In this paper the acquisition of nominal ellipsis by L1 (1;8 – 5;11) and 2L1 learners (2;5 – 4;0) of Dutch and French is investigated. The acquisition of nominal ellipsis has not received much attention in the literature. Our cross-linguistic and cross-sectional approach deepens the understanding of the acquisition process and its relative complexity and also of the licensing mechanisms of nominal ellipsis.

Nominal ellipsis is the omission of a noun from a definite or indefinite noun phrase in a situation where it can be recovered from the (linguistic or situational) context. It has been claimed that the missing noun can be formally licensed 1) by adjectival inflection (e.g., Kester 1996), as in the Dutch example (1) or 2) by elements (adjectives or quantifiers) with an intrinsic partitive meaning preceding the omitted noun (e.g., Sleeman 1996), as in the French example (2):

(1)  *Hij koos de grote.*
    he chose the big

“**He chose the big one.**”

(2)  *Je préfère la deuxième.*

“I prefer the second.”

In addition to the licensing requirements on the remnant, in certain indefinite noun phrases noun ellipsis requires the use of a quantitative pronoun. In standard Dutch, the quantitative pronoun *er* is only used if the remnant of the indefinite noun phrase is a quantifier (3). In French the quantitative pronoun *en* is also used in combination with adjectives, the same that license noun ellipsis in definite noun phrases (4):

(3)  *Ik heb *er* drie gekocht.*
    I have *er* three bought

‘I have bought three.’

(4)  *Elle en a choisi une rouge.*
    she *en* has chosen a red

‘She has chosen a red one.’

Valois et al. (2009) argue that L1 acquisition of noun ellipsis in French shows that partitivity plays an important role. In their view, the interpretation of spontaneous production data from 15 monolingual L1 French children (1;8 – 2;12) goes against an account in terms of adjectival agreement (Snyder et al. 2001) and supports Bouchard’s (2002) analysis of nominal ellipsis. Bouchard claims that nominal ellipsis, at least in French, is licensed by partitivity, expressed, e.g., by a quantifier or an adjective with a partitive meaning preceded by a determiner. Gavarró et al. (2010) for Romance and Veenstra et al. (2011) for Dutch, show that the use of the quantitative pronoun in Romance and Dutch is target-consistent in L1 children not before the age of 5, and later than the acquisition of accusative pronouns.

These analyses raise the following questions: 1) if partitivity (quantifier or an adjective with a partitive meaning preceded by a determiner) plays an important role in the L1 acquisition in French, is this also the case in a language like Dutch, for which it has been claimed that nominal ellipsis is licensed by adjectival agreement? 2) if the use of the quantitative pronoun in French and Dutch is target-consistent around the age of 5, how does the acquisition proceed? 3) since 2L1 acquisition can be delayed and can be subject to cross-linguistic influences (e.g., Hulk & Müller 2000), how does 2L1 acquisition of nominal ellipsis proceed?
In order to find out how nominal ellipsis is acquired cross-linguistically and cross-categorically, we analyzed the productions of 5 L1 French children (1;8 – 3;0) and of 5 L1 Dutch children (1;8 – 3;6) available in Childes, and of 3 2L1 French-Dutch children (2;5 – 4;0) from our own corpus. We also submitted two tests to 20 Dutch 4 year olds and 20 Dutch 5 year olds in order to investigate their acquisition of the quantitative pronoun: an elicitation task (the same as in Veenstra et al. 2011) and a repetition task (slightly adapted from Veenstra et al. 2011).

For L1 French, our corpus research shows that children use noun ellipsis at least from 1;8. Noun ellipsis is licensed in their speech by quantifiers and adjectives with a partitive meaning preceded by a determiner, conform Valois’ findings. For L1 Dutch, we had partly the same results: Dutch children also use noun ellipsis already around 1;8 and, surprisingly, in their early productions noun ellipsis is also licensed by cardinals and adjectives with a partitive meaning, just as in L1 French. Interestingly, however, Dutch children start using noun ellipsis when they still frequently omit the determiner, which contradicts Bouchard’s and Valois’ analysis of the licensing of noun ellipsis. Our corpus research shows that French and Dutch L1 learners also behave similarly with respect to the acquisition of the quantitative pronoun *en* resp. *er* with indefinite elided nouns. Both groups start using the quantitative pronoun around the age of 2;5. However, children fluctuate in their use of *en/er*. Sometimes they use *en/er*, sometimes they omit it in contexts where it is required in the target system.

The results of our experiments (an elicitation and a repetition task) reinforce Gavarró et al.’s (2010) and Veenstra et al.’s (2011) results: the use of the quantitative pronoun by French and Dutch L1 learners is target-consistent around the age of 5. The (Dutch) 4-year olds left out the quantitative pronoun *er* much more frequently than the 5 year olds. In the elicitation task, the 4 year olds also avoided the use of *er* much more often than the 5 year olds by using a noun instead of an elided noun.

Our corpus research on the acquisition of noun ellipsis by French-Dutch 2L1 learners shows that it emerges early in both languages and that, just like in L1 Dutch, in 2L1 French it can be licensed without the presence of a determiner. Moreover, we found that the use of the quantitative pronoun *er/en* by 2L1 learners is delayed in both languages. We argue that these apparently opposite patterns can be explained by cross-linguistic influence which operates differently with respect to licensing of noun ellipsis by *en/er* and by a remnant.

We will argue that these new empirical data from child language allow us moreover to evaluate recent theoretical analyses of licensing of nominal ellipsis and the quantitative pronoun (e.g., Corver & Van Koppen 2009, Schoorlemmer 2009).