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Syntax Development: The Relevance of Realistic Methods

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1. Introduction

Usually syntax developmental studies explore how far (or near) child's linguistic structures are from adults' grammatical forms or which are the differences between child's and adult's comprehension of some grammatical usages. Almost all of these studies share the same underlying (and very strong) assumption: adult grammar is a kind of formal system with different and clear cutting categories and these forms have univocal and not context dependent relationships with their meanings.

Although this perspective has provided our present knowledge about how children acquire their language and the syntactic development processes involved, it was undersupplied for explaining particular trends of syntactic development (i.e. on non -western languages, on poor communities, etc.). Nowadays we believe that is needed to reach a new horizon developing a new, richer and more complex, interdisciplinary approach to the development of syntactic processes.

In that sense we have to take into account that children lives always in a cultural world: they participate in daily communities activities, share different customs and meanings with adults and peers and in these contexts children negotiate with them, and sometimes introduce, through using symbolic system, their own cultural perspective about events and people. So, they are not only learners on social groups but they are also active participants of their groups. Sometimes very young children, at 2 or 3 years old have a fine grained knowledge about how some behaviors are appropriate and relevant (or not) to different activities. Also, because they are group members that could participate from very young in, at least, the life of two social environment routines (i.e. community and schooling settings) they have take into account the differences between them on language performance demands and their relationship with the context of use and role demands. So they, from the beginning, are not only language users they are also community members that, in some sense, can think about how their language uses could change if the context or other constraints require that usage changes. In that sense syntactic resources are a set of specific procedures which allow language changes.

So, if we try to understand how children instantiate and develop a particular set of features of a symbolic system, i. e. syntactic procedures, when they are becoming an adult member of a

social group, we could realize that the results of traditional syntactic studies have some limitations. As it has been noticed by some other scholars before, some of these limitations are:

1. Understanding child's grammar as a system that may be explained according to a subsidiary relationship with one more stable and autonomous stage: adult's grammar. On this assumption underlies a "maturity" perspective, so child grammar is considered always as an incomplete (or deficient) system (i.e Chomsky, 1975; Correa, 1982; Solana, 1997).
2. Describing grammar forms by emphasizing the relevance of syntactic/formal aspect, taking for granted how symbolization and syntax, as a part of symbolization process, are been affected by interactional, situational or historical parameters (i.e Echeverria, 1976; 1978).
3. Establishing child grammar stages based on the presence (or to the absence) of some linguistics structures or features (i.e Gili Gaya, 1972; Alarcos Llorach, 1976; Solana, 1997; Mugica & Solana, 1999).
4. Considering grammar usages as a set of fixed and inalterable forms (i.e Gili Gaya, 1972; Alarcos Llorach, 1976; Solana, 1997; Mugica & Solana, 1999).

Syntax developmental studies conclude (or suppose) that child usages are, in some instance, deficient usages compared with adults' ones; and, due to this perspective, researchers can't understand the broad amount of grammatical resources that children have and could use, according to the different situations.

Although these arguments have been noticed before (Lust, Lynn & Foley, 1996; Nelson, 1996) questioning the "formal" view is a work far-reaching yet.

In this chapter we will analyze how the tighten relationship between the "formal emphasis" and experimental methods have conformed our nowadays particular view of syntactic developmental processes. Then we will mention how a different theoretical and empirical perspective, Cognitive-Functional paradigm, can contribute to expand this comprehension. In fact Cognitive Linguistics (Langacker, 1987; Lakoff, 1987) Grammaticalization Theory (Hopper, 1998) and Language Usage Model (Tomasello, 2001; 2003) trough criticizing the traditional notion of grammar model which allows to reach a more deep comprehension of different human symbolic usages, language uses between them.

This new research paradigm studies language considering language uses as epiphenomena of conceptualization, so grammar is always seen as an unstable system, in constant movement and tension. Even when grammar is always unstable, speakers and hearers prefers language over other symbolic systems because the frequent use of some forms make them as conventional uses; in fact a great amount of our everyday language uses are "sedimentation" ones and, by this fact, language allows that speakers and hearers reach mutual understanding in most economical way. In contrast with the chomskyan assumption considering grammar as an a-priori formal system, for Cognitive- Functional Perspective grammar is an "emergent structure": signs are provisional, context-bounding or bounding to other usages shared (or evoked or presupposed) by speaker and hearer (Hopper, 1998).

From this perspective when we study syntactic development processes, we start looking for and describing all the forms that could have same functional features, in a second instance we have to explain their formal structure and/or the meaning differences and, then, we postulate

different routines, *grammaticalization processes* (Hopper, 1998; Wierzbicka, 1988), that instantiate psychological or social motivations that could explain why we found these differences. In that sense, Cognitive- Functional Perspective assumes that there is a tighten relationship between descriptive and explanatory phases because both explain human behaviors and, when we study human phenomena, we try to “discover” how interact human cognitive constraints with the particular individual, social, cultural, environmental circumstances and experiences (Rosch, 1978; Rosch, Thompson & Varela, 1993; Nelson, 1996).

Cognitive Functional Perspective requires a coherent methodological approach, one of these requirements is considering and describing in a fine grained way functional language uses. But, to this end, it is necessary to have representative corpora of natural linguistics uses, obtained from spontaneous speaking or produced at so called “real” communicative exchanges. This kind of data allows us to preserve many aspects that form the complex dimension of behavior phenomena (Diver, 1995; Haiman, 1994).

