

Position and spell-out of subjects in French as a heritage language: a cross-sectional study of early bi-, tri- and multilingualism in Spain and Germany

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Several studies on the acquisition of the position of French subjects show that monolingual children exhibit a stage of ungrammatical postverbal subject placement whereas bilingual children skip this stage (Déprez & Pierce 1993, Jansen 2015, Arnaus Gil & Müller 2018). These results are independent of French being a heritage language (HL) and are unexpected if the HL is considered the target of cross-linguistic influence since it is used to a lesser extent and sometimes mastered at a lower proficiency level.

The present study tested the position and spell-out of French subjects in 63 bi-, tri- and multilingual children (>3 languages) raised in Spain or Germany (mean age 4;8). 23 children are simultaneous and 34 are successive bilinguals (with French in the institution only, yet from early on) or child L2 learners (Schulz & Grimm 2019). In addition to an elicitation task, the vocabulary competence in French and language (un)balance was measured by the *Peabody Task* (PPVT, Dunn et al. 1993). All children performed at ceiling (Arnaus Gil & Müller 2018) with preverbal subjects, independently of age of onset, number of L1s (70% had > 2L1s), language proficiency (41% low PPVT results), language balance (46% unbalanced) and language combination (46% had also a null-subject-language). These results stand in sharp contrast to those obtained for spell-out. The task required an indefinite subject. The children using the expected constructions differed significantly from those with target-deviant spell-outs: The former were bilingual (n=33, 54.1%), older (age 5 and above) and acquired only non-null-subject languages (n=48, 47.5%). Within the group producing target-deviant spell-outs, French age of onset is the predictor variable. The children exposed to French from birth show a strong preference for one type of spell-out, whereas those first exposed to French in the institution display individual variation. Our results show that the SVO property of French is acquired successfully early on. However, spell-out of French subjects vary according to age of onset which exhibits a significant cut-off between simultaneous and successive acquirers. Two levels can thus be distinguished in subject acquisition in French as a HL (position, spell-out). Extra-linguistic factors like age of exposure, number of languages and language combination may account for the attested variation.

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