The Early Acquisition of Determiners in Spanish and Yucatec Mayan.

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This is a study which compares the early acquisition of determiners in two unrelated languages: Spanish and Yucatec Mayan. The literature shows that determiners are very early in the acquisition (Soja 1994, Muneton Ayala et al 2002) and that they even seem to be the first particles to be syntactically productive in the child’s speech (Lieven et al, 2003). In our analysis of longitudinal data of Flor, a native speaker of Mexican Spanish, determiners are found already at the age of 1;11. However, in the analysis of the spontaneous speech of Armando and Sandi, native speakers of Yucatec Mayan, no determiners were found until 2;07. These results are interesting because the study of Mayan languages has already put in question the assumption that nouns are acquired earlier than verbs (Brown 1998, de León 1999, Pfeiler 2003).

To test the spontaneous data results and to find out at which age determiners are part of the grammatical knowledge of both Yucatec and Spanish children, we conducted an elicited imitation task with children aged between 2;00 and 5;00, both monolinguals of the languages studied. The use of determiners is mastered earlier in the acquisition of Spanish (2;00) than in Mayan (3;00) speaking children. We attribute this to a characteristic of the Yucatec input in which determiners are difficult to identify.

References