Language Acquisition and Concept Development

Interaction promotes the acquisition of language and concepts

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Interaction between children and more expert speakers plays a critical role in displaying how to use language in a variety of different contexts. Adults rely on the conventions of a language in deciding how to talk, and how to coordinate their talk and their activities. And they frame children’s earliest contributions as they offer one-word comments and responses in different settings. I’d like to focus on three main topics:

(a) Other-initiated repairs. Children attend to other-initiated repairs and respond to them from the earliest stages of acquisition on. Adults implicitly request such repairs with side sequences as they supply extensive feedback on what their children say and how they say it. They generally do this, as in (i), in the utterance that immediately follows an erroneous child utterance, so children can contrast how they themselves said $X$ with how the adult says $X$, where both are trying to express the same intention (Chouinard & Clark, 2003; Clark & de Marneffe, 2012).

(i) Philippe (2;1.26, looking at a small milk carton):
   
   $\textit{une petit de lait.}$ (‘a-fem. little-masc. of milk’)
   
   Mother: $\textit{une petite boîte de lait.}$ (‘a-fem. little-fem. box-fem. of milk’)
   
   Philippe: $\textit{petite boîte de lait.}$ (‘little-fem. box-fem. of milk’)

(b) Word offers and uptake. Children’s requests for words for objects and events, and their uptake of words offered by more expert speakers: Offers of new words are provided both in response to general requests (nonverbal points or an early version of What’s that?) and as repairs to children’s guesses at a possible label (e.g., Goldin-Meadow et al., 2007; Kelly, 2011; Olson & Masur, 2011). New words are generally presented in one of a small number of frequent frames, e.g., $\textit{That’s a/the ---, This is called a ---, or Those are --}$ (Clark & Wong, 2002; Clark & Estigribbia, 2011). Children frequently take up these offers in their next turn, as in (ii):

(ii) (a) Child (1;7.9, points at picture of a kangaroo)
   
   Mother: Yeah. <laughs> It’s called a $\textit{kangaroo, Kangaroo.}$
   
   Child: $\textit{roo.}$
(b) Hal (1;10.26): *What’s this?*  
Mother: It’s a beaver.

Hal: *Beaver.*

(c) Naomi (2;4.5): *what’s that?*  
Mother: that’s the latch for the window.  
Naomi: *latch for the window?*

Adult offers are typically accompanied by added information about the referents of new words. Such information commonly includes listing of parts and properties, and also information about characteristic sounds and movements for animate objects, and of functions for inanimate objects. Adults also provide information about ontogeny, history, and habitat, along with comparisons to relevant neighbours within a domain (see Clark, 2007, 2010).

**(c) Coining words.** At times, when children lack an appropriate word for an object or an action, they coin a term on the spot. But in doing so, children use only certain options as they construct new words: They follow the rules of the language being acquired, and opt first for the simplest forms available that are also transparent (see Clark, 1993), as in the examples in (iii).

(iii)  
(a) Novel N-N compounds  
1. A (1;7, picture of a crow): *CROW-bird*  
2. C (1;11, looking at spoon for cod-liver oil): *OIL-spoon*  
3. C (2;0, for hand coffee-grinder): *COFFEE-churn*  
4. R (2;0, stray dog found near site of a fire): *a FIRE-dog*  
5. H (2;1, picture in book of s’one with a spear): *SPEAR-page*  
6. D (2;3, choosing a T-shirt to wear): *BOAT-shirt.*

(b) Novel verbs  
1. G (2;5) *How does a violin go? It bows.*  
2. J (2;5, waving a toy animal as he played): *It’s flagging around.*  
3. S (2;4, as Mo prepared to brush his hair): *Don’t hair me.*  
4. S (2;4, reaching for calculator with ‘buttons’): *I can button it.*  
5. S (2;7, after hitting his baby sister with a broom)  
   Mother: What did you do?  
   S: *I broomed her.*  
6. Z (2;6): *Can I fire the candle? [= light]*

Children rely initially on the most productive options for constructing new words in their language — compounds nouns and denominal verbs in English, for example — but replace most of their coinages with the relevant conventional forms as they acquire more vocabulary.
In all three activities within interaction — other-initiated repairs, new-word offers, and the need to coin new words — children provide clear evidence of attending to the language used by their interlocutors. They repair their utterances, they ratify new words offered, and, as they learn more vocabulary, replace their own coinages with the conventional adult terms. In short, they begin to adjust their own usage from early on to match the adult targets offered within the interaction. At the same time, they take adult usage for their overall target in comprehension, and make use of that in as they come to align their own usage with the adult’s.

