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Isabelle Barrière, Marjorie Perlman Lorch and Marie-Therese Le Normand
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On the overgeneralization of the Intransitive/Transitive alternation in children’s speech:
A cross-linguistic account with new evidence from French*

Isabelle Barrière
University of London and Université de Toulouse-Le-Mirail

Marjorie Perlman Lorch
University of London

Marie-Therese Le Normand
INSERM, Hôpital de la Pitié-Salpêtrière, Paris

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Abstract
This study investigates the cross-linguistic patterns of the overgeneralization of the Intransitive/Transitive alternations found in children’s speech and provides new evidence from findings based on the acquisition of French. The morphosyntactic characterization of such phenomenon in English and Hebrew child language is followed by a description of the morphosyntactic characterization of such alternation in adult French which relies on an account of SE-affixation proposed by Werhli (1986). On the basis of this account, predictions are made with respect to the overgeneralization of the Intransitive/Transitive alternation displayed by French children’s speech which is borne out by the data drawn from several corpora. In addition, this account is shown to explain the results of a comprehension task carried out by Annibald-Vion (1980) which were previously unexplained.

Key words
French
intransitive/transitive alternation
overgeneralization

Introduction
Although the two languages which are described in this section do not display the same typology with respect to a substantial number of morphosyntactic features, they share the
following characteristic: a subset of intransitive verbs in these languages are also used in transitive/causative constructions, while the transitive/causative counterparts of others can either only appear in periphrastic construction or are morphologically unrelated and/or not systematically related to the intransitive verb.

Cross-linguistic evidence for the overgeneralization of the intransitive/transitive alternation in children’s speech has been documented for English and Hebrew. The evidence suggests that children overgeneralize the intransitive/transitive alternation and that the morphosyntactic patterns which they employ in order to do so are language-specific. The first instances of children’s production of argument structure patterns not found in the adult grammar were first documented on English (Bowerman, 1974 and references cited therein). Although much of the recent literature devoted to the investigation of this phenomenon has focused on providing explanatory accounts of such patterns displayed by children (Borer & Wexler, 1987; Bowerman, 1982; Gleitman & Landau, 1994; Pinker, 1991, among others) instead of evaluating the various proposals which have been put forward, we will simply describe the various manifestations of this phenomenon with a special emphasis of the intransitive/transitive alternation and demonstrate why they have been rightly analyzed as overgeneralizations of patterns found in the adult grammar.

In the adult grammar of English, a subset of intransitive verbs is also used in transitive constructions. Examples of such verbs are provided below:

1. a) The doll moved  
   b) John moved the doll
2. a) The door opened  
   b) John opened the door

The fact that the transitive/causative verbs display the same form as their intransitive counterparts in the examples listed above has led linguists to refer to the causative morpheme affixed to these intransitive verbs as a “zero-morpheme.”

With respect to the acquisition of English, Bowerman (1974) has reported numerous examples of children’s utterances, some of which are reproduced below:

3. a) The ball dropped; John dropped the ball  
   b) The ball moved; John moved the ball
4. a) The doll giggled; (*)John giggled the doll  
   b) The dog went; (*)John goed the dog

While the pairs presented in (3) are acceptable in the adult grammar, the transitive constructions presented in (4) are not acceptable in the adult grammar. They are best captured as the outcome of the overgeneralization of the Intransitive/Transitive alternations which applies to verbs such as those used in (3).

Like English-speaking children, Modern Hebrew (henceforth Hebrew) speaking children also produce overgeneralizations of the intransitive/transitive alternations. This section briefly summarizes the morphosyntactic characteristics of this alternation in adult Hebrew and reports findings which have described the manifestations of the overgeneralization of the intransitive/transitive alternation in Hebrew child language.
The verbal paradigm of Hebrew consists of a consonantal root and a number of morphological patterns each of which is characterized by a certain type of affixation and a specific vocalic melody. As far as the intransitive/transitive alternation is concerned, two forms are of interest: KαTaL- which constitutes the sourceform when it exists—and HiKTiL which is the form associated with the causative meaning. Borer and Wexler (1987) mention two features which characterize the derivation from KαTaL to HiKTiL, namely:

–its productivity despite some gaps in the lexicon.