Ethnographic studies have provided clear and rigorous methodological set of criteria considering setting features, context and human performance relationship (Auer & Luzio, 1997; Silverstein, 1976). In this sense a lot of developmental studies have used Conversational Analysis tools and made a relevant contribution to reach a deep comprehension of child development (i.e. Gardner & Forrester, 2010). Nevertheless this analytical perspective was taken for granted in syntactic developmental researches, because, although with this tool we can comprehend how a same child manage different syntactic resources - a “lower” and an “upper” syntactic developmental form - according to the context demands, these studies are considered only as “analysis of cases” and don’t respond to traditional requirements of syntactic developmental studies (i.e. reliability, opportunity to replication, etc.).

In contrast, results obtained in recent Spanish syntactic developmental researches (Silva, 2002; 2008; 2010a) demonstrate that it’s possible to obtain a new more dynamical view about syntactic language development not only following Cognitive Functional Perspective theoretical assumptions but also obtaining data by a new methodological tool that includes contributions from Etnomethodology perspective: Semi Structured Interview. This methodological tool is a data eliciting technique that allows to obtain relevant child syntactical performance data preserving most of the conditions that regulate real conversational exchanges.

After introducing Semi Structured Interview methodological guidelines, we will present our own researches’ results that compare and analyze syntactic developmental processes in Spanish speaking children between 4 and 7 years old. In these studies we have considered linguistic, discursive, cognitive and interactional processes observed when children use Relative Clauses (Rcs.).

We find that different forms of Rcs. coexist at a same age and that they have different contexts of usage and discursive functions. These results have very few points of coincidence with results obtained previously in experimental studies (Gili Gaya, 1972; Solana, 1996; 1997; Múgica & Solana, 1999; Jacobowicz, 1986; 1996). We believe that the particular eliciting technique allowed us to identify better the tighten interrelationship between child syntactic forms uses and other discursive competence factors, such as Media Length Utterance, or Discursive Contexts of appearance, so we could appreciate in a more fine grained view the relationship between syntax development and language demands posed by some cultural, social or contextual circumstances.

2. Syntactic development studies: A constant tension between theoretical assumptions, methodological resources and child discourse uses

Traditional methodology on child syntactic development studies consists on comparing child syntactic uses with its more likely similar adult form. Syntactic development researchers use to pick up and analyze some child usages considering that, in some way, these unstable forms are “deviant” and/or “corrupted” and that grammatical/ adult forms are “hidden” in them and, by a maturation process, child would access to a static/ grammatical adult form.

In few words child usages are, by definition, deficit usages and adult uses are complete and stable ones; it is the perspective that has been called “Maturation Perspective” (Borer & Wexler, 1987). In this sense Solana (1997), analyzing differences observed within child oral and written Relative Clauses (Rcs.), minimizes them by falling back to Maturation Hypothesis “cuando investigamos el conocimiento del lenguaje infantil,[...] no solo el conocimiento específico de las relativas sino también de los principios y parámetros que se ponen en juego, la distinción oralidad/ escritura entra en la determinación del objeto como la variable fundamental, pero no puede decirse que haya dos sistemas completamente distintos [...] sino diferencias respecto de la frecuencia de aparición, de la elección de encabezador, de la complejidad de la construcción sintáctica en particular. [...] pareciera ser más lógico encontrar la explicación del orden de adquisición de estructuras dentro de la hipótesis de la maduración, los niños adquieren unas estructuras después de otras (en este caso unas relativas después de otras) no porque los datos se den así escalonados sino porque maduran ciertas habilidades lingüísticas”¹ (Solana, 1997: 314)

In this kind of analysis researchers isolate and “cut”, within child discourse, some particular and interesting phenomena. This methodological procedure implies that researchers try to “freeze” child syntactic competence and believe that child syntactic uses are, such other language uses, monolithic and static. But, really, this assumption is only an illusion.

Let’s go to observe an example of how traditional analysis cuts, isolates and “freeze” child syntactic competence. Magali is a 4,5 years old Argentinean little girl living in a Media Class home in Buenos Aires city. She has attended at kinder from 2,3 years old and speaks Spanish in her monolingual home.

At 3,8 she used the irregular verb /poner/ (to put on) in different contexts, referring to actions performed by different agents.

At age of 4 she is realizing the different irregularities for this verb in past tense, but for the same grammatical adult target form /puse/, she uses two alternative forms: /pusí/ and /poní/. Magali uses two different forms expressing the same grammatical/ conceptual

¹ When we study child language knowledge, [...] not only particular child Relative Clauses knowledge but also Principles and Parameters Knowledge posed, oral and written differences go into epistemological object characterization as an essential variable, but we cannot believe that there would be two wholly different systems [...]there are differences on frequency of occurrences, about relative header choosing, about syntactic construction complexity[...] so it would seem more logical to look for an explanation about structural order acquisition within Maturation Hypothesis, it is that children acquire some structures after others (in this case some Relative Clauses after others) not because data appear in such way, staged, but because some [different] language skills mature at this time. (The translation is our).

meaning: 1st person + Simple Past + Punctual Action, but very soon she also uses the adequate, normal and expected adult target grammatical form: /puse/.

Child utterance	Adult-like form
/Pono esto aí?/	/Pongo esto aí?/
Put (Reg.) 1 st sg. Pres. this Masc. there Int.	Put. (Irr.) 1 st sg. Pres. This Masc. There Int.
Do I put this there?	
/Mami, Lupe me puso ete collar!	Mami, Lupe me puso este collar? Te gusta?
Mom, Lupe OD Put (Irr.) 3 rd . Sg. Past this necklace!	
Mom, Lupe put to me this neckle!	

Despite the fact that she uses more often “inadequate” forms than the adequate one, the question is: why she uses in some context /poní/ and in other circumstances /pusí/? It is only at chance choice or we can find a pattern?

