Ways of expressing a future meaning: evidence from French child language
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1. One interesting issue in the acquisition literature is the construal of tense in embedded contexts. In a study on the acquisition of Sequence of Tense by Dutch and American children, Hollebrandse (2000) (henceforth, H) observes that young children (< 5 years old) allow sentences such as John said that Mary was busy (with an embedded imperfective past) to report a future in the past situation, where Mary’s being busy holds at a time which follows John’s saying-time but precedes the utterance time (UT). According to H, this so-called future-shifted reading of the past is due to children’s lack of subordination—children assign an interpretation on which the embedded event is located in the past with respect to the UT but remains unordered with respect to the matrix event-time (Ev-T1). H thus identifies two important stages in child tense grammar: one at which children lack subordination and therefore have independent construals of subordinate tenses (i.e., the time of evaluation for the embedded event is the UT), and another at which children have acquired subordination and thus have dependent construals of subordinate tenses (i.e., the evaluation-time for the embedded event is Ev-T1).

(For H, only children with an independent tense grammar allow a past to convey a future in the past meaning.) The experiments with Dutch and American children reveal a high rate of acceptance of the future-shifted past in comprehension (∼ 80%), but a very low rate in production (8%) (the production task was carried out with Dutch children only). H cannot explain the unexpected production findings.

We report preliminary results of an experimental study testing the construal of semantic future in complement clauses in French child language (Elicitation Task and Truth Value Judgment Task, Crain and Thornton, 1998, with 14 children between 3;8 and 5;4; mean: 4;7). We discuss some puzzling production data showing that these French children, unlike the American and Dutch children, do produce a past (imparfait) in a future in the past context. Moreover, children also produce a simple future in the same context. We argue that H’s hypothesis cannot capture our findings with French children.

We propose that (i) the unexpected results with the imparfait are not due to the lack of subordination but rather to the properties of the imparfait across Romance languages; (ii) the unexpected results with the future prove that children have a dependent future tense, and constitute indirect evidence that their use of the imparfait cannot be imputed to the absence of subordination.

2. Semantic future embedded under a matrix past. Temporal subsequence in embedded contexts gives rise to two temporal configurations: one, where the embedded event-time (Ev-T2) is subsequent to Ev-T1 but anterior to UT as in (1a) and other, where Ev-T2 is subsequent to Ev-T1 and also to UT, as in (1b).

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(1) a. EV-T1 | EV-T2 | UT   
        |       |       
      ————>  

(2) a. John said that Mary would be busy.  
     b. John said that Mary will be busy.  

(3) a. John past say that Mary futimparfait be busy.  
     b. John past say that Mary futimparfait be busy.  
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(2a) with would can be used to report a situation where Mary is busy at a time subsequent to John’s saying but anterior to the UT ((1a)) as well as a situation where Mary’s being busy is subsequent to John’s saying and also to the UT ((1b)). (2b) with will can only be used to report that Mary is busy at a time following both John’s saying and the UT ((1b)).

The morphological realization of the embedded future depends on the time interval (Ref-T) with respect to which the embedded event is evaluated (Stowell, 1993 ; Uribe-Etxebarria, 1994, a.o) : if the Ref-T is in the past, the semantic future surfaces as would (decomposed into a future and a past Ref-T). If the Ref-T is a non-past (present / future), future is realized as will (decomposed into a future and a non-past Ref-T).

The simplified representation in (3a) shows that the embedded event is constrained to follow a past Ref-time (i.e., Ev-T1), thus yielding a dependent construal. In contrast, (3b) indicates that the embedded event is constrained to follow a present Ref-T (i.e., UT), yielding an independent / indexical construal. The indexicality of FUTPRES in a language such as English is expected on the assumption that present is always indexical (i.e., it always refers to the moment of speech, be it in embedded or simple contexts). Languages which allow an embedded present to express temporal overlap with the matrix event-time (for example, non-SOT languages such as Japanese, Korean) would not impose such a constraint on the use of the embedded FUTPRES.

