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Repeats and Ratification in the Process of Acquisition

What are children doing when they repeat something just uttered by the adult in the turn before? In many cases, they appear to be ratifying what the adult just said. Evidence for this comes from three studies of immediate repeats by children. In the first, I look at data from children’s uptake of some 600 offers of new words. Children repeat these immediately up to 50% of the time, as in (1):

(1) Mother: that’s a kangaroo.

Adam (2;4.15): kangaroo.

They repeat new words twice as often as formerly-new information (new in the preceding speaker’s turn and now given) (Clark, 2007). I argue that these repeats of new words show that children are attending, and that by repeating the words they ratify the adult’s offer. Their repeats, then, acknowledge the offers explicitly.

In a second study, I take up data from adult reformulations of child errors (n = 7792). Here again, children use repeats to acknowledge and thereby ratify the pronunciation, the word form, the word choice, or the construction that has been corrected (Chouinard & Clark, 2003), as in (2):

(2) Philippe (2;1.26): une petit de lait. ‘a-fem. little-masc. of milk’

Mother: une petite boîte de lait. ‘a-fem. little-fem. carton-fem. of milk’

Philippe: petite boîte de lait. ‘little-fem. carton-fem. of milk.

That is, in repeating, children try to correct the erroneous form flagged by the adult.

In a third study, I consider uses of repeats by young children and their mothers (n = 978) in short conversations over an afternoon snack (Clark & Bernicot, 2008). Here adult repeats tend to correct child errors, and then ratify any child corrections. Adults also repeat to confirm that they have understood the child. Children at 2;3 appear to repeat only to ratify what the adult just said, as in (3):

(3) Mother: Y’a du riz dedans regarde / Hof / J’en mis / un morceau par terre .

‘there’s some rice inside look / uhoh / I dropped some’

Elodie B (2;3): Du lli dedans / ‘some rice inside’

Mother: Oui y'a du riz dedans. 'yes there's some rice inside'

By 3;6, though, children's uses of repetition begin to resemble those observed in adults: they repeat given information and add new information in the same utterance, as in (4), where *c'était où* is new:

(4) Mother: Il est un p'tit peu plus blanc parce que je ne l'ai pas acheté à la même boulangerie.

'it's a little bit whiter because I didn't buy it at the same bakery'

Daphnée (3;9): *C'était où cette boulangerie?* 'where was this bakery?'

Mother: C'est la boulangerie qui se trouve euh derrière l'église, la place Schoelcher.

'it's the bakery that's eh behind the church, in Schoelcher square'

Overall, children's reliance on repeats shows that they are attending to the information being offered, and that, by repeating it, they are making a first attempt to take up the relevant linguistic form and simultaneously showing the adult that they are doing so. Repeats, then, may play a role in the actual process of acquisition.

References

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