At first we can appreciate that Magali inadequate forms derive from two different roots of “poner” conjugation forms.

Poní	Pusí
Poner	Puse
Pongo	Pusimos
Ponemos	Pusiste

In fact /Pon-/ is the regular root and /Pus-/ the irregular one (irregular forms are 41% of all conjugation forms).

Second, we can see that both forms share the same ending stressed vowel /í/. It is possible to think that this ending indicates that the girl is starting with the process of taking out regularities from a set of words (Tomasello, 2001) and she is inferring from this set some grammatical features. In fact, verbs with infinitive ending in “er” or “ir” have final stressed vowel /í/ expressing 1st person and punctual action.

Comer: Yo comí (To eat: I ate)

Ver: Yo ví (To see: I saw)

Sentir: Yo sentí (To feel: I felt)

So, we can assume that Magali can identify some aspects of /poner/ verbal conjugation.

But, why does she alternate the use of /pusí/ with /poní/?

The answer of this question comes from analyzing in detail these usages within the context of two interactional exchanges

The girl at 3.8 years old is starting to dress by her own: closes her door room and then she shows her mother the clothes that had pickup to dress.²

Mom: ¿Te pusiste e::sO:::?³

² The symbols follow Jefferson (2004)
³ Translation
Mom: Did you put (dress with) this?
Girl: Yes. I put (dressed) cause it is pretty

Girl: Si::¿Me PUSI: po:que esss BONITO!

In the same day the girl is trying to dress sandals although the day is too cold.

Mom: ¡No- te- pon-gasss! ⁴

Girl: ¡ Ya me- PO-NI!

In previous examples we can see that Magali's uses seem to obey to a "contextual" pattern: if her mom previously says a verbal form with the root /pus_/, she uses /pusí/ but if her mom uses a verbal form with the root /pon_/ she uses /poní/. We can conclude that the "instability" of Magali uses is not at chance phenomena, but results from some pattern and if we couldn't grasp natural daily exchanges and functional uses of the alternate forms, we couldn't understand why the girl chooses in some instances one form and not the other.

In that sense we believe that a syntactic developmental researcher could be like a cultural researcher, approaching to child language uses focusing on the function (or purpose or goal) that children attempt to do (Rogoff, 2003). So with this attitude it is possible to consider that child uses sometimes have a similar adult pattern, sometimes have a little different adult-like pattern and sometimes exhibit a very different one but always, due to the cognitive constraints that are imposed on its uses, they exhibit a human conceptual organization.

In sum, if we could take into account Magali's irregular forms of /poner/ (/pusi/ vs /poní/) only as an intermediate or erroneous or deviant form of the adequate adult like target /puse/ probably we would had a very partial comprehension of Magali's language, grammatical and pragmatic competence. So, we can conclude that traditional child development studies set not only partial and deviate images they reduced the complex dynamic of child discourse and language competence.

Probably the icon of this perspective has been chomskyan model. In fact the chomskyan assumption of autonomous syntax has obligated researchers to control in experimental tasks contextual variables interferences. Experimental tasks were designed to explore child's ability to discriminate meanings only by syntactic cues (syntactic bootstrapping) (see revision at Lust, Flynn & Foley, 1996).

However, some scholars have noticed that this methodological approach has a lot of shortcomings if we want to understand the dynamics of children's syntactic development (Crain, 1992; Bocaz, 1997; Kress & Fowler, 1983).

As it's been pointed out by some scholars other disciplines have also the same limitation for studying the relationship between language, behavior and human thought. It has been hypothesized, as the source of this limitation, the conception of language symbol as a mere formal entity, an unit detached from its social and psychological uses and constraints (Lakoff, 1987).

On the other hand, Cognitive-Functional Perspective sustains that language development is complex and dynamic process within children incorporate their cultural communal categories.

⁴ Translation:

Mom: You don't put (dress with) it

Girl: I put (it) yet!

Some social and cognitive abilities allow children to share the symbolic categorization system of their communities (Lakoff, 1987; Hopper, 1998; Langacker, 1993; 2000).

As human beings, children from their birth categorize their world in base of a network of symbolic resources (Tomasello, 2001; 2003). The categorization processes respond to different kind of motivations: psychological, social and/or communicative. Cognitive-Functional Perspective assumes that symbolic usages exhibit “traces” of this fact (Rosch, 1978; Rosch, Thompson & Varela, 1993; Lakoff 1987; Langacker, 1987, 1993, 2000; Nuyts & Pederson, 1997). When children learn (or develop) a language, they form abstract routines of surrounding language usages, (Idealized Cognitive Models - ICM-) by a process of neuro-cognitive specialization and by the appropriation of the routines which make language useful for communication together with actions, gestures, pitch differences, etc.. ICM are abstract items formed by children participation on language exchanges and provide the sources by which individuals can create new expressions based on their abstractness degree (Langacker 1987, 1993; 2000; Tomasello 2001). ICM have a high degree of generality, but they are not "universal", they are determined by specific social interaction routines; then, in some cases, it is possible that in different languages a same ICM have very different linguistic expression. In this sense grammar is conceived as an "emergent structure": the signs emerge from discursive contexts and are context bounding, that is they depend on other uses and contexts in which speaker and hearer have participated (Hopper, 1998).

It implies that, when Cognitive Functional scholars describe a linguistic form, they investigate the conditions, constraints, possibilities that speakers updated using this form. To do this it is necessary to have a representative corpus of language uses: spontaneous speech samples or some data provided by natural-like communication exchanges.

