Finiteness and Verb Placement in Early Child Grammars: Evidence from Simultaneous Acquisition of French and German in Bilinguals

1. Early Grammars Without Functional Categories?

Early child language exhibits a number of properties, e.g. a lack of case and agreement markings, word order patterns deviating from the adult norm, etc., which seem to indicate that child grammars differ in crucial ways from their adult counterparts. This observation might lead to the conclusion that child grammars do not conform to the principles of Universal Grammar (UG) which, according to linguistic theory, shape the grammars of natural languages. Although it is conceivable that these principles are subject to maturation, it is preferable to first explore explanations which will account for the noted particularities of child language without forcing us to assume a difference in kind between developing and mature grammars.

This possibility is, indeed, offered by the theory of principles-and-parameters, as developed by Chomsky (1981; 1986) and others. If a number of options are parametrized and need to be specified in the course of language acquisition, one can expect the child to explore the range of variation defined by the parameters. More specifically, since parameters relate primarily to the non-substantive elements of the lexicon, one should expect to find specific characteristics of child language, resulting from differences in the systems of functional categories in early as compared to mature grammars.

One way to interpret this claim is to assume that functional categories emerge later than referential ones and are thus missing at early points of development. The structure of child utterances therefore resembles that of adult Small Clauses. This is the hypothesis proposed by Radford (1986,
1987, this volume); see also Guilfoyle and Noonan (1988). Another possibility, however, first explored by Hyams (1986, this volume), is that the children do have these categories in their grammars, following options permitted by UG, but parameter values are set in a way deviating from the adult grammar.

In what follows, we will pursue both these ideas, arguing that the development of functional categories is characterized by the children's oscillation between options offered by UG. Not only do developing grammars lack particular abstract features and the corresponding syntactic positions, they also exhibit individual variation with respect to the value chosen for a particular parameter, i.e. one child explores one possibility, and another child favors, temporarily at least, a different one. In addition, our study shows that bilingual children, acquiring two first languages simultaneously, may choose the same value of a parameter for both languages before they discover that it needs to be set differently in L(a) and in L(b).

2. DATA COLLECTION AND SUBJECTS

2.1. Data collection

This study is part of a larger research project on the simultaneous acquisition of German and French by children of preschool age. Studying the linguistic development of bilingual children offers the advantage of allowing one to differentiate between distinct grammars and different patterns of grammatical development within the same child. This is likely to lead to insights concerning the role of formal properties of grammars for language development, insights not possible based on monolingual data alone; see Meisel (ed.) (1990) for further arguments on this point.

So far, 13 children have been studied longitudinally by our research group DUFDE4; currently (1990), three children are being recorded and studied. The children are videotaped every second week while interacting with adults and occasionally with other children. The recordings consist mainly of free interaction in play situations; they last for approximately 60 minutes each, half in German and half in French. The well-known principle of "une personne - une langue" is observed. This means that two researchers participate in each recording, one speaking only French with the child, the other consistently sticking to German. Both linguistic and nonlinguistic