

Phonological language acquisition has become a research area of fast-growing importance in recent years, and particularly since the introduction of Optimality Theory (Prince & Smolensky, 1993), there has been a rapid emergence of acquisition studies, reflecting the suitability of constraints for formalization of the phonological development. The importance of acquisition is also reflected in the construction of substantial empirical bases, e.g. the Fikkert/Levelt Dutch corpus (Fikkert, 1994; Levelt, 1994) and the CHILDES database (MacWhinney, 1995). My doctoral project is a contribution on two theoretical fronts, i.e. L1 acquisition and Optimality Theory (henceforth OT). It aims at testing central principles of OT against acquisitional data, and specifically to further advance our understanding of how OT can model variation. Theoretical questions about the nature of L1 acquisition will be explored mainly through the acquisition of French. The investigation of OT's modelling of variation will be based on schwa's behaviour in child language.

Schwa is the weakest vowel segment in many languages, a weakness that is reflected both in its frequent alternation with zero (or other vowels) and in its frequently observed incapacity to bear stress. Many aspects of schwa's behaviour remain unexplained in phonological theory, and French is a language in which these questions are especially prominent. In French, schwa is licensed in the output to avoid a marked syllable structure. However, its realisation is not the only optimal solution, resulting in intraspeaker variation. Numerous studies attempt to account for schwa in French, but no one thus far has attempted a study of how schwa is acquired by children. The main objective of this project is to study the acquisition of schwa through a longitudinal study of Swiss French monolingual children, with emphasis on (i) the child's strategy for handling variation in the ambient language input and (ii) the segmental, prosodic and positional constraints existing at different developmental stages.

## References

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