

How does word category and the structure of the target language influence caretakers' strategies when teaching new nouns and verbs to 12-month-old German-learning children?

Anja Müller

University of Potsdam, Germany
anmuelle@rz.uni-potsdam.de

Barbara Höhle

University of Potsdam, Germany
hoehle@rz.uni-potsdam.de

Jürgen Weissenborn

Humboldt University, Berlin
juergen.weissenborn@rz.hu-berlin.de

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Abstract

The aim of the present study was to investigate which linguistic means parents of German learning 12-month-old infants would make use of, in order to highlight the target word in a word-teaching situation. In such a situation the word to be learned information theoretically constitutes new, respectively focused information. One hypothesis was that parents would make systematic use of the linguistic means the target language has, in order to put the target word into focus. Another hypothesis would be that overriding language specific focusing possibilities the parents would also use language independent strategies like putting the target word into the utterance initial, or final position which are supposed to constitute perceptually favorable positions (e.g. Slobin 1985; Echols et al. 2001), even if by doing so they would violate rules of the target language. Work by Woodward and Aslin (1990,1991,1992), Aslin, Woodward and others (1996) present evidence for the latter assumption. They found that in a word learning situation in which 12-month-old children were taught an unknown verb, English and Turkish speaking mothers would occasionally use the target word in ungrammatical positions, e.g. utterance final in English, and utterance non-final in Turkish. A third hypothesis, closely related to the first one, would be that the utterances used to present the new words would cumulate different means in order to create an information structurally optimal context. Thus given that German is a language with freer word order and consequently with more means to syntactically focus the target word than Turkish and English, we would expect the German utterances introducing the new words to be syntactically more varied than the English and Turkish ones.

To investigate these assumptions, following Woodward and Aslin, we asked 18 German mothers to teach their 12-month-old child two nouns (*Daumen/thumb*, *Knöchel/ankle*) and two verbs (*schieben/push*, *ziehen/pull*) which, according to a questionnaire answered by their parents, were new for the children. Mothers were instructed to use any strategy they felt appropriate to teach the new words to their child. The mother-child-interactions were audio recorded. The caretakers utterances containing the target word were then analyzed focusing on their prosodic, lexical, and syntactic information structural properties.

Preliminary findings provide evidence for hypotheses one and three. That is, German parents made systematic use of the information structural means, like prosody, i.e. stressing the target word, and/or marked word order, to highlight the target word, and they did so, as predicted, in a more varied manner than English and Turkish parents, especially when teaching a new verb.

Furthermore, there is first evidence that the lexical environment of the target word is characterized by a high use of closed class lexical items, like determiners, pronouns, demonstratives, modal verbs, and light verbs. These words are among the most frequent words in any German discourse, and are thus at least phonetically familiar to the German child at the age of 12 months, as shown by Höhle and Weissenborn (2003), who found that German-learning children at the age of 8 months are able to recognize determiners, pronouns, and prepositions in continuous speech. The familiar closed class items should thus constitute a linguistic context which contributes to perceptually highlighting the target word, enhancing word learning.

In how far the properties of the linguistic structures, in which the target word is embedded in the teaching situation, would present an advantage over word learning in a non-directed situation, in which the target word does not necessarily constitute focussed information, will be the object of further studies with the children of the present experiment when they have reached the age of 20 months.

References