

The acquisition of reference in German and French: Language-independent and language-specific effects
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The form and position of referring expressions signal the information status of referents in discourse, while at the same time following syntactic constraints, such as the V2-constraint in German. While there are language-independent principles governing their use, the specific constraints and their interplay may vary between languages.

There are conflicting claims in the literature as to when children acquire an adult-like use of referring expressions (de Cat, 2011; von Stutterheim, Halm & Carroll, 2012). To contribute to addressing this question, the current study uses a carefully controlled cross-linguistic design. German and French-speaking 5, 7 and 10-year olds as well as adults were asked to retell short films that elicited reference to preceding subjects or preceding non-subjects in comparable contexts. The data revealed common developmental tendencies across the two languages, in particular concerning the amount of pronominal forms in different age groups. There were also language-specific effects regarding the specific forms chosen, their syntactic integration as well as the use of word order. Finally, there were interactions between age effects and language-specific effects: in particular, the German system seems to make the adult-like use of word order harder than does the French system. We conclude that the age at which an adult-like use of referring expressions is achieved depends among other factors on the specific language that is acquired.