

PARENTAL REACTIONS TO THE MORPHOLOGICALLY CORRECT AND INCORRECT UTTERANCES OF CHILDREN

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Abstract. The acquisition of the first language is a long and complicated process. Besides incorrect pronunciation, one can observe various morphonological, grammatical, and lexical errors in the speech of young children. The goal of the present research was to analyse the parental reactions both to the correct and incorrect utterances of children and to discuss the dependence of parental reactions on the errors of the child's speech. The analysis is based on longitudinal data from the conversations between a Lithuanian girl (from the age of twenty months to thirty-two months) and her mother. The results of the study indicate that parents rather tend to react to the form than to the content of the incorrect utterances of children. On the other hand, the responses to the correct utterances are related more often to the content.

Keywords: child language, language acquisition, longitudinal corpus, conversation analysis, psycholinguistics, Lithuanian

1. Data and research methods

The acquisition of the first language is a long and complicated process. Besides incorrect pronunciation, one can observe various morphonological, grammatical, and lexical errors in the speech of young children. Parental reactions to the grammatically incorrect utterances of children may vary depending on the language type or the cultural and individual features of adult speech. However, such reactions differ from those to correct utterances. Moreover, these differences are universal and exist in most languages that were investigated. Previous research (Chouinard, Clark 2003) has discovered that parents tend to react to the errors in the speech of children by using special linguistic instruments (e.g. special questions such as "What did you say?" and "What are you trying to say?", remarks such as "I can't

understand you” and corrections such as “Not ..., but...” etc.). The main idea was that the differences between the parental reaction to correct and incorrect utterances can help the child in detecting and memorizing the errors of his or her speech. However, before proposing a hypothesis of the influence of the differences between parental reactions to correct and incorrect utterances on the development of the child’s grammar, one has to prove the statistical reliability of these differences.

The aim of the present study is to analyse and to calculate the parental reactions to both the correct and incorrect utterances of children and to discuss the dependence of parental reactions on the errors of the child’s speech. The analysis is based on the longitudinal data of Monika, a Lithuanian girl, and her mother. Their conversations were recorded by Monika’s mother (the author of this paper) in natural everyday situations: playing together, performing common tasks, and so on. The recordings started in March 2000 when Monika was one year and eight months old (age notation 1;8), and continued until she was two years and eight months old (2;8). The 15–20-minute conversations were recorded twice or three times per week. The total duration of recordings is 43 hours. The recordings were transcribed and partially coded according to the requirements of CHILDES (Child Data Exchange System, MacWhinney 1991). The longitudinal data of natural spontaneous conversations allows the researcher to analyse the development of children’s and child-directed speech and to discuss their relationship.

Monika was born in a middle-class family. During the period under study Monika did not attend any day-care centre and had no constant communication with other children; her language was mainly influenced by adult speech. Both her parents speak the north-eastern dialect of Lithuanian, but they use standard Lithuanian when talking to their daughter. Monika speaks standard Lithuanian, but also some phonetic and morphological features of the dialect were observed in her speech.

The study analyses the conversations between Monika and her mother that recorded when she was from one year and eight months to two years and eight months old¹.

2. Theoretical background

During the first phase of the research all the parental utterances were categorized as particular types of reactions. According to W. U. Dressler *et al.* (2006), all parental reactions can be divided into two main categories: **conversational** and **metadiscursive reactions**. Conversational parental reactions are related to the **content** of the child’s previous utterance, whereas metadiscursive reaction focuses on the **form**. According to this classification, parents can either react to *what was said by the child* (in the case of conversational reaction), or focus on *how it was said* (metadiscursive reaction). Both conversational and metadiscursive reactions can be divided into special types, such as *repetitions*, *expansions*, and *corrections* of the child’s utterances, and *questions*. In some cases parental responses are not related directly to the previous utterance of the child (e.g. the adult starts a new topic), but during the analysis presented in this paper all of responses were marked as conversational reactions (as part of the natural flow of conversation).

¹ All the conversations were recorded in 2000–2001 with the primary purpose of collecting data on Lithuanian child language. The parental speech of these conversations is analysed from 2004 only, so the mother’s language could not be influenced during the target period.

Table 1. Distribution of mother's reactions (1;8–2;8)

| Number of reactions | 1;8 | 1;9 | 1;10 | 1;11 | 2;0 | 2;1 | 2;2 | 2;3 | 2;4 | 2;5 | 2;6 | 2;7 | 2;8 |
|---|------|------|------|------|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|
| Metadiscursive | 133 | 266 | 221 | 160 | 86 | 146 | 24 | 92 | 72 | 116 | 22 | 50 | 60 |
| Percentage of metadiscursive reactions | 11% | 24% | 17% | 16% | 15% | 14% | 9% | 9% | 13% | 7% | 2% | 6% | 8% |
| Conversational | 1102 | 841 | 1096 | 865 | 498 | 871 | 241 | 904 | 462 | 1464 | 904 | 793 | 702 |
| Total | 1235 | 1107 | 1317 | 1025 | 584 | 1017 | 265 | 996 | 534 | 1580 | 926 | 843 | 760 |

The analysis of the mother's coded reactions shows that the conversational reactions were more frequent during the period of analysis (see Table 1).