References


Acquiring reference: the case of metonymy

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In classical rhetoric, metonymy figures among the set of tropes, involving the replacement of ‘literal’ language with unexpected expressions that gives rise to a richer and/or clearer ‘figurative’ meaning (e.g., Habinek, 2005). In metonymy, the figurative meaning stands in a contiguity relationship with the literal meaning, as in (1):

(1) [Orchestra member]: The first violin missed the rehearsal today.

In modern pragmatic theory, metonymy is often seen as a referential shorthand device with a function to economise processing effort in identifying a referent (e.g., Nunberg 1979). While metonymic uses by adults are common, little research has investigated the possible role of this referential device in the language of young children. However, developmental studies of categorisation, symbolic gesturing and lexical innovation, such as denominalisation and compounding (e.g., Acredolo & Goodwyn 1988; Clark, E. V. 1982; Clark, Gelman & Lane 1985; Rosch et al. 1976;) have attested to the presence of an early ability to exploit salient associations for the purpose of communication.

In this paper, I suggest, based partly on diary data from the early referential productions of a one- and a two-year-old, partly on evidence from a recent study on metonymy production in preschool children aged three to five (Falkum, Recasens & Clark, under revision), that metonymy may in fact serve a useful communicative function in the language of young children, by offering them a productive option for referring to unfamiliar entities. In the earliest stages of acquisition, metonymy may provide children with a useful strategy for compensating for vocabulary gaps and/or limited expressive ability, and later, an accessible short-hand strategy for making reference to things that lack proper names or a ready-made category label, often in cases where use of a fuller referring expression might be more demanding in terms of linguistic and/or conceptual complexity. Thus, together with well-attested processes such as compounding and denominalisation, metonymy may be part of the early repertoire of referential strategies available to the child. This has implications for theories of the mechanism(s) underlying metonymy use in the language of adults, and, in particular, for the literal-figurative distinction assumed by classical approaches.

References:
Gesture’s helping hand in language learning

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Children communicate using gestures before they speak, and continue to use gesture along with speech even after they begin to produce their first words. Does gesturing merely precede talking, or is it itself relevant to the language-learning process? If gesturing not only precedes language, but also reflects knowledge relevant to the developmental process responsible for language, then the differences and/or delays in attaining linguistic milestones in speech should be preceded by similar delays in the attainment of gestural precursors to these milestones. I approach this question from several angles, studying children with typical and atypical (e.g., autism) developmental profiles. Overall, my research shows gesture to be a robust aspect of the language learning process. Gesture remains preserved across different learners and acts a forerunner of change in the child’s developing language system.

Language from the Ground Up: A Study of Homesign Communication

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Philosophers are often beholden to a picture of language as a largely static, well-defined structure which is handed over from generation to generation by an arduous process of learning: language, on this view, is something that we are given, and that we can make use of, but which we play no significant role in creating ourselves. This picture is often maintained in conjunction with the idea that several distinctively human cognitive capacities could only develop via the language acquisition process, as thus understood. This paper argues that the phenomenon of homesign, i.e., spontaneous gesture systems devised by deaf children for the purpose of communicating with their non-signing peers, can shed valuable empirical light on these convictions. Contrary to grounding assumptions of Wittgensteinian, Gricean, and Peircean approaches to language, homesign shows how core properties of language – including semantic properties – can be built from the ground up in idiosyncratic ways to serve the communicative needs of individuals.
**Human self-conscious mind in early development**

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The aim of the presentation is to discuss and revisit infants and children's representational development via the emergence of self-consciousness. Self-consciousness or the ability to construe oneself as an object of reflection is considered as a unique feature of human development. I try to show that self-consciousness parallels and probably co-emerges with human unique symbolic and linguistic competencies. In fact, self-consciousness in development might contribute in “bootstrapping” language acquisition when considered from the point of view of what motivates children to communicate and learn from others. From this vantage point, language acquisition and concept formation are inseparable from the ultimate communicative function they serve. This function, I propose, is the negotiation and sharing of values between increasingly objectified self and objectified others. A developmental blueprint depicting various layers of representational abilities accumulated by children between birth and 5 years is proposed. This blueprint captures changes from literal to meta-conceptualization of what links self to others. Unique to humans, these changes could be the primary context of children’s language acquisition and concept formation.