–the fact that it applies to both transitive and intransitive KαTaL forms.

Borer and Wexler (1987) distinguish between two types of HiKTiL forms in the adult grammar, namely:

–those forms which are not derived from a KαTaL source

–those derived from the KαTaL source and the meaning of which is best characterized as the meaning of the KαTaL form from which they are derived and causation.

Borer and Wexler (1987, p. 162) provide a table reproduced below which illustrate their analysis of HiKTiL and KαTaL forms.

Borer and Wexler (1987) rightly emphasize the regularity of the rule despite the fact that the morphological/semantic correlation is never complete.

The evidence based on the acquisition of Hebrew sheds light on the fact that children tend to systematically assign a regular causative meaning to HiKTiL forms. Borer and Wexler (1987) distinguish between two types of overgeneralization found in Hebrew

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paradigm of the anticausative/causative verbs in Hebrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anticausative</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>KαTaL</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘axal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lavash</td>
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<tr>
<td>ra’a</td>
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<tr>
<td>shama</td>
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<tr>
<td>rakad</td>
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<tr>
<td>yashav</td>
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<tr>
<td>amad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>caxak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nafal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) katav</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>batax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*kashav/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*bara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) dakar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>karaçb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xalam</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
...which allow them to classify instances of overgeneralizations reported in Berman and Sagi (1981):

(a) Overgeneration of verbs in the *HiKTiL* patterns derived from actual *KaTaL* forms to which children assign a causative meaning. Borer and Wexler (1987, p. 163) provide examples of overgenerated forms which are reproduced above in Table 2:

(b) cases of roots the patterns of which differ from that of *HiKTiL* which have a causative meaning and are assimilated to *HiKTiL* forms by children. Borer and Wexler (1987, p.163) provide the examples listed in Table 3 above, which illustrate this phenomenon.

Borer and Wexler (1987, p.163) note that in contrast, children’s speech does not display instances of overgeneration of forms in the *HiKTiL* pattern deprived of causative meaning. Furthermore, children do not assign the Argument Structure of intransitive verbs to *HiKTiL* forms.

This section has shown that Hebrew speaking and English speaking children produce overgeneralization of the intransitive/intransitive alternation and that in order to do so they employ the morphosyntactic devices displayed by the grammar of their respective languages. With respect to English, we have shown that this phenomenon gives rise to the production of ungrammatical transitive constructions in which the verb displays the same form as its intransitive counterparts whereas in Hebrew two types of overgeneralization have been found in children’s speech: (a) overgeneration of causative verbs in the regular *HiKTiL* patterns when the adult form does not exist or displays an irregular pattern and (b) cases of roots which do not display the regular *HiKTiL* pattern and which have a

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**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KaTaL form</th>
<th>Overgenerated HiKTiL form</th>
<th>Correct form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>shata</td>
<td>hishta caused to drink</td>
<td>hishka (irreg)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>taka</td>
<td>hikti’a caused to get stuck</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gar</td>
<td>higir caused to spend the night</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yashan</td>
<td>hishin caused to go to bed</td>
<td>hiksiv (from shaxavlied down)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>saxa</td>
<td>hisxa caused to swim</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cala</td>
<td>hidil caused to dive</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correct form</th>
<th>Overregularized form (<em>forms actually attested in the samples, inflected for gender, number and tense</em> Borer &amp; Wexler, 1987, p.163)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>daxaf pushed</td>
<td>hidixif (madixifa)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xalac took off shoes</td>
<td>hexlic (lehaxlic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>saraf burned</td>
<td>hisrif (masrif)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hafax turn inside out</td>
<td>hahafix (mahafixa)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
causative meaning which are assimilated to HiKTI! forms by children. Thus the identification and classification of instances of overgeneralization produced in English and Hebrew has relied on the morphosyntactic characterization of the intransitive/transitive alternation in the adult grammar.

