in France for at least four months. Just like the Dutch students, all Japanese students were able to tell the stories in French, with the help of a small list of French words (nouns were presented without the article).

It turned out that the Japanese students had much more difficulties with the syntactic encoding of new and old referents than the Dutch students. As expected, they sometimes left out the article, just as in Japanese, especially after a preposition:

- (13) *Grenouille est sortie dans le pot.*
 frog is come out in the jar
 ‘The frog had left the jar.’
- (14) *Ils cherchaient grenouille.*
 they searched frog
 ‘They were searching the frog.’
- (15) *Et après il s’ est fait tomber par cerf.*
 and then he himself is made fall by deer
 ‘And then the deer made him fall.’

They also made Type II errors, i.e. they used indefinites for already introduced referents. The Dutch students did not make these errors. In (16) an indefinite noun is in focus position, in (17) it is in topic position and in (18) it is a dislocated topic:

- (16) *Le garçon et le chien a trouvé la grenouille n’ est pas dans un pot.*
 the boy and the dog has found the frog NEG is NEG in a jar
 ‘The boy and the dog discovered that the frog was not in the jar.’
- (17) *Un garçon a ouvert la fenêtre.*
 a boy has opened the window
 ‘The boy opened the window.’

- (18) *Mais un garçon, il n' avait pas arrêté chercher un grenouille.*
But a boy he NEG had NEG stopped search a frog
'But the boy did not stop searching the frog'

Just like the children in Hickmann et al.'s experiment and the Dutch students in my test, the Japanese students made some Type I and Type III errors, i.e. they used definites for newly introduced referents in focus or topic position. But whereas the children and the Dutch students might have made these errors because of the test which was based on a picture story, so that all referents were present in the situational context, the Type I and Type III errors in the speech production of the Japanese students were more numerous and could not always be attributed to the picture task. To see why this should be so, consider (19), which exemplifies a Type I error, a definite DP for a newly introduced referent in focus position:

- (19) *Il y avait un garçon et un chien. Ils avaient une grenouille dans le pot.*
There were a boy and a dog. They had a frog in
the jar
'There were a boy and a dog. They had a frog in a jar.'

In section 3.1 I claimed that the erroneous use of the definite article by the Dutch students was due to the fact that the students were sometimes describing the pictures instead of telling a story. Sentences (8)-(12) can all be seen as oral descriptions of pictures. With the use of (19), however, the Japanese student is not describing a picture, but is telling a story.

Sentence (20) exemplifies the use of a newly introduced referent in a presentational construction, a Type I error that the children in Hickmann et al.'s test never made, according to De Cat:

- (20) *Là-bas il y a le cerf il y avait le cerf.*
there there-is the deer there-was the deer
'There was a deer there.'

An example of a Type III error, a definite for a newly introduced referent in topic position, is given in (21):

- (21) *Un petit garçon a trouvé une trou dans le terre et*
a little boy has found a hole in the ground and

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soudain le taupe sortit du trou.
suddenly the mole comes-out of-the hole
'The boy found a hole in the ground and suddenly a mole came out of the hole.'

There were no examples of newly introduced referents as a definite topic in dislocated position, but there were examples of the reverse, a newly introduced referent as an indefinite in a typical topic position, the dislocated position. We could call this type of error a Type IV error:

- (22) *Et un hibou, il était sorti de la trou dans l' arbre et*
and an owl he was went-out of the hole in the tree and
des abeilles ils ont commencé attaquer le chien.
IND.PL. bees they have begun attack the dog
'And an owl came out of the hole and bees began to attack the dog.'

The examples mentioned so far show that the Japanese students have problems with the syntactic expression of newness. They made many mistakes. Furthermore, they corrected themselves sometimes, as the examples (23)-(24) illustrate, which shows that they are not sure about the correct use of the article:

- (23) *Ils avaient un grenouille dans le pot dans un pot.*
They had a frog in the jar in a jar
'They had a frog in a jar.'
- (24) *L' hibou est a suivi un petit garçon le petit garçon.*
the owl is has followed a little boy the little boy
'The owl has followed the little boy.'

One student almost consistently used the definite article with the dog and the indefinite article with the boy:

- (25) *Et le chien et un garçon regardent la grenouille.*
and the dog and a boy watch the frog
'And the dog and the boy watch the frog.'
- (26) *Un garçon, il avait crié et le chien, il regardait dans le forêt.*
a boy he had shouted and the dog he looked in the forest
'The boy shouted and the dog looked in the forest.'

