

Single Words to Combinations: Longitudinal analysis reveals constructive processes integrating lexical and pragmatic development within a conversational context

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Abstract

The phrase ‘transition from single to multi-word speech’ potentially conveys two misleading notions. First, that single-word speech is qualitatively a single phase and second, that there is a distinct, perhaps even abrupt, dividing line between the two types of speech. However, in order to understand how a child attains the phenomenon of multiword speech one must recognize that mature multiword speech comes to fruition through a series of successive and cumulative phases, involving cognitive as well as social and pragmatic factors. One important factor in this process is the child’s development of predication: the ability to assert something about something else. The ability to predicate follows from three constructive processes: a) sensorimotor experience with entities in motion facilitating understanding of dynamic event words, b) experience, in the single word period, with pairing of different words across conversational turns and/or within turn but separated by a temporal pause to express a given proposition (‘successive single-word utterances’ (SSWUs) or ‘vertical constructions’), and c) input from the conversational partner that adds to a child’s utterance that, together, serves to form a proposition.

Dynamic event words which refer to actions or states of objects (or relations between them) are primary predicates and are usually expressed by particles in English-learning children (e.g., *up*, *out*, *allgone*). Such words are inherently predicative, that is, in a single word they convey the fundamental topic-comment structure of language. For this reason, they may bootstrap understanding of verbs which is crucial for multiword speech.

Several authors (Veneziano 1999, Scollon 1976) have noted that, in the single word period, children come to express propositions across utterances and speakers (see examples below). Such “successive single word utterances” (SSWUs), may be a stepping stone to multiword speech. The child’s functioning at the word-combining level with the support of the conversational partner and the context of the conversation at hand may facilitate later independent use of predicative combinations.

In this research, the path to word combinations by four English-learning children (17 to 23 months) is traced through study of mother/child conversations that occurred during monthly play sessions. The research analyzes children’s use of self-repetition, SSWUs both across turn and within turn, other vertical constructions that include a single word a perceptible temporal pause and a multiword utterance and finally multiword utterances. Specifically, the study analyzes: 1) the steps taken by the child, throughout the

developmental period, to form propositions including use of self repetition and verbal imitation of the mother, 2) the conversational techniques used by the mother to help the child form propositions and 3) the child's development of dynamic event word use and the mother's role in this development.

Results demonstrate a constructive process towards combinatory speech through use of SSWUs and other sequential utterances and support the results of previous research (Veneziano, 1999; Scollan 1976). The child progresses from production of SSWUs heavily dependent on context and conversation to SSWU's that are independent of surrounding dialog (e.g. propositions are formed in the absence of self-repetition and/or imitation of the mother), to SSWU's that are within-turn and finally to multiword combinations. Results also provide support for the proposal that relational words serve as a bootstrap for verb understanding. In early propositions that include production of an entity word and a dynamic event word, children rely on relational words to express dynamic event meanings, then progress to verbs paired with semantically empty pronouns ('it') and finally to production of a verb/noun pairings.

Table 1: Examples of Successive Single Word Utterances

indicates a perceptible temporal pause

<p>Across Turn/ Conversation Dependent</p> <p><i>Child: 'cow'</i> <i>Mother: 'what does the cow say?'</i> <i>Child: 'moo'</i></p>	<p>Across Turn / Less Dependent on conversation</p> <p>Across-turn SSWU: con conversationally unsustained <i>Mom: 'let's play with the puppet.'</i> <i>Child puts blanket over the puppet.</i> <i>Child: 'bye bye'</i> <i>Mom: 'oh alright'</i> <i>Child: 'there'</i></p>
<p>Within turn / Conversation dependent (1st) and less dependent (2nd)</p> <p><i>Mom: 'what do you want to play with?'</i> <i>Child: 'want # play'</i> <i>Mom: 'with what?'</i> <i>Child: 'purse # byby'</i></p>	<p>Other vertical utterance that includes a multiword utterance</p> <p><i>Mom: 'do you want to read a book?'</i> <i>Child: 'yes' #</i> <i>Child: 'read book'</i></p>

References

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