In sum, traditional syntactic development research has shown strong explanatory power for understanding child syntactic performance at experimental tasks. But these contributions do not explain usual phenomena in child speech (i. e. the existence of alternative routines, the relationships between forms and contexts/tasks of uses, etc.). In this sense we believe that this limitation is a consequence of the prevalence of experimental paradigm, which does not allow understanding in a deep sense how children manage the variety of symbolic resources that they have.

Children's grammars are not "incomplete", "deviant" or “in developing to a standard adult grammatical system”; they are grammars that express the subtle complexity of language appropriation process (Silva, 2008; 2010a). From a Cognitive Functional Perspective studying syntactic developmental processes implies inquiring about functional characteristics of the forms, and, if we find some differences, trying to find out the psychological or social motivations they cue.

3. Designing a methodological tool for eliciting child syntactic data: Semi-structured interview

If we would carry out a syntactic development research in order to explore the tighten relationship between cultural and contextual constraints and child syntactic development, at first, we must take into account the risks of the traditional techniques.

Because one of the guide assumptions in Language Usage Model framework (Tomasello, 2001; 2003; Silva, 2008; 2010a; 2010b) is considering grammar as a sedimentation of linguistic usages, we would select a methodological tool that could preserve the greater amount of child contextual linguistic usages; but, also this methodological tool would allow us to compare child language performance; in this case, a particular syntactic data.

The previous aims prompted us to design a new technique for eliciting child syntactic data. In fact, when we had decided to study Relative Clauses (Rcs.) development in Spanish, we evaluated different traditional syntactic tasks and concluded that none of them could be useful to our research aims and some of them are even opposite to Cognitive- Functional assumptions.

Thus we had designed a technique according with our theoretical perspective. The task wasn't a simple one: we would design a particular methodological tool and a set of criteria for eliciting different syntactic forms in their most natural and frequent way of appearance, that is in a format of conversational exchanges. But, due to the fact that we would carry out a research about Rcs. child uses, we had not only pay attention to the methodological aspects, although we would consider how eliciting a significant amount of Rcs. functional uses.

At first we considered and pondered different alternatives contexts for recording child language performance: natural exchanges or conversational like exchanges, that is a natural-like exchange. Due to the particular aims of our research, we needed a greater amount of linguistic forms to make a statistic procedure of analysis (at least 100 Rcs.), we choose a real-like (or "realistic") exchange as the better fit option.

In this sense we considered that the interview would be the most adequate option, because it conveyed two important advantages. It allowed us to preserve some particular aspects of spontaneous speech that we wanted to observe (on-line processing, contextual bounding, grounding in some perspective- footing-, etc.) and it could let making a set of ad-hoc guidelines according to our research aims.

In this sense others scholars have appreciated interview methodological values. Interview, compared with other eliciting techniques, and if the interviewer is a good one, is considered as the most "less information filtering" (Avila Baray, 2006; Richaud of Minzi & Ciuffardi Lemos, 2006) because people interact, after a little touching, in a natural way and people feel free to comment, expand, suggest, compare; in sum speakers talk with their interviewer as if he/she were with an acquaintance (Kress & Fowler, 1983).

Also it was regarded as an essential tool when we were working with children (Stromswold, 1996) because interview's situation reproduces the conditions that govern everyday conversational interactions (Labov, 1991) and in these exchanges children tend to be more stress-free and comfortable than in experimental situations. In fact interviews have overlappings between speaker and interviewer, a width sample of pitches, shift tones, gestures, etc.; because, as it happens in every day conversations, speakers cannot plan in detail their speech. Sometimes happens that participants include their opinions or other comments not restricted by topics of talk. These aspects were taking for granted when children were interviewed, i.e. in interview's transcriptions these features were "normalized" and disappeared (Rodriguez & Murillo, 1985). But contributions from Conversationalist Analysis and Ethnomedology studies allowed to understand their

relevance and realized how could change our syntactic phenomena understanding if we try to preserve them and to give back their contextual meaning (Silverstein, 1976).

In this sense one of the Cognitive Functional Theories, Grammaticalization Theory (Hopper, 1998), assumes that face to face interactions are the main contexts which provide models for the emergence of grammatical categories because in these interactions grammar exhibits two significant characteristics: context bounding and on-line processing dependence (Wierzbicka, 1988).

Also there is evidence that children in interviews with an adult exhibit higher scores of syntactic complexity speech than the scores obtained when they were talking with peers. Wells (1988) found that 5 years old children at home talking with siblings or friends show an 2.8 score of Syntactic Complexity Media, while at school, talking with their teachers, the same children have 3.2 score and at home, speaking to adults, their Syntactic Complexity Media score was 3.1. These results demonstrate that children display more complex syntax when they talk with an adult than when they talk to other child.

In Spanish there are some language development studies based on interviews (Gili Gaya, 1972; Oralia & Murillo, 1985) but these eliciting data situations were not designed in detail, they usually have been considered as “Free talking” (Plática Libre) and they didn’t have a detailed set of criteria by which interviewers would prompt a more natural way of interaction. So children, in these interviews talked about topics that researchers assume are common talk topics for children: how many people did conform their family, what they were doing, what were the games that children use to play, when, and so on. Despite the fact that these interviews provide some relevant linguistic information, they do not provide, in strictu sensu, analogous syntactic data. It is, although we could find that different children use a “same” syntactic form the context in which forms appear and their discourse functions were so dissimilar, so they were not comparables between them (Silva, 2010b).

