

The Acquisition of Initial Stress in French

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Abstract

French has a final lengthening primary accent (FA) carried on the last syllable of a rhythmic group (Di Cristo, 2000). It is the delimiting marker of the accentual phrase (*ap*); *ap* is also the level of the secondary accent (IA), as an initial stress (Jun & Fougeron, 2000). Its function and phonological status are still debated today (Astésano & Bertrand, 2016). In children, FA appears around the sixteenth month in productions (Konopczynski, 1990; Roux, 2023) that are mainly dissyllabic (Demuth, 2006), constituting iambs with metrical right prominence. However, what can we say about IA?

11 children (CHILDES database) were compared according to the Mean Length of Utterances (MLU). The research focused on combinations of lexical units. With CLAN software, Cooccur commands showed that the most frequent were: adjective-noun; noun-adjective; verb-verb; verb-adjective. 100 productions were extracted at random on the Praat software, 25 per category. A perception test was developed, asking for a judgment between 1 and 5 of the perceptual salience of the syllables from 10 native speakers. Then the two authors manually analyzed the F0 curves of each utterance.

A total of 1688 utterances were analyzed. They show that the adjective-noun category is the most frequent ($n=765$), followed by noun-adjective ($n=552$). The perception test showed that significant non-final prominence is identified mainly on noun-adjective (79% of productions; $p<.01$). On Praat software, a majority of units (77%) show a pitch stress.

These noun-adjective productions appear variably when children have a minimum MLU of 1.8; they increase between 2.5 and 3.5. The gap narrows with an MLU greater than 5. Thus, IA seems to appear with postposed adjective and an increased number of syllables. Since the development of nouns has always been linked to the FA, when it is in an *ap* where it does not carry the FA, IA tends to appear on nouns to indicate its importance as the most important element of the syntagm.