One can observe that metadiscursive reactions are more frequent at an earlier age of Monika (1;8–2;4) when the child is unable to pronounce some sounds (such as *r*, *l*, *s* etc.). Thus, the parent cannot comprehend many of her utterances and asks her to repeat or to explain them; starting with two years and four months metadiscursive reactions are rarely observed. The results of the analysis lead to the conclusion that during natural spontaneous conversation parents tend to react to the content of child's utterances more frequently than to the form.

3. Research findings

In order to test the hypothesis about the differences between the parental reaction to correct and incorrect children's grammar, all Monika's utterances were divided into correct and incorrect utterances, and each group was analysed separately.

The conversational parental reaction is more frequent both to the correct and incorrect utterances of the child, but one could observe a significant difference between the number of the metadiscursive reactions to the correct and incorrect utterances. The metadiscursive reactions account for 26% of reactions to grammatically incorrect utterances and for only 8% of all the reactions to grammatically correct utterances (see Figure 1).

3.1. Parental reactions to grammatically correct utterances of the child

When the child produces grammatically correct utterances, the parents react mostly (79–96%, see Figure 2) to the content and maintain the natural flow of conversation.

The most typical **conversational reactions** to correct utterances are expansions and questions. A conversational **expansion** can be defined as an expansion of the content of the child's previous utterance by the adult. In the earlier stage of Monika's speech acquisition (from one year and eight months to two years and one month), the mother expands most of her single-word utterances by (1) interpreting them according to the situation and the content of the conversation. Later (from two years and three months) the mother often expanded Monika's utterances by adding a particular modal verb (2) or an additional clause (3):

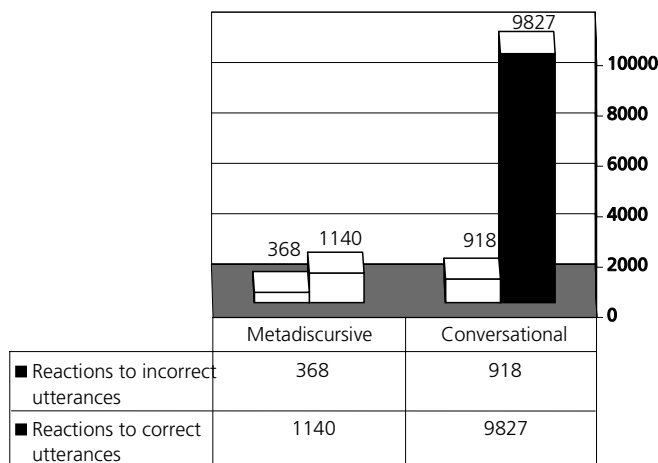


Figure 1. Distribution of the mother's reactions to grammatically correct and incorrect utterances of the child

- (1) CHILD: Teta.
'Aunt.'
MOTHER: Ir teta šneka.
'The aunt is also talking.' (1;8)
- (2) CHILD: Tėtukas vairuoja.
'Daddy is driving.'
MOTHER: Tėtukas moka vairuoti.
'Daddy is able to drive.' (2;1)
- (3) CHILD: Uždarytas.
'[window is] closed.'
MOTHER: Uždarytas tikrai, tėtukas nesusąls.
'[window is] really closed, daddy will not get cold.' (2;5)

The conversational **questions** are also very frequent reactions to the grammatically correct utterances of children. One can observe that these reactions are mostly used with the intention of maintaining conversation and are not used to elicit any information from the child (4):

- (4) Situation: Monika asks the mother to give her the cherries.
CHILD: Duok.
'Give [me].'
MOTHER: Ką mes dabar darysim? Šnekėsime apie vyšnią, ką? Šnekėsime?
Monika vyšnias valgė?
'What will we do now? Will we talk about the cherry? Will we talk?
Did Monika eat cherries?' (2;3)

Other conversational reactions, such as the **repetitions** and **corrections**, are not frequent in the mother's speech.

