Production and Interpretation of Questions in French

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In this paper we present evidence in favor of the hypothesis that the development of question formation is constrained by a Hierarchy of Computational Complexity (HCC) (Jakubowicz 2004a,b) that is sensitive to the nature and number of operations involved in the derivation. According to the HCC (" <" indicates "less complex")

A. Merge (and Agree) < Move.
B. Moving a constituent α n times < moving α n+1 times.
C. Moving n constituents < moving n+1 constituents.

Taking into account (i) that in French wh in-situ is legitimate in root (Boskovic 1998, Cheng & Rooryck 2000 among others), and also in embedded questions (Obenauer 1994, Blanche-Benveniste pc), and (ii) that subject-finite verb inversion is obligatory only for clitic *que* fronted questions, the HCC gives rise to the following predictions :

(1) Wh in-situ will emerge before wh fronted questions.

(2) Root and "exceptional partial movement questions" (in the sense of Crain & Thornton 1998) will emerge before adult-like long distance questions.

(3) Root and long distance questions without subject-finite verb inversion will emerge before root and long distance questions with inversion.

To test these predictions we used two experimental tasks: (i) Elicited Production (EP) of root and embedded questions and (ii) Interpretation (IN) of ambiguous questions. Subjects were 36 monolingual French-speaking children (3 groups of 12 children each, aged 3, 4 and 6 years respectively) and 24 adults.

Although the results of the EP task did not contradict the predictions above (At age 3, frequency is significantly higher for wh in situ than for fronted wh questions; children avoid producing adult-like embedded questions; and don't produce any question with inversion), the results of the IN data let us think that the HCC constrains production only and thus qualifies as an interface phenomena (in the sense of Chomsky 2004).

298 words (without title, authors and references)

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