3.1 When a topic of talk is a “significant” one at children interviews?

Considering the problematic characteristics of syntactical data obtained in other interviews with children, we have decided that the eliciting technique to be designed wouldn’t be focusing on common topics talking production, because the common topic is not an efficient resource for eliciting a same amount of autonomous talking in different children from different communities. In fact a boy, or a girl, who works with his/ her parents after school has not the same the same opportunities that a Media Socioeconomic Level child to play a lot of time with a width variety of games. Of course his/her comments about toys or games would be scarcer than a typical Media Level child. So if we need to set common topics, we could look for topics that would be part of child life experiences.

Nevertheless we considered that elicitation of common discursive sequences (i.e. narrative sequences appear when someone is retelling a short story, instructional sequences appear when someone gives a description of some trajectory, etc.) could provide us richer syntactical data sources than the elicitation of traditional topics and it would allow to carry out a statistical comparative analysis. So we decided that elicitation technique to be designed would promote children production of some discursive sequences and topics would function as “significant matters” to talk about, as in real conversational exchanges. It implied that first at all we would explore which were “significant matters” in the particular

children communities in which we would carry out our research. These significant childhood topics could prevent that interviews reproduce experimental circumstances (i.e. children feel self-conscious and evaluated) and would enable children to interact with the interviewer in a most natural and spontaneous way.

How we characterize “significant child topics”? To identify which were significant topics in the communities being studied, two communities of different Socioeconomic Levels, we decided to carry out an exploratory research. The communities were selected due to their Socioeconomic differences, but they were also located in the same geographical area: Buenos Aires city, because this condition could prevent a large dialect fluctuation. So we made interviews in two different urban kindergarten and schools communities: a private and a public one. In a brief social description and depending the area considered, nowadays, at Buenos Aires city, children who attend private kinder and primary school belong to High and Media Socioeconomic Level (i.e. their families have upper incomes, the education of their parents is higher, parents have permanently jobs, etc.); on the contrary the most of the children who attend a public kinder and primary school belong to Media, Low and very poor or marginalized population.

Then, we have to identify the “core” topics that could trigger a good sample of natural-like interaction, a greater amount of child autonomous talk and discursive contexts for the emergence of Rcs.. We named these topics as “Discourse Nuclei” because they pose some interactive and discursive function and topics would be subsidiary to this function. For example if a child relates a quarrel with her sister and with this story argues attempting to persuade interviewer about the need to have certain object for re-establishing “home calm”, the topic “a quarrel” will be subsidiary to a pragmatic function: persuading interviewer about the relevance of a child desire. We always had in mind that “Discourse Nuclei” would provide contexts of appearance of specific syntactic data: Rcs. forms, and they would be supporting experiences shared by almost all the children being studied. In an exploratory research we tested some different topics, for narrative discourse: retelling a film, a story that children had read, telling a personal experience (i.e. a little damage or accident in which children were protagonists or observers); for instructional discourse: giving directions about how to prepare their favorite meal, how to repair a toy which was broken very often, how to play their favorite video-game or table/cards-game and for argumentative discourse: explaining why they prefer an object (i.e a particular meal, a game), an activity (i.e. to do swimming or a hobby after school-time) or to do something with somebody (i.e. to play with certain playmates and not with other). Afterwards we had made our exploratory interviews to 20 children of the communities under study, we analyzed them and evaluated data provided. We asked other 2 referee’s opinions for deciding which were the topics with a higher score.

We decided that they would be determined by their capacity to elicit a considerable amount of child autonomous talk, so we have considered

1. The significance of the topic within the community being studied (i.e. stories with their pets were important and productive topics for Media Level children but not always for Lower Level children)
2. The topic relevance within a particular life moment of childhood (i.e. birthday parties, vacations, princess or heroes films are significant topics for children between 5 to 7 years old but not for children between 9 to 11 years old).

3. The possibility that the topics emerge as an interesting matter to talk about during a conversational exchange.

When children talk a lot, emphasize, add comments, include pitch variations, gestures and use the topic to argue, to relate other episode or to include a detailed description, then the topic would be ranked in a high degree. On the contrary, when children participation was scarce or they seemed to be apathetic the topic was considered as non significant (Stromswold, 1996).

After having a list of "Discourse Nuclei" positions, we considered which was the best order of appearance according their "interactional power"; it is the topics that allows "breaking the ice" would be the first to be elicited.

So the "Discourse Nuclei" elicited from the child communities being studied were:

1. Asking about the name and age of children.
2. Asking about child birthday: when it was and asking to relate his/her last birthday party or the most important birthday party that child have remembered.
3. Asking a personal experience in which the child would be the principal character or in which this role could be carried out by a member of his/her family or a mate (a classmate, a playmate, etc.).
4. Asking a retelling of child's favourite cartoon, movie, or stories that he/ she had read if children did any reference to some cartoons or movies while children retold their birthdays. Interviewers would paid attention and taken note of these mentions and, asking a retelling of their favorite cartoon, movie, or stories that he/she had read.

In order to have a comparable set of adult-child interactions we made a list of guidelines and suggestions that orient interviewers to take data.

Although we made a detailed set of guidelines orienting interviews, an event happened when we made one of the first interviews changed this protocol. When we were interviewing a girl she mentioned, at her birthday's party retelling, a set of troubles that she had experienced before, and she mentioned the places where each of them had happened. These mentions conveyed a serious communication problem, because the interviewer couldn't understand when and in which order the problems had happened, so, as an ad-hoc solution the interviewer asked the girl to draw the plan of the journey described and to make some crosses to indicate where the problems had occurred. After we had read this transcription we could appreciate that there was a considerable increase of Rcs. uses.

Trough this descriptive sequence the girl built a shared area of knowledge with her conversational counterpart and by using Rcs. the girl was trying to share the reference points with the interviewer (Silva, 2008). So this interview provided a new " Discursive Nuclei": a description to get particular location would include the mention of different reference points to reach the end-point.