New evidence from French children’s speech production

Studies on the acquisition of French have reported instances of intransitive/transitive overgeneralizations (Clark, 1985; François, 1978; Grégoire, 1947). However there has been no systematic account of why such overgeneralization has been found to display not only transitive uses of intransitive verbs in the same form but also instances of ungrammatical omission and affixation of SE (Clark, 1985, p. 735). The analysis of French Intransitive/Transitive constructions presented here relies on the accounts of French SE-constructions proposed by Werhli (1986) and Zubizaretta (1985), both of which draw a distinction between Middle-Passive SE and Neuter SE constructions. On the basis of the status of SE in adult grammar presented below, predictions are made with respect to the morphosyntactic characteristics which are to be displayed by early overgeneralization of the Intransitive/Transitive alternations.

Although the acquisition of French SE has been investigated in relation to subject clitics (Hamann, Rizzi, & Frauenfelder, 1995), to other object clitics (Cryssman & Müller, 1997) and to the Binding Principles (Jacubowicz, 1991), the following account will attempt to emphasize the relevance of the status of SE with respect to the morphosyntactic characterization of intransitive/transitive alternation in French and thus to the investigation of the acquisition of Argument Structure.

The account of SE-constructions proposed by Werhli (1986) adopts the following classification:

– Reflexive/Reciprocal SE
– Inherent SE
– Neuter SE
– Middle-Passive SE

Although the above classification seems to emphasize the distinguishing features displayed by various types of SE, the unified account proposed by Werhli (1986) demonstrates that SE is best captured as a detransitivizer, or an “argument absorber” (Werhli, 1986). Such absorption is “nonlexical” in the Reflexive/Reciprocal and Middle-Passive constructions in that such constructions are systematically derived from the transitivity of the verbs. In contrast, Neuter-SE refers to intransitive constructions which are subject to two types of lexical idiosyncrasies:

Firstly, the intransitive alternation of some transitive verbs does not requires SE-affixation, thus the contrast between 5 and 6 below:

5. (a) Je refroidis l’eau
   
   I cool (Transitive) the water
   ‘I cool down the water’
(b) L’eau a refroidi
the water has cooled (Intransitive)
‘The water has cooled down.’

c) L’eau s’est refroidie
the water SE (Neuter- 3rd person singular) be (3rd person singular) cooled (Intransitive)
‘The water has cooled down.’

6. (a) Je réchauffe l’eau
I heat (Transitive) the water
(b) *L’eau a réchauffé
the water has heated (Intransitive)
(c) L’eau s’est réchauffée
the water SE (3rd person singular) heated (Intransitive)
‘The water has heated up.’

Secondly, some transitive verbs do not undergo such intransitivization process (see Zubizaretta, 1985)

7. (a) J’ai lu le livre
I have read (Transitive) the book
(b) *Le livre s’est lu.
The book SE (Neuter- 3rd person singular) be (3rd person singular) read.

In contrast transitive verbs systematically undergo SE-affixation in Middle-Passive constructions. This implies that for verbs such as ‘rechauffer’/heat, the SE-affixation may give rise to either a Middle-Passive or a Neuter interpretation. Such interpretations differ with respect to the assignment of thematic roles; in contrast to Neuter constructions, Middle-Passive implies an agent.

In addition, a subset of intransitive verbs which cannot undergo transitivization obligatorily occur with SE. Examples of such verbs are presented below. 8(a) and 9(a) present examples of appropriate uses of these inherent SE constructions. With respect to this type of verb, 8(b) and 9(b) show that the omission of SE in a transitivization process generate ungrammatical constructions. Examples 8(c) and 9(c) provide instances of periphrastic causative constructions in which these verbs are used.

8. (a) Le ballon s’envole
The balloon SE (Inherent- 3rd person singular) flies (Intransitive)
‘The balloon flies away.’
(b) *J’envole le ballon
I (omission of Inherent SE) fly the balloon
‘I make the balloon fly away.’
(c) Je fais s’envoler le ballon
I make (Inherent SE) fly the balloon
‘I make the balloon fly away.’
9. (a) Paul s’évanouit
   Paul SE (Inherent SE- 3rd person singular) faints (Intransitive)
   ‘Paul faints.’

