

THE ROLE OF FUNCTION IN CHILDREN'S EARLY MULTIWORD CONSTRUCTIONS:  
A CROSS-LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

Child language researchers working within the usage-based approach claim that language development involves the segmentation of units from the input rather than the activation of pre-given linguistic knowledge (e.g. Tomasello 2000, 2003; Lieven et. al. 1997; Theakston et. al. 2003). This claim brings with it a host of issues pertaining to the types of units segmented by the child and how the units are represented in a child's linguistic system. A number of researchers over the years have suggested that the early stages of linguistic development are function-based (e.g. Bates, 1976; Bloom, 1970; Bruner, 1975; Dore, 1975; Halliday, 1975; Ninio and Bruner, 1978; Snow 1979; Ninio and Snow, 1988; Ninio, 1992) and thus it would appear logical to suggest that the units segmented and used by young children reflect form-function mappings in their ambient language. In the present study we suggest that an approach to language development which combines insights from function-based studies of language development along with the usage-based approach provides a promising avenue of research.

Through the analysis of cross-linguistic data of two typologically distinct languages (Irish, a VSO language and English an SVO language) we investigated the development of constructions from the onset of multiword speech. The study focused on the speech of an Irish-speaking mother and child, and an English-speaking mother and child during daily activities at home. The input sample consisted of three hours of recording for each mother. Two samples consisting of two hours of speech were analysed for each of the children; the first sample was taken from the onset of multiword speech (aged 1;8 for the Irish child, and 2;1 for the English child) and the second sample was taken three months later. The data were transcribed into CHAT format by trained transcribers and coded for pragmatic function using the Inventory of Communicative Acts (Ninio et. al., 1994).

We identified the types of pragmatic functions used within the samples and then conducted a construction-based analysis on utterances found in the most frequently occurring pragmatic functions. The results from the input analysis were compared with the children's samples in order to identify the relationship between form-function pairings in the mothers' and children's speech.

The results of the pragmatic analysis indicated a strong similarity in the functions found in the speech of the two mothers. Much of the discourse focussed on the 'here and now' although our study also indicated the prevalence of repetitions, imitations and recasts in the speech of the mothers. The construction analysis conducted on the input sample indicated a high degree of lexical specificity within each function. Furthermore the analysis of the children's data reflected these form-function patterns with the gradual emergence of function-specific frames. The characteristics of the frames attested in the children's speech indicated both language-specific features but also more general characteristics which suggest that both children use similar methods of segmentation on their respective linguistic input.

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