Metadiscursive reactions contain not more than 16% (the average being 8%) of all the mother's reactions to the child's grammatically correct utterances. They become rarer during the later period (from 2;4). **Questions** are the most typical

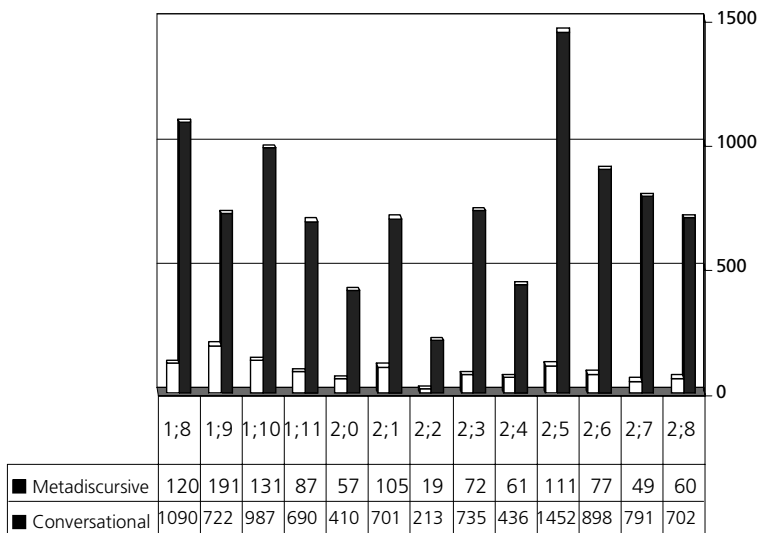


Figure 2. Distribution of the mother's reactions to grammatically correct utterances of the child

metadiscursive reactions to the grammatically correct utterances of the child. The mother uses them mostly when:

- 1) asking Monika to repeat (5) or to explain (6) the incomprehensible utterances:
 - (5) CHILD: Sėsk.
'Sit down.'
 - MOTHER: Ką sakai?
'What [do you] say?' (1;8)
 - (6) CHILD: Ant stalo pinigėlis.
'Coin [is] on the table.'
 - MOTHER: Kas ant stalo?
'What [is] on the table?' (2;3)
- 2) realizing that she has understood Monika's previous utterance correctly (7):
 - (7) CHILD: Guma.
'Gum.'
 - MOTHER: Guma, Monika, pasakei?
'Gum, Monika, [did you] say?' (1;9)

The **reformulations** constitute the second group of the most typical metadiscursive reactions of the mother to the grammatically correct utterances of the child. At an earlier stage (1;8–2;3) the mother reformulates Monika's utterances mostly by changing the morphological category of the child's word (8).

- (8) CHILD: Uždėsim tabiuką.
'[we] will put the tubby on.'
- MOTHER: Uždėk tabiuką.
'Put:IMP the tubby on.' (2;3)

Later on (from 2;4), when Monika is already able to use longer and more complicated constructions, the mother often reformulates the word order of the daughter's phrases (9).

- (9) CHILD: Galvytė gera.
'The head [is] good.'
MOTHER: Gera galvytė.
'Good head.' (2;5)

Lithuanian word order is not rigid, and both Monika's and her mother's utterances are grammatically correct. Thus, this type of parental reaction must be marked in Lithuanian as reformulation and not correction.

3.2. Parental reactions to grammatically incorrect utterances by the child

When the child produces a grammatically incorrect phrase, the mother often reacts (11–52%) to the form of the utterance (see Figure 3).

The most frequent **conversational reactions** to the grammatically incorrect utterances of children are **expansions** of the child's previous phrases (10) and **questions** (11).

- (10) CHILD: Mamytė, spausk.
'Mummy:NOM [=VOC]² push:IMP'
MOTHER: Taip, tik mamytė gali šitą spausti.
'Yes, only mummy can push this.' (2;1)
- (11) CHILD: Nukrapštyti.
'Scratch [= + modal verb].'
MOTHER: Ką tu ten nukrapštysi?
'What will you scratch?' (2;5)

Both of these reactions are related to the content but not to the form of the child's phrase. The mother does not stop the flow of natural conversation and does not demonstrate that Monika has produced an erroneous utterance. Conversational reaction to incorrect phrases can be related to parental intention to maintain conversation, to avoid disturbing the child and making her confused.

The frequency of **metadiscursive reactions** mostly depends on the type of the child's error. Particular errors, such as incorrectly used nominal forms, are followed by metadiscursive parental reactions more frequently (up to 64%), whereas other errors tend to be ignored more often. For example, metadiscursive reactions contain only 18% of all the parental reactions to incorrectly used verbal forms (Balčiūnienė 2006).

The most typical reactions to grammatically incorrect utterances are the **corrections** of the child's previous phrases. Parents can correct the child either directly (12) or implicitly (13).

- (12) MOTHER: Dėsim va tą baltą.
'[we] will put this white one on.'
CHILD: Šitas [= šitą].
'This:NOM [= ACC].'