(b) *Marie évanouit Pierre’
   Marie (omission of Inherent SE) faints Pierre
   ‘Marie makes Pierre faint.’

(c) Marie fait s’évanouir Pierre
   Marie makes(Inherent SE) faint Pierre
   ‘Marie makes Pierre faint.’

On the basis of the account of SE presented above, if French children are to employ
the full range of morphosyntactic devices which characterize the intransitive / transitive
alternation in French, it is predicted that their speech will display the following patterns of
overgeneralization:

**Three types of transitivization of intransitive verbs:**

(a) Use of intransitive verbs in the same form in transitive constructions (i.e., with NP
    objects or object clitics).

(b) Ungrammatical SE-affixation when assigned a Reflexive/Reciprocal interpretation.

(c) Ungrammatical SE-omissions with Inherent-SE verbs used transitively.

**Two types of detransitivization of transitive verbs:**

(a) Ungrammatical SE-omission applied to those verbs the Neuter form of which
    either requires SE-affixation or does not exist.

(b) Ungrammatical SE-affixation applied to Neuter constructions which do not
    require SE-affixation.

The empirical evidence presented below has been drawn from a variety of sources:
diary studies (Francois, 1978; Gregoire, 1947; Mereasse-Polart; 1969) and a cross-
sectional corpus of speech sample collected by Le Normand (1986; 1996) on children
aged between two and four years old, and analyzed by Barriere, Le Normand, and Lorch

The instances of overgeneralizations displayed by French children’s speech seem to
confirm the hypotheses formulated above. Some illustrative examples drawn from various
corpora are presented below:

**Transitivization of intransitive verbs of three types:**

(a) Use of transitive verbs in the same form in transitive constructions (i.e, with NP
    objects and/or object clitics)
   –(*) Ne faut pas tomber les pommes de terre [2;5] (Grégoire, 1947, p. 137)
      ‘Don’t fall the potatoes.’
   –(*) Qu’est-ce qui a tombé ma pipe? [2;5] (Grégoire, 1947, p. 137)
      ‘Who has fallen my pipe?’
(*) Siffles encore une herbe (Mereasse-Polart, 1969)  
‘Whistle a grass again.’

(*) Tu gigotes ma chaise (François, 1978, p. 87)  
‘You fidget my chair.’

(b) Ungrammatical SE-affixation applied to intransitive verbs when assigned a Reflexive/Reciprocal interpretation

(*) Je me gigote (François, 1978, p. 87)  
I SE (Reflexive-1st person singular) fidget

(*) tu vas te mourir (Grégoire, 1947, p. 137) (where ‘mourir’ is used causatively to refer to ‘tuer’/kill)  
You will SE (Reflexive-2nd person singular) die.

(c) Ungrammatical SE-omissions with Inherent SE-verbs used transitively.

(*) (le loup) envole la maison (Mereasse-Polart, 1969)  
(the wolf) (omission of Inherent SE) flies away the house

Detransitivization of transitive verbs of two types:

(a) Ungrammatical SE-omission applied to those verbs the neuter form of which requires SE-affixation or does not exist.

(*) une fleur qui a coupé là (Grégoire, 1947, p. 198)  
‘A flower which has cut there.’

(*) le canapé ça va mettre là (Barrière, Le Normand & Lorch, 1998)  
‘The sofa it will put there.’

(b) Ungrammatical SE-affixation applied to Neuter constructions which do not require SE-affixation.

(*) cela se commence pour la nuit (Grégoire, 1947, p. 138)  
it SE (Neuter SE-3rd person singular) starts for the night

(*) la glace se fond (Barriere, Le Normand & Lorch, 1998)  
the ice (Neuter SE-3rd person singular) melts

In analyzing the ungrammatical SE-affixation above under (b) we have assumed that children were producing overgeneralizations of Neuter constructions as opposed to Middle-Passive constructions. It seems that this claim is consistent with Grégoire (1947). In discussing the acquisition of SE-constructions, he asserts that Middle-Passive constructions are acquired late:

