

Crosslinguistic paths of pragmatic development: *actually* and *en fait* in British and French children

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Diachronic studies of the development of discourse markers generally suggest that there is a metaphorical use of the semantic load of a lexeme (M1) which leads to M2 in a unidirectional way, from propositional to textual and expressive uses (Traugott 1982; Sweetser 1990). In the case of *actually*, for instance, the adverbial evolved from a propositional meaning of factuality (“in reality”, “effectively”) to contradiction, topic change and even hedging uses (Defour et al. 2010). This evolutionary tendency has, however, not been observed in first language acquisition of discourse markers: Sprott (1992) points out that *because*, *so*, *and*, *but* and *well* are first used interactionally as part of the exchange and action structures, and only subsequently ideationally to express propositional relations (cf. Kyratzis & Ervin-Tripp 1999).

Crosslinguistic studies of discourse markers have repeatedly illustrated that discourse functions are not distributed equally across languages and registers (see the papers in Aijmer & Simon-Vandenberg 2006). In particular, cognates such as *in fact* and *en fait* only partially mirror each other’s functional spectrum, leading to transfer effects in second language learners (Buysse 2018). The present study takes a crosslinguistic approach to the use of two adversative discourse markers, viz. *actually* and *en fait*, by British and French children. These expressions share the same core meaning and a number of propositional and pragmatic functions (Mortier & Degand 2009). The research questions are: What are the functions of *actually* and *en fait* in child data up to age five? Do expressive (interactional, interpersonal) uses of *actually* and *en fait* occur in the early stages of language development, simultaneously or even before propositional (literal, semantic) ones?

Occurrences of *actually* and *en fait* were extracted from the CHILDES database, particularly the Paris (Morgenstern & Parris 2007) and Lyon (Demuth & Tremblay 2008) corpora for French and the Wells (Wells 1981), Manchester (Theakston et al. 2001) and Thomas (Lieven et al. 2009) corpora for English. We used a coding scheme which distinguishes between two functions (adversative and elaborative) and three domains (propositional, textual, expressive) to explore patterns of usage of these markers and to look for any regularities in the way that they are acquired. We checked for inter-rater reliability, refined our criteria, and carried out quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data. We first compared the rates and functions of the two markers in their first year of acquisition (age 2). We then conducted two longitudinal case studies, focusing on an individual English and French child (Thomas and Madeleine), to trace the development of the functional uses of *actually* and *en fait* from ages 2 to 4.

A total of 28 “en fait” (0.36 per thousand words) and 47 “actually” (0.19 ptw) were extracted from two-year-olds, in addition to the 60 cases (1.76 ptw) in Madeleine and 127 (0.25 ptw) in Thomas across a three-year span. Preliminary results suggest that the pragmatic functions of *actually* are used by children as young as two years old, but the same is not true of *en fait*, which is almost exclusively propositional in the early years. By contrast, *en fait* seems to acquire a textual or “narrative” function to a much larger proportion than *actually*. Qualitative analyses of co-occurrence patterns and scaffolding effects partially explain these differences. Confounding factors such as activity-type and parental input (Van Veen et al., 2009) are discussed.

References (indicative)

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