

The Acquisition of the Reversed Time-Ordering in *weil* ‘because’ Sentences by Preschool Children: A Case Study

Serge Doitchinov

SFB 441 – University of Tübingen, Germany

serge@uni-tuebingen.de

In language acquisition research, it is commonly assumed that language comprehension precedes language production. Clark (1993, 246) argues that this asymmetry is critical for language acquisition, because “it allows children to work at leisure on their own production and to perfect it without having to rely directly on adult speakers for examples of the target words.”. Although this asymmetry is widespread in lexical acquisition, many counterexamples have been observed (e.g. in the acquisition of determiners, modal verbs, and adverbial conjunctions like *because* or *before*). A common explanation for these kinds of exceptions to the comprehension/production asymmetry is that the experimental designs used to elicit comprehension data do not provide enough extralinguistic information for the children to embed the input sentences in a natural context (Karmiloff-Smith, 1979).

The aim of this paper is to investigate one of these exceptions to the asymmetry rule in language acquisition: the acquisition of the German adverbial conjunction *weil* ‘because’. The hypothesis I want to defend is that the acquisition pattern of this conjunction does not really contradict the asymmetry rule and that the (apparently) late comprehension of *weil*-sentences by preschool children is not (solely) due to some laboratory effects.

In German, as well as in English, the default order in *weil*-sentences is that the ANTECEDENT is introduced after the CONSEQUENT, i.e. ‘C, weil A’ is the default order and not ‘Weil A, C’. This means that the time order of the related event in the antecedent and the consequent is inverted in a normal *weil*-sentence.

Experimental research has shown that preschool children fail to understand *weil*-sentences in default ordering because they do not have the ability to cognitively invert the sequence of the described events as required by the default ordering of the sentence. So, for example, in Bebout et al’s (1980) acting-out Experiment preschool children solved the task by letting the red car push the blue car, when they were given a sentence like *the red car moves because the blue car moves*.

On the contrary, longitudinal studies indicate that children as young as 2;6 flawlessly produce *weil* sentences in the default ordering, i.e. with a reversed time ordering of the described events. Eisenberg (1980) explains this contradiction by the fact that children do not order the clauses of a *weil*-sentence relying on the time order of the related events but on the contrast between given and new information (Theme-First Principle): The clause of the *weil*-sentence that contains given information is systematically produced before the clause that contains new information, independently of the time ordering of the related events.

Eisenberg's hypothesis shows clearly that the available data on the acquisition of *weil*-sentences is compatible with the comprehension/production asymmetry, but only under one important condition: When no Theme-First-scheme is available to the child, she should be unable to invert the time ordering of the related events and therefore be unable to produce a correct *weil*-sentence in the default ordering.

The goal of the following longitudinal case study was to test for this possibility.

All the *weil*-utterances were extracted from the German SIMONE-Corpus (CHILDES database) for the period between 1;09 and 4;0. Out of the 53 utterances that were collected, 52 were all from the type 'C, weil A'. Out of these 53 utterances 45 were motivated by the Theme-First Principle. In 7 of the remaining 8 utterances that were not motivated by the Theme-First Principle, *weil* was used to introduce the reason for a speech-act (speech-act *weil*). In this case, the natural ordering is supposed to be so, that the speech-act is made before the reason for it is given. Therefore no capacity to invert the described events is required to produce an utterance of the type 'C [the speech-act], weil A [the reason for the speech-act just made]'.

Only one utterance out of 53 was about physical causality and not motivated by the Theme-First Principle:

(1) (3;3)

ADU: Erzähl doch mal dem Maxe, was da passiert is.

Tell Max what happened

SIM: da da hat der junge den nich festgehalten weil er alleine weggeflo [/]

there there the boy didn't hold it [a kite] because it flown away

weil der in baum geflogen war kaputt gegang↓

because it had flown to the tree, was broken

In (1) the events are mentioned in iconic way. In the first part of her utterance Simone tried to produce a *weil*-sentence in the default ordering 'C, weil A'. However, because she was not able to reverse the time ordering of the two events described, she produced an incorrect sentence of the type 'A, weil C'. Simones second *weil*-utterance is absolutely correct. However, in order to respect the iconic ordering of the described events, she was forced to produce her second *weil*-utterance in the iconic order 'weil A, C'.

Simone's difficulties to produce the sentence in (1) clearly show that she is unable to inverse the events ordering when (i) the utterance is about physical causality and (ii) when neither the antecedent nor the consequent is thematic. (1) corresponds exactly to the type of sentences that are usually used in experimental tasks on the comprehension of the time ordering in *because* sentences. In this sense, (1) shows that the type of mistake observed in experimental tasks is also likely to occur in spontaneous speech and therefore that it is not (solely) due to the laboratory context as often claimed.

However, this study also shows that this type of mistakes are very rare in children's spontaneous speech (only 1/53 in Simone-Corpus). This is probably the reason why longitudinal studies tend to exaggerate children's ability to reverse the time ordering in *because*-sentences. On the contrary, experimental studies tend to mask children's ability to produce correct *because*-sentences because they test children's ability only in a very specific context (physical causality without linguistic context).

To conclude, the present study provides strong evidence that the acquisition of *because*-sentences does not really contradict Clark's asymmetry assumption, and it also shows, why different types of data are needed to systematically reconstruct the course of language acquisition.

References

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