“We set aside here the French passive in its phrasal form, as well as special constructions such as ‘le poisson se mange…..’/‘fish SE (Middle-Passive 3rd person singular) eats,’ ‘le bourgogne se sert…..’/‘Bourgogne SE (Middle-Passive 3rd person singular) serves …,’ constructions which the child does not learn during the first year”  
(Grégoire, 1947, p. 134)
In making such a statement, Grégoire (1947) implicitly assumes that the SE-constructions which his two sons produced were not to be analyzed as Middle-Passive constructions. Our account is consistent with this claim. However no further consideration of the acquisition of this construction is offered by Grégoire (1947). To provide additional evidence in favor of our account, in the next section we demonstrate that it sheds light on the results of a comprehension task carried out by Annibaldi-Vion (1980) and that in the context of Learnability Theory it is consistent with current principles formulated with respect to the assignment of Thematic Roles by children.

Experimental evidence of comprehension

Annibaldi-Vion (1980) carried out an experimental study on the comprehension of simple sentences by children. Her aim was to identify the strategies which preschool children employ in order to interpret utterances and to find out whether such strategies vary according to children’s age. In order to do so, Annibaldi-Vion (1980) set up three act-out tasks. In one of these tasks, one of the stimuli to which the children were exposed was a Middle-Passive construction: *la chaise se glisse sous le chien* /the chair SE (Middle-Passive 3rd person singular) slides under the dog/ ‘someone slides the chair under the dog:’

The task was administered to 48 children—boys and girls—aged between 2;8 and 4;7 who were divided into three age groups, namely 2;8 to 3;3; 3;4 to 3;11; and 4;0 to 4;7. Each age group included 16 subjects. During the task, children were exposed to utterances which Annibaldi-Vion (1980) refers to as “simple sentences” as they did not contain embedded or coordinated clauses. These “simple sentences” described spatial relations and displayed the following structures: NP-V-PP in which the following prepositions were used: *dans/in, contre/against, près de/near, loin de/far from, sur/on, sous/under*. The children were asked to act-out the sentences with the following pairs of props: two dolls and a tepee, a horse and a cone-shaped tree, a car and a fence, a lorry and a bench, a male doll and a table, a dog and a chair.

Annibaldi-Vion (1980) classifies the cues on which children rely in order to interpret utterances as pragmatic, semantic, and morphosyntactic. She relied on two dimensions in order to set up the 24 stimuli to which the children were exposed: a) whether the sentences refer to “pragmatic” or “antipragmatic” events; and b) whether the verb which is used is or is not “semantically constrained.” Although the fact that Annibaldi-Vion (1980) does not provide a clear account of the distinction between what she refers to as “semantically constrained” deserves a thorough discussion, this will not concern us here. With respect to the second dimension which she employs, note that in Annibaldi-Vion (1980)’s own terms “pragmatic” refers to constructions which are typically labelled “irreversible” in the literature and “antipragmatic” to reversed irreversible. Although such terms are usually applied to refer to animate/inanimate relations, with respect to this experiment Annibaldi-Vion (1980) uses them to characterize mobile animate and inanimate/still inanimate relations. The classification of one of the stimuli is problematic: according to Annibaldi-Vion (1980) ‘*la chaise se glisse sous le chien*’ is “semantically-constrained and antipragmatic.” In the adult interpretation, this sentence would be
classified as a pragmatic Middle-Passive construction as there is an implicit/implied agent to which none of the Noun Phrases refer. This construction is not ambiguous in the adult grammar as the Neuter counterparts of ‘glisser’ do not require SE-affixation.