As it happened with the girl, when other children were describing the route not only gave detailed route descriptions but also they expressed the need to draw it by taking a notebook and a pen (or pencil) or asking: do you want I draw it? Afterwards they draw rudimentary plans indicating with crosses some reference points to guide the interviewer in this "imaginary" tour. (See Fig.1)



Fig. 1. Plan sketched: The trajectory starts at school and the end-point is the child's house (The boy said: *Y ahí en la puertita que tiene un cartel: ven-do gelatina con flan*⁵)

The descriptions elicited were so familiar to children, i.e. answering how to get at child's house from the school, how to get at mate's house from child's house, how to get at child's party saloon from the school. Because the aim of the research was identifying the emergence contexts of Rcs. we attempted that children could explain crosses that they had drawn as reference points for indicating how to get an end- point.

Another "Discourse Nuclei" incorporated was of "shared Rcs." elicitation. This task was included in every context and required that the interviewer, after an ambiguous or unspecific actant/ object mentioned by the child, simulated that he/she couldn't remember the event in which this actant/ object had been mentioned. So interviewer began a phrase using a Rc. but, when he/she would complete the subordinate structure, he/she did as he/she had in the "tip of the tongue" this structure. So the child, that had mentioned it before and had a better knowledge about this referent, completed the utterance with an adequate Rc. form.

3.2 How to deal with interviewer participation?

Our revision of previous studies on syntactic development allows us to thinking about on seeming "neutral" position of adult interviewers. On the contrary, Etnomethodology approach contributions showed that studies of social and cultural human relationships and use of symbols depending on scholar's position and his/her community involvement (Rogoff, 2003).

⁵ Translation: And there in the little door that has a chart: I sell jelly with caramel

At first we attempted to clarify in every detail how interviewer's role would be.

One of the choices was deciding which adult would be the best interviewer: if it would be an acquaintance (i.e. children's teacher with a specific training) or if would be a strange people.

The two possibilities showed advantages and disadvantages. If we selected an acquaintance person probably children would omit expressions assuming that referents mentioned were part of adult and children common background. On the contrary, a strange person could intimidate children and could produce shyness or nervous child speech (Rogoff, 2003). So we decided that the best way was a strange person who shared with children their routine activities at kinder or school classes' before making interviews (Rogoff, 2003).

The presence of interviewers at kinder/ schools classes allowed us to obtain sizeable amount of child autonomous speech because interviewers didn't realize so much about child life's and this fact produce "better" child language performance, i. e. if children skip some mentions of events probably interviewers were not able to distinguish referents and they could face off a communication problem and would require a precise use of linguistic resources to resolve it. In that sense there is evidence that children at 4 years old can recognize if their conversational counterpart have a little or a great common background with them, can adequate their speech to this situation (i.e. including more explanations for clarifying) and can resolve communication problems caused by this fact (Mathews, Lieven & Tomasello, 2007).

Likewise interviewers attempted to be considered by children groups as "Insider/ outsider observer" (Rogoff, 2003), but this position was different due to the particular characteristics of the different groups. For example, posing this dynamic at Media Level 7 years old children group was more difficult than in other groups. On the contrary, at kinder classes it was easier: the interviewer became soon as an "auxiliary" teacher, playing with children at corners, talking with them at circle-time, and so on. The kinder teachers realize very soon the impact of this kind of dynamic for making good interviews. On the contrary 7 years old children of Media Level teacher was reluctant to allow that interviewers attended her classes. Nevertheless in 7 years old group only a boy talked in a scarce way.

An essential issue at those instances was to get for children group's approbation of interviewer's participation. In some occasions actions done for this aim were ad-hoc. In example in the first days of taking interviews interviewers would observe the social dynamic of each group, trying to talk with every child and introducing children to the study (i.e. explaining its aims, showing the technical resources, etc.). At the end of this process, only children selected in order of their age brought to their parents authorizations for participate at the research. However these guidelines didn't guarantee that interviewers could be considered by children as a part of their group. At 6 years old children of Low Socioeconomic Level, the interviewer introduced her to children and was located by the teacher at one corner of the classroom, so far from children. Children twisted their head frequently for look to the interviewer but they did not approach or speak to her. After that, teacher explained an activity in which children would use specific coloured pencils. Some of them did not have these coloured pencils, and they would be allowed to walk through the classroom asking somebody to borrow them. At this circumstance interviewer showed her coloured pencil to a boy who couldn't find anybody who could borrow it. The child

approached her, took the pencil and came back to his site talking to his mate that the interviewer had a lot of colored pencils required by the activity. After that some other children approached to the interviewer, and asked her if she could borrow pencils, checked with her whether the work was right, showed their drawings or asked her about the research. When the class finished children began to approach freely to the interviewer, holding her hands and relating her some stories (i.e a girl said: do you know that my daddy will bring me a Barbie from his job this night! and other: I haven't a Barbie but I have a lot of dolls! My siblings had a lot and they gave them to me!).

On the other hand interviewers had to overcome different setting limitations, i.e. looking some days for an adequate room to make interviews and recording child speech. For example at Media Level School we had a room in which we installed camcorder and recorders, but this room was originally designated for educational psychologist tasks. This implied that if educational psychologist needed this place we would suspend interviews. Also if educational psychologist entered to the room while we were interviewing children, they changed abruptly their way of speaking: if children before the interruption were talkative, collaborative and expressive, when psychologist was there, they answered with monosyllables or muted.