**Core Forms of Social Relations**

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Young children face the daunting task of figuring out the social relations among members of their community--both with the child him- or herself and with each other. These representations of social relations cannot be reduced to representations of individual people. Knowing Bill well does not allow us to infer Bill’s relations to Fred: are they members of the same family, friends, in some hierarchical dominance relation? I will argue that innate, core concepts of fundamental forms of social relations are necessary to help children discover the answers to these questions, and that these core relational forms undergird social psychological phenomena at large. I will first review evidence for two basic types of dyadic relations that are understood in infancy and early childhood: intimate, cooperative, communal sharing relations and dominance relations. Next, I will present new data suggesting that the abstract, structural forms of *clique* and *hierarchy* undergird concepts of community/fællesskab and status/dominance: Across culture, and among primary school and possibly pre-school and pre-verbal children, iconic depictions
of a clique of overlapping circles (where all units connect with all others inside the clique and none outside it,) are seen as communal groups (e.g. “people who love each other and will die for each other”). Conversely, a pyramidal arrangement of circles is interpreted as dominance or status relations (e.g. “a dictatorship”, “the strong and the weak”). Among adults, both interpretations are maintained under recursion. Importantly, preferences for such graphical forms correlate with a number of psychological and political phenomena (such as secure attachment, agreeableness, empathy, and support for social welfare, multiculturalism, and real economic donations to outgroups in need (e.g. Save the Children Palestine) versus self-enhancement, racism, and support for ethnic persecution of immigrants).

Child language acquisition of information structure and word order variation

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In this talk I will discuss children’s acquisition of word order variation that is dependent on information structure, focusing on examples from Norwegian and English, e.g. variable verb-second, double object constructions, or different subject positions (preceding or following negation). The choice of word order in such cases is typically dependent on whether the speaker considers an element (a subject or an object) to be already familiar in the discourse or whether it represents new (or focused) information. In the following examples, an informationally given subject precedes negation (typically a pronoun as in (1)), while a subject conveying new information follows negation (typically a noun phrase as in (2)).

(1) nei, nå må han ikke røre. (Ina.21, age 2;9.18)

  no now must he not touch

  ‘No, now he mustn’t touch.’

(2) komte ikke reven med mæ # i senga mi? (Ina.18, age 2;8.12)

  come.PAST not fox.DEF with me in bed.DEF my

  ‘Didn’t the fox come with me in my bed?’

It has often been argued that syntax is early, but pragmatics is late acquired (e.g. Chien & Wexler 1990, Batman-Ratyosyan & Stromswold 2002). However, a number of recent studies have shown that word order variation such as the above is generally in place from early on (e.g. De Cat 2003, Westergaard 2013), with only occasional errors, typically involving lack of syntactic movement of an informationally given element, such as the
pronominal subject han 'he' in (3).

(3) har ikkje han fota her?
have.PRES not he foot.PL here
‘Doesn’t he have feet here?’

Target: har han ikkje fota her?

Such findings raise a number of questions. For example, do young children not understand the difference between given and new information? Have they not yet acquired what Schaeffer (2000) refers to as the Concept of non-shared knowledge? Or is lack of syntactic movement simply a result of an economy principle, ensuring that children will not produce an element or perform a movement operation unless there is clear evidence for this in the input?

References

Linking children's interest in objects and actions with objects to differences in the topics of parent’s child-directed speech and subsequent child language production.
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Mothers typically respond in a semantic contingent ways to their children’s attentional focus, behavior and verbal production (Cross, 1977; Huttenlocher, et al., 2010; Snow, 1977; Snow et al., 1987; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2013, 2014). Therefore, the language input an individual child gets from her/his parents is partly related to that child's intentional and non-intentional demonstration of interests (as shown by their focus of attention, actions, gestures and verbal production), reflecting both parent-to-child and important child-to-parent processes driving the content of language and knowledge that children are subjected to early on. This raises three set of questions that will be focused on in the current paper: (1) Do children’s particular interest in
certain objects and subsequent interaction with that object elicit differences in the topics of child-directed speech across parents? In other words, do parents tend to provide similar language input for similar child action/object combinations? (2) Is there a change in the type of child action/object combinations that children perform at different ages, and is that related to differences in the language children are receiving from parents across ages? (3) Do children themselves produce language output that is related to whether the language input they received was related to their own interests/actions?

References