

The first steps towards word combination : The contribution of conversation and of expressive options

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Abstract

The change from single to multiword speech has often been related to lexical growth (e.g. recently, Anisfeld et al., 1998; Caselli et al., 1999) and to children's production of transitional phenomena, in particular, Successive Single-Word Utterances - hitherto SSWUs (e.g., Bloom, 1973; Greenfield & Smith, 1976; Ochs et al., 1979; Scollon, 1979; Veneziano et al., 1990).

This paper aims to determine the aspects of lexical development and the kinds of SSWUs that may best predict the initial change from single-word to multiword speech, on the one hand, and to better specify the sequence of SSWUs that developmentally precede the dominant production of multiword speech, on the other.

For word learning, we consider that although a critical number of words may be needed before children can start combining words in an utterance, number is not sufficient *per se*: a critical aspect of lexical development that can set in motion the change towards multiword speech is the way in which words are used (e.g., Bloom, 1973; Vihman, 1999). For SSWUs, we will consider different kinds of SSWUs, on the assumption that they may reflect different kinds of knowledge and thus contribute differently to the change. A critical distinction we make is between conversationally-generated and conversationally-unsustained SSWUs (Veneziano, 1999). In the former type children, functioning as single-word speakers, are led to produce a second word, related to the one they had uttered previously, by following the succession of conversational moves. There is no clear indication that the semantically-related words produced in these SSWUs are considered as such by the children who produce them. Leading children to function at a level higher than that they would otherwise be capable, these SSWUs may play a pivotal role in the change from single to multiword speech. In conversationally unsustained SSWUs, relatedness and belongingness of the words to the same event must be clearer for the children since they make the semantic shift themselves (although ahead planning may still be lacking).

Thus we argue that relevant precursors to early multiword speech are found in two behaviors showing that children can view the event talked about through different semantic encodings, in particular:

1. the production of different single-word utterances for the expression of similar recurring events, a behavior showing the ability to operate a semantic shift likely to create links among words in the child's lexicon;
2. the production of conversationally-generated SSWUs produced across the partners' turns where children verbalize more than one aspect of one given situation following the conversational moves (answering a question or producing a word different from the one uttered first by uptaking a word from the mother's expansion of his/her preceding utterance).

These functionings lead the way to other types of SSWUs (across-turns conversationally unsustained and intra-turn SSWUs), which progress in articulatory fluidity gets them into multiword speech.

We will present two sets of data to test empirically this scenario :

1. Data from two longitudinal studies of French-acquiring children gathered in a natural setting and analyzed in the period from single-word to dominant multiword speech production for which we will report on :

- a) the expression of similar recurrent events tracing the occurrence of lexical expressive options;
- b) the distribution of conversationally-generated SSWUs throughout the transitional period ;
- c) the temporal relation between the appearance of expressive options (as found in (a) above) and early kinds of SSWUs (as found in (b) above);
- d) the developmental sequence of the different kinds of SSWUs identified and their relation to the sequence expected by the transition model presented here.

2. Data from an experimental study in which 5 children exposed intensively to opportunities to provide conversationally-generated SSWUs are compared to a control group who has undergone intensive interaction with no elicitation of SSWUs. All children were seen in their homes and were observed in natural interaction with their mothers for a pre- and a post-test session. This exploratory study, whose design is a modified version of that implemented by Schwartz, Chapman, Prelock, Terrell, & Rowan (1985), will allow to have an additional source of data to evaluate the relevance of across-turn SSWUs production in the transition to more mature SSWUs and multiword speech.

The change towards the occurrence of expressive options and of conversationally-generated SSWUs will be discussed in terms of cognitive, lexical and conversational developments associated with the working of inhibition in the initial phase of the process.

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