The role of accommodation during parent-child interactions in the acquisition of sociophonetic competence

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This paper looks at the role of input in providing the child with the source of phonological knowledge and the tools to (co-)construct a flexible phonological system which exhibits both convergence towards and divergence away from adult patterns depending on the needs of the interaction and the stage of the child's development. Data from two studies are presented, one looking at gestural co-ordination as part of adolescent children's developing sociophonetic competence and the other focussing on infants and the role of their self-perception and production in filtering adult input in the process of building phonological representations.

In the first study, I look at the case of English-dominant bilingual children of Arabic heritage who are regularly exposed to native and foreign-accented varieties of English in their daily interactions. While children of immigrant families are often reported to learn the dominant variety and to filter-out any foreign accent features in their parents' speech (Chambers, 2002), this study suggests that the children develop implicit knowledge of these features and that these can surface in their production during social interactions with their caretakers. A type of code-switching in interaction is examined that is different from what is normally discussed in the bilingual literature, that of switching between native and non-native varieties of the same language rather than between languages. Interactions between three English-dominant Lebanese adolescents living in the UK and their native Arabic-speaking parents are examined in order to look at the children's strategies for coping with the demands of using their weaker language. These include switching between English-like and Arabic-like accent patterns while speaking English as a way to either converge towards or diverge away from their parents' foreign accented English, and as a way to avoid a complete language switch to Arabic. It suggests that, far from filtering out any foreign accent features that they are exposed to, the children harness the rich repertoire of accent patterns that they are exposed to and make use of it in their production, demonstrating sociolinguistic competence (Khattab, 2009; 2013).

In the second study I look at the child's adoption of well-practiced prosodic shapes in the second year of life as part of their transition from phonetic/item-based learning to phonological acquisition. Longitudinal data are presented from five Lebanese-speaking children between the ages of 1 and 2 (covering the one-word stage), and the development of their word shapes is documented. Following fairly accurate realisations of a small set of vocabulary items in their emerging lexicons, the children go through a phase of increased adaptation of the input, akin to the templatic or whole-word patterns discussed in Vihman and Croft (2007). This apparent regression in accuracy is evident despite the children's improved motoric abilities and is viewed as strengthening of the infants' internal representations of gestural patterns, which serve as phonological bootstrapping for rapid lexical advance before their attention is refocused on the adult gestural patterns for more target-like production (Khattab & Al-Tamimi, 2013). This raises the role of the child's own production in phonological representation and how it interacts with representations of the adult input.

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