The Japanese students also used definite determiners different from the definite article, but often in an incorrect way. Whereas in (27) the demonstrative has an antecedent in the immediate context, in (28) this is not the case. Some

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students seem to overuse the demonstrative determiner and use it where they should use a definite article:

- (27) *Soudainement ce cerf s'arrêtait. Ce garçon et son chien sont tombés.*
suddenly that deer stopped. That boy and his dog are fallen
'Suddenly the deer stopped. The boy and the dog fell.'
- (28) *Tout à coup une taupe s'apparaît et ce garçon blessait son nez.*
suddenly a mole appears and that boy wounded his nose
'Suddenly a mole appeared and the boy hurt his nose.'

The Japanese students also used a possessive pronoun when there was no antecedent for the pronoun in the immediate preceding context:

- (29) *Ils ne peuvent pas le trouver. Son chien est tombé de la*
they NEG can NEG him find. his dog is fallen of the
fenêtre et puis un petit garçon a aidé son chien.
window and then a little boy has helped his dog
'They could not find him. The dog fell out of the window and then the
boy helped his dog.'
- (30) *Et soudain le taupe sortit du trou et son chien a trouvé*
and suddenly the mole comes out of-the hole and his dog has found
une maison de abeilles.
a house of bees
'And suddenly a mole came out of the hole and the dog found a
beehive.'

The preceding data show thus that the relation between the pragmatic notions 'old' and 'new' referent and the syntactic expression by means of a definite or indefinite DP is much more difficult to acquire for the Japanese L2 students of French than for the Dutch students or for the children learning French as their L1. In the next section I discuss the question as to why this should be so.

4. Discussion

The fact that Dutch has articles with definiteness distinctions while Japanese does not have articles suggests that L1 plays a role in the acquisition of the syntactic expression of newness by means of the article. This had already been shown by Zobl (1984). Zobl noted that the acquisition of the determiners *a* and *the* in English is faster for L2 learners whose native language also makes a distinction between indefinite and definite determiners (such as French and

Spanish) than for those L2 learners whose native language does not make such a distinction (such as Chinese or Russian). For Zobl this meant that there was positive transfer of properties from French and Spanish to English. More specifically, I propose that interface relations between the pragmatic distinction ‘new’ versus ‘old’ and its syntactic expression by means of an article can be positively transferred (cf. Ferdinand 2002, who argued that the relation between the pragmatic notion of topic and its syntactic expression as a dislocation construction can be positively transferred from Dutch to French).

Positive transfer is possible from Dutch but not from Japanese. Japanese is a determiner-free language (see e.g. Fukui 1995). Determiners such as *a*, *the* or *some* do not exist. Definiteness is not marked morphologically either. As a means to express definiteness, although not equivalent to *the*, pronominal modifiers expressed by *so*-series in Japanese, can be added to serve for deictic use. This might explain the overuse of the demonstrative determiner by some Japanese learners, as noticed in § 3.2:

- (31) *So-no otoko-no hito-ga haitte-ki-ta.*
 that-GEN male-GEN person-NOM enter-come-PAST
 ‘That/the man entered.’

Since positive transfer of the interface rules for the article is not possible for Japanese learners of L2 French, they have to learn them. This seems to be a very hard task for them. On a total number of 502 referential DPs in the Japanese corpus of L2 French, there were 61 (=12.2%) definiteness errors (23 (=4.6%) type I errors, 34 (=6.8%) type II errors and 4 (=0.8%) type III errors). In addition there were 4 (=0.8%) type IV errors, 12 (=2.4%) wrong uses of the possessive pronoun and 15 (=3%) misplaced uses of the demonstrative pronoun. Furthermore the article was wrongly omitted 33 times (=6.6%).

The conclusion of this section is that if positive transfer is not possible the acquisition of definiteness distinctions, just like other syntactic-pragmatic interface relations (e.g. the distinction between preverbal and postverbal subjects in Italian (Sorace 2003)) seems to be a very difficult task for L2 learners.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have shown that whereas children learning French acquire the interface relations for the article quite easily, this is not always the case for adult learners of L2 French. Whereas Dutch learners of L2 French seem to positively

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transfer the interface relations from Dutch, Japanese learners, for whom positive transfer is not possible, have many problems in acquiring the interface rules.

Notes

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¹ Focus is the new information of the sentence and is in the default case on the most embedded element of the VP.

² The topic of a sentence is that part that serves as a starting point for new information.

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