In referring to this construction as “antipragmatic,” Annibaldi Vion (1980) assumes that the only interpretation of this SE-construction to which children have access is the Reflexive interpretation. First this assumption is not consistent with findings reported in the literature on the comprehension of full periphrastic passives by children (Bronckart, 1983 and references cited therein) who have been shown to be sensitive to reversible versus irreversible passives and thus to the animate/inanimate relations. Such findings demonstrate that the interpretation of a similar morphosyntactic construction gives rise to different interpretation by children on the basis of the animacy/inanimacy feature of the subject and object of the sentences. We take this evidence to suggest that SE-constructions are not systematically interpreted as Reflexive/Reciprocal by children, as the Reflexive/Reciprocal interpretation in the adult grammar is restricted to the presence of an animate subject. The assumption adopted by Annibaldi-Vion (1980) not only contradicts the adult interpretation and the language acquisition findings reported in the literature, it is also inconsistent with the occurrences of SE-constructions found in children’s speech reported above. The production of SE-constructions by children indicate that they use SE-affixation not only as a Reflexive but also as a Neuter construction marker.

The fact that SE is used as a Neuter detransitivizer by children is indeed confirmed by the interpretation of this stimulus by the subjects (Annibaldi-Vion, 1980). Annibaldi Vion (1980, p. 56) asserts that the children acted-out this sentence as if it referred to the event described by the “the dog slides onto the chair.” This suggests that the children have interpreted this sentence as if ‘glisser’ (Neuter) instead of ‘se glisser’ had been used (Annibaldi-Vion, 1980, p. 67). The performance on this task provides additional evidence in favor of our claim that the status of SE in children’s grammar is best described as a detransitivizer which gives rise to a Neuter interpretation rather than a marker which implies an agent giving rise to a Middle-Passive interpretation.

Our account which has shed light on the results obtained by Annibaldi-Vion (1980) presents an additional advantage. In the context of Learnability Theory, our proposal is consistent with the Thematic Inference Principle proposed by Wexler (1982) which assumes that “when a learner is computing thematic roles from situations s/he assumes a thematic role only if it can be related to an appropriate phrase in the sentence” (Borer & Wexler, 1987).

In summary a description of the Intransitive/Transitive alternation found in French adult grammar which takes into account SE-constructions has enabled us to make predictions regarding the overgeneralization of such alternations in children’s speech. These predictions have also been borne out by the data analyzed above. This account presents two additional advantages. First it provides an explanation of the interpretation which children aged between 2;8 and 4;7 assign to the Middle-Passive construction in the comprehension task carried out by Annibaldi-Vion (1980). Secondly, it is consistent with current assumptions regarding the assignment of Thematic Roles by children (Wexler, 1982; Borer & Wexler, 1987).
Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the phenomenon of early overgeneralization of Intransitive/Transitive alternation which has been documented on English and Hebrew can also be observed in French. English speaking children have been shown to apply the adult pattern displayed by the intransitive/transitive alternation, to overgenerate transitive constructions in which the verbs display the same form as their intransitive counterparts. In contrast, Hebrew speaking children have been shown to produce a range of errors which can be predicted and classified on the basis of the morphosyntactic characterization of the intransitive/transitive alternation in Hebrew. With respect to French, our study has provided a characterization of the intransitive/transitive alternation, especially in relation to specific types of SE-affixation. This account has proved useful in making predictions with respect to language acquisition, in providing a systematic classification of instances of SE-omission and SE-affixation found in children's speech, and in explaining the results of a comprehension task which were previously unaccounted for.

In order to fully contribute to the research on the intransitive/transitive alternations in children’s speech, at least one other phenomenon requires investigation. We have shown that children use intransitive verbs in transitive constructions, and that in order to do so they employ the specific morphosyntactic features which French displays. Since a subset of intransitive verbs in French select the être/be auxiliary as opposed to avoir/have (which is used with all transitive verbs and a subset of intransitive verbs) in compound tenses, a study on whether children alter the auxiliary selection when they produce overgeneralized transitivization would provide a useful insight into the acquisition of the intransitive/transitive alternation. The findings reported here demonstrate that like English and Hebrew speaking children, French speaking children are sensitive to the morphosyntactic features displayed by the intransitive/transitive alternation in the language to which they are exposed. We would therefore predict that instances of transitivization of the subset of those intransitives which select être/be would display the use of the avoir/have auxiliary in children’s speech.

The study presented here constitutes a first step towards a systematic account of the acquisition of the intransitive/transitive alternation in French. The additional investigation suggested above will contribute to a fuller cross-linguistic characterization of the acquisition of Argument Structure.

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