In sum, these episodes allow us to appreciate the relevance of making "areas of stories safeguarding" when we were getting data from children. With regard to this some children commented daily life episodes at Semi-Structured Interviews, seemingly unimportant but they are crucial to understand children worlds. For example we had collected, at Semi-Structured Interviews, stories in which children relate the consequences of living unstable family relationships, poor living conditions, the death of a relative, episodes of discrimination, differences made by parents with their siblings, the loss of a loving toy, and so on. Sometimes, when we had told these stories to teachers, they could realize the relevance of the precautions for getting interviews because only few of them knew episodes that children retold at interviews.

For example, a 4.8 years old Argentinean boy, after mentioned that a mate, a Peruvian boy, had broken one of his toys, explains why he believes that this boy did it: because he is Peruvian and Peruvian people are bad, lie and eat "garbages"

Boy: *todo eso comen lo peruano // todo eso animales comen los peruanos // **cocinado***

Interviewer: *¿una cucaracha cocinada?*

Boy: *Sí/ la comen ello*

Int.: *pero jeso no se puede comer!*

Boy: *lo argentino no pueden comer, pero lo coso sí comen, le ponen ajo, ají y lo comen // [...]*

Int.:{ *¿no comerán pescado °o arroz °y uno no se dará cuenta? Y parece*

Boy: = *no // **lo argentino comen** lo argentino comen // [...] y/ bue:no// eso es lo que cocina// preguntáale al **Miguel**/ y él te va- a- de-cir/ claro/ no me dijo Miguel que comían/ me dijo que comía flan **con** chocolate// **ÉL MIENTE** /poque lo peruano miente// él miente⁶⁷*

⁶ Translation

4. Child Relative Clauses uses and syntactic development from a new perspective

Although Rc. development has been considered in a huge amount works from different theoretical perspectives, we studied it because we realize that none of them could explain a seemingly trivial contradiction: children exhibited “deviant” or “later” forms at experimental tasks but when they interact they pose adult-like forms (Gili Gaya, 1975; Alarcos Lloras, 1976; Echeverría, 1978; Hamburger & Crain, 1982; Solana, 1996; 1997; Dasinger & Toupin, 1997; Bocaz, 1997; Jisa & Kern, 1998).

Rcs. developmental studies showed contradictory results (i.e. the order of occurrence of each type of Rc.). We hypothesized that not only theoretical assumptions could be responsible for the differences in results but, also, differences could be attributed to the different methodological perspectives adopted.

If we study Rc. development within Communicative Competence Development and Language Usage Models (Tomasello, 2001; Diesel & Tomasello, 2001) we consider Rcs. as structures that allow speakers to manage referential function (Matthews, Lieven & Tomasello, 2007; 2009). Referential function is a cognitive ability by which speakers can provide adequate information to his/her counterpart; by it speaker and hearer could share a same perspective about a referent codified in the message. The development of this skill implies other cognitive skills such as that children could move off from their own point of view to his/ her hearer point of view or the ability to form expectations about the information that could require a conversational counterpart, etc. (Deutsch & Pechman, 1982; Matthews, Lieven & Tomasello, 2007; 2009).

For example if we observe a girl of 3,4 walking with her mother and talking with her, we could appreciate real Rc. functional occurrence

Girl (pointing a wall chart in which they see a marinated pork image): Mom, a pi::g!

Mother (looking and pointing wall chart): Yes, as the pig that we saw at Carrefour⁸.

Child: Aha! The pig we saw.

When the mother is using a Rc. shows the girl that construction headed by "that" allows recalling another previous situation in which were they and the object mentioned. From mom's point of view both objects (the wall-chart pig and the market- pig) are similar, so child could learn, by this, that the object could be the same although they were in different spaces and with them people could do different things: you can see to the wall chart pig but

Boy: all of this Peruvian people eat, all of these animals Peruvian people eat, cooked,

Int.: A cockroach cooked?

Boy: Yes, they eat that

Int.: But, we can't eat it

Boy: Argentinean people cannot, but these guys eat it, they put garlic and chili and they eat that.

Int.: But they won't eat fish or rice and we won't realize that?

Boy: No, Argentinean people eat that, Argentinean people eat/ / And, well, that is that (they) cook, you ask Miguel and he will answer you, of course, he didn't tell me what they ate, he said that they ate caramel with chocolate, he lies, because all Peruvian people lie, he lies.

⁷ The symbols used in transcription follow Jefferson (2004).

⁸ Carrefour is the name of one of the most popular markets in Argentina

you can take home, cook and eat the market pig. These inferences allow child to conclude that the constructions headed by "that" categorizes two objects in the same class despite the dissimilar events in which they are involved (Silva, 2002).

From this point of view, producing a Rc. implies not only a syntactic development. In fact there is a more complex process, when children use a Rc. they face off a very cognitively complex task: they must realize what shared knowledge is needed, how manage semantic role assignment, how order the lexical items according syntactic/ conventional uses, pick up the appropriate phonemes, etc.. Actually, when we identify different child syntactic forms we could appreciate the complex cognitive task involved (Diesel & Tomasello, 2001; Silva, 2002).

In this sense Silva (2008; 2010) found 5 (five) different Rcs. forms attending Rcs. uses, that Argentinean girls and boys (5 and 7 years old belonging to different Socioeconomic Levels) produced at Semi Structured Interviews.

