

PROSODIC VARIATION IN PARENTAL SPEECH IN SWEDISH

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to describe the prosodic adjustments made when going from child-directed speech to adult-directed speech in Swedish. 12 parent-child dyads are studied with children aged between one and four. Fo, amplitude and duration will be analysed in a sentence perspective and discussed in relation to generality for the adult and to function for the child's language acquisition and learning.

GENERAL PRESENTATION

Adjustment in speech directed to children up to three years of age has been considered to be a special speech register called BT (Baby Talk), [1] Snow & Ferguson 1977, or CA (child-adjusted communication), [2] Junefelt 1987. This paper will highlight the following questions: To what extent is child directed speech adjusted in the prosodic domain? Will the same physical adjustments occur in speech irrespective of the parent's speaking style and the child's age? Could there be a possible interaction between the child's acquisition and the parent's prosody?

MATERIAL

Parental speech directed to children between one and four years old was collected through bookreading which turned out to be a good combination of eliciting both spontaneous and "semi-spontaneous" speech. The parents did not only read the text but used the text material (as well as the illustrations) to engage the child in conversation. For comparison, adult-directed material was collected for each parent in adult-adult dyads. In order to facilitate the analysis of Fo, which in Swedish is used to signal sentence intonation, phrase-, sentence-, and word accent as well as boundary phenomena carefully prepared texts were used, (see [3] Bredvad-Jensen 1991).

RESULTS

Data show that all speakers adjust irrespective of their intention /not/ to talk Baby Talk to their child. All three parameters (Fo, amplitude and duration) are affected, but to different extents for the different speakers. More specific results will be presented at the congress. Individual speaking styles are preserved within the child-adjusted register which also varies according to the child's age. Typical features of child-adjustment are a) defocusing which seems to be used in order to give extra prominence to the sentence accented word, b) an added phrase accent even in very short sentences and c) pauses which are used more frequently than in adult-directed speech.

DISCUSSION

A developmental line can be seen in parental speech starting with the use of special tonal contours which are used to attract the baby's attention already during the preverbal period, (see for example [4] Bruner 1983). Once the child's acquisition has started, the role of child-adjustment is more complex; it will still serve as an attention-getting device, and it may at the same time facilitate the child's understanding and learning. Functional aspects of the physical parameters used in child-adjusted speech are threefold: pedagogical, affective and communicative, (see [5] Junefelt 1987). These aspects may of course characterize any dialogue, but their dominance in the child-adjusted speech is noticeable. As the child gradually will grow in verbal and communicative skill, the need for the parent to catch the child's attention will decline to a more adultlike level. This will result in a gradual decline in the use of the physical parameters. The question may remain as the last child-adjusted speech device which is interesting as the question itself is a verbal attention-getter.

[6] Bolinger 1978 pointed out that questions may be interrogative to different degrees, strong or weak

questions (my terms) depending on the interrogative load. It is argued here that this approach will also hold for child-adjusted attention-getters which then may be strong or weak to different degrees, depending on the attention-getting load. For both child-adjusted speech and for questions in general the same physical parameters may be used in similar ways. The dividing line here can be seen between the more "neutral" questions and the more emotionally loaded child-adjusted speech. The important role of affection in mother-child interaction has been emphasized by, among others, [7] Trevarthen 1988.

Even if child-adjustment is regarded as a special speech register with unique qualities it is at the same time part of man's universal capability of attracting somebody's attention and it will be performed with much the same physical means as in other situations. This might then be one explanation for the gradual decline from child-adjustment which can be seen in this study.

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