

PHONOLOGICAL STRUCTURE OF SPEECH ADDRESSED TO CHILDREN

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An area of study which aims to clarify children's acquisition of their first language concerns the nature of speech addressed to children. The consensus seems to be that adults attempt to clarify and/or simplify the structure of their language when speaking to children. Although the exact function of adult simplification is still controversial, it may well serve to provide a language-learning child with a corpus of systematic and grammatically correct primary language data from which he can generalize the rules of his language with greater facility.

In the present study we investigated the phonological structure of child-directed utterances in comparison with the phonological structure of adult-directed utterances. In order to make an explicit comparison possible, we selected four phonological processes common in casual conversation and calculated their frequency of occurrence vs. their potential occurrence in adult-adult conversation and in adult-child conversation.

Mother-child and mother-adult conversations were recorded in an informal setting. Each child was given a puzzle which served as the topic of conversation; the adult-adult conversations dealt with informal topics. All the participants in the study were long-term residents of Colchester or the surrounding area.

The recorded conversation samples were analyzed for the ratios between the actual occurrence and the potential occurrence (i.e. when the structural description of a rule is met) of four phonological processes which tend to neutralize the distinction between lexical items. The phonological processes were:

- 1) $t \rightarrow ? / _ \#$ (loss of oral contact for /t/)
- 2) $t \rightarrow \emptyset / _ s \#$ (final cluster simplification)
- 3) $t \# j \rightarrow t^j$ (affrication)
- 4) $\delta \rightarrow \emptyset /$ apical continuant $\# _ _$ (δ loss)

Contrary to expectation, mothers were found to use a more reduced style of speech, characterized by a liberal use of common phonological processes, with their children than with adults.

These results raise the following question: How do children acquire the full representation of lexical items when they seldom hear it from their mothers?