- Rcs. headed by a relative pronoun⁹

*Y ACÁ vive mi abuela y::: **que está muy lejos** (girl 12: 33)¹⁰.*

*Yo me fui de vacaciones y me hicieron fiesta, en la playa y **donde jugamos al tesoro del pirata**, lo tenía que enterrar en la arena (girl 1: 20)¹¹*

- Rcs. headed by an evidential particle (viste) plus relative pronoun

*Sí // porque mi hermana se compró u, un vestido **¿viste esos que son así, con unas cositas, así?** (boy 6:5).¹²*

- Shared Rcs. headed by a relative pronoun

Girl: Lo tiene en una caja¹³

*Interviewer: Pero una caja, **que vos***

*Girl: **que yo::, YO NO SÉ DONDE GUARDA ESO**, guarda por unas cosas así, al toque, ahí guardamos nuestras cosas pero no sé cuál cajón es de ella (girl 27: 37)*

- Rcs. headed by a relative pronoun but children omitted it

*Este es el tío y le querían matar a su hijo bebé <al que> **le va a comer** (boy, 5: 56)¹⁴*

*No:: agarran una lata e_[s] como que hacen e:: un portalápices con plastilinas, un tubo_[al que] **le ponen plastilinas**, le hacen un muñeco, así (girl 29: 38)¹⁵*

⁹ The numbers in brackets correspond to the codification for order of children interviewed and order Rc. occurrence in child's transcription. The bold phrases are Rcs.

¹⁰ Trans.: And here lives my grandmother and that she is so far.

¹¹ Trans. I went to [was on] holidays and they made a party for me, in the beach, and where we played the pirate's treasure, I had to bury it into the sand.

¹² Trans.: Yes, because my sister bought a, a dress, do you see those that they are such as, with a little things, like this?

¹³ Transl. Girl: She has it into a drawer

Interviewer: but, a drawer that you

Girl: that I, I don't know where she keeps that, she keeps for some things like this, at the touch, there we keep our things but I don't realize which is her drawer of wardrobe.

¹⁴ Transl.Boy: This is the uncle and they wanted to kill his baby son {to whom} he goes to eat.

- Headless Rc.

*Y cuando me soltó la señorita, yo estaba pataleando y pataleaba muy fuerte (boy 22: 32)*¹⁶

Although their syntagmatic differences, all the Rcs. identified share some features; within them: when children structures Reference Point, they discriminate a salient characteristic of previous Conceptual Frame, it is children assign saliency to an element (or part of it) belonging to an activated Conceptual Frame (Fauconnier, 1985). The Conceptual frames are activated by particular exchange needs and/or a mental state that children could anticipate (or suppose) of their conversational partner. It implies that children, as competent speaker, could recognize when and how is needed to increase some actant/ figure cognitive accessibility degree activating relevant information (Langacker, 1987; 1993). In fact, through a Rc. use, speakers could integrate conceptual information and establish a Reference Point. Reference Point allows to mention and to identify an actant mentioning an event. It's possible that this process could be an expensive and complex conceptual procedure, and, by this, several different Rcs. forms could instantiate this cognitive and sociocultural variation (Sedano & Bentivoglio, 1997).

Although Silva (2008; 2010) found significant correlation between Rcs. frequency and Age, she did not find any correlation with developmental stages (periods of three months). She concluded, in coincidence with other studies, that Rcs. frequency is caused not only by a syntactic developmental factor but it is possible that it could be originated by the interaction of psycholinguistic and discursive developmental factors (i.e, Media Length Utterance, Media Length Clause, total amount of words produced by children during the interview, etc.).

5. Conclusions

In contrast with traditional children interviews we stated a set of criteria that allowed us to elicit a sizeable amount of particular syntactic form (Rc.). So we designed a technical tool to elicit considerable amount of child autonomous speech. We named this technique Semi-Structured Interview because its format will be "structured" by previous exploratory research. In this exploratory research we could look for some possible functional contexts in which syntactic forms under study would emerge with their natural-like speech function.

In fact exploratory study allowed us to identify that some personal experience narratives, trajectories description, retellings, etc. could be richer "Discursive Nuclei" for eliciting not only sizeable child autonomous speech but also for to create contextual conditions requiring at Rcs. usages. We, following Ethnometodological studies, took a lot of eliciting precautions, within them considering interviewers as classroom community participants and making interview's setting as "safe-guarding stories areas", maintaining child's attention by controlling gaze, body posture and intonation attempting to express interest in the child's talk; so interviews were so similar as "everyday conversations", and children could express freely in them.

These precautions also ensure that children couldn't contextualize or erosionate so much their speech. We consider this technique of great value because with it we could resolve some of the

¹⁵ Transl. Girl: No, they catch a can i[s] like that they make e, a pencil holder with modeling clay, a pipe [to whom] they put it modeling clay, they make it a dummy, like this.

¹⁶ Transl. Boy: And when teacher lets me go, I was stamping and stamped so fast.

difficulties involved at studying child syntax development. Among them that the methods for studying adult syntactic competence are not suitable for children (Stromswold, 1996), that there is evidence that child syntactic performance at experimental tests is modified according to test conditions (i.e. when a test administrated has been repeated), and because child syntactic tests exhibit greatest differences with language usage daily demands (Silva, 2008).

Semi- Structured Interviews allowed us to obtain a sizeable and functional amount of syntactic forms. In fact at the "Discursive Nuclei" children use Rcs. when they need to refer and discriminate an object or an actant for some particular exchange needs. Instead syntactic tests we believe that Semi- Structured Interview, carefully designed, provides spontaneous-like conversations, it is an efficient method for producing children comparable samples and allows considering the relevance of factors undermined at experimental tests (i.e how child syntax is influenced by child Media Length Utterance). In fact Semi- structured interview has a peculiar elicitation format of data that reveals features minimized at experimental tests.

In sum, Semi- Structured Interview seems to be a valuable tool to preserve much of child language usage characteristics at context and to understand the complex dynamics of language development and the effective use of language, considering it as social behavior.

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