

The Acquisition of Temporality in Italian Child Language: Case Study of Child Frog Story Narratives

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Abstract : The present study investigates the Aspect Hypothesis (AH) in Italian child language in the production of frog story narratives from the CHILDES database. The AH is based on the assumption that children initially encode aspectual and lexical distinctions rather than temporal relations. Children from a variety of first languages have been shown to mark past initially with achievements and accomplishments (telic predicates) and in later stages with states and activities (atelic predicates). Aspectual distinctions in Romance languages are obligatorily and overtly encoded in the inflectional morphology. In Italian the perfective viewpoint is realized by the passato prossimo, which expresses a temporal and aspectual meaning of pastness and perfectivity, whereas the imperfective viewpoint in the past tense is realized by the imperfetto. The aim of this study is to assess the role of lexical aspect in the acquisition of tense and aspect morphology and to understand if Italian children's mapping of aspectual and temporal distinctions follows consistent developmental patterns across languages. The research methodology aligns with the cross-linguistic designs, tasks and coding procedures previously developed in the frog story literature. Results from two-factor ANOVA show that Italian children (age range: 4-6) exhibited a statistically significant distinction between foregrounded perfective and backgrounded imperfective marking. However, a closer examination of the sixty narratives reveals an idiosyncratic production pattern for Italian children, whereby the marking of imperfetto deviates from the tenets of AH and emerges as deictic tense to entail completed and bounded events in foreground clauses. Instances of 'perfective' uses of imperfetto were predominantly found in the four-year old narratives (25%). Furthermore, the analysis of the perfective marking suggests that morphological articulation and diatopic variation may influence the child production of formal linguistic devices in discourse.

Keywords : actionality, aspect, grounding, temporal reference

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