3. Eliciting a future in French child language. The construal of future was tested in two contexts, corresponding to the temporal configurations given in the two diagrams in (1) above: Context A describing a situation where the boys give the chimpanzee a banana at a time following their saying-
acceptance

Finally, the production results their language allows this other possibility of expressing a future in the past meaning. In sum, the use children also produce a is only used in a context where fact that have acquired subordination (and therefore to the absence of dependent tenses) in these children’s grammar but rather to the status of the imperfect (imparfait) in French and across Romance languages. French imperfect, unlike the English imperfective past is able to commute with conditional in certain contexts such as Un simple coup de téléphone et je venais tout de suite! (‘A simple phone call and I would immediately come.’) (Le Goffic, 1986). If the imperfect is able to occur in certain modal contexts (replacing a conditional), we expect it to occur also in other contexts where a conditional is required (i.e., temporal contexts to express a future in the past). If this line of reasoning is correct, then we predict that children who produce an imperfect in Context A also produce an imperfect in Context B. This prediction is borne out with certain kids. Below, we illustrate the response of one child, Justine, who produces an imperfect ((6a)), and the comment of another child, Julie, who, not only does she produce an imperfect but she also rejects a future and volunteers an imperfect ((6b)).

(6) Context B (short version): Les garçons / filles: “We will shovel the snow / steal the pirate hats.”

a. Justine (4;9): [Les garçons] ont dit qu’ils ramassaient la neige, mais en fait ils ont changé d’avis. ‘The boys said that they were shoveling the snow but they changed up their minds.’

b. Julie (4;3): Non, elles [les filles] ont dit qu’elles volaient les chapeaux de pirates. ‘No, they said they were stealing the pirate hats.’

Moreover, in other Romance languages like Italian and certain dialects of Spanish, an imperfective past is used to express temporal subsequence with respect to both the matrix event-time and the UT.

(7) Gianni ha detto (l’altro ieri) che mangiava una banana (ieri / domani). ‘John said (the day before yesterday) that he was eating a banana (yesterday / tomorrow).’

In the light of these adult data, the French child data seem less surprising.

When future means ‘future in the past’. The production data reveal another interesting finding: future (FUTPRES) was accepted 21% of the time in Context A. If, following H, we considered that children who use the imperfect are children with an independent tense grammar (i.e., they evaluate the embedded tense with respect to the UT) we would not expect them to produce a future in this context. Recall that the experimental context is one where the embedded event is completed before UT—the embedded future can only be construed as a dependent tense (expressing subsequence with respect to Ev-T1). We thus take these production data to mean that these children have a dependent tense grammar (i.e., they have acquired subordination). Now, assuming that French is like English and that children have acquired subordination, one might argue that the use of the future in Context A before UT is due to the fact that children did not acquire the properties of the future—they do not know that, in French, future is only used in a context where Ev-T1 follows the UT. We think this is not what is going on because children also produce a FUTPAST (future in the past) in the same context (26%). They thus know that their language allows this other possibility of expressing a future in the past meaning. In sum, the use of the future in Context A provides an indirect argument that it is not the lack of subordination that determines children’s use of the imperfect to convey a future in the past meaning.

Finally, the production results are corroborated with the results of the comprehension task where the acceptance rate of either the imperfect or the future was very high: between 88% and 96%. 

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(4)

a. Context A: Peter and Tommy: “Oh, look mom, a chimpanzee! We will give the chimpanzee a banana!” [the boys give the chimpanzee a banana].

b. Context B: There are two little girls Lucy and Suzy, two big girls, Anne and Mary, and the twins Tommy and Peter. They are playing together. Tommy and Peter: “We will jump over the trunk!” [The boys do not jump over the trunk].

Cronos (the puppet): Peter and Tommy said that …

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<tr>
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<th>Context A (Ev-2 completed before UT)</th>
<th>Context B (Ev-2 not completed before UT)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FUTPRES</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PASTIMP</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<tr>
<td>FUTPAST</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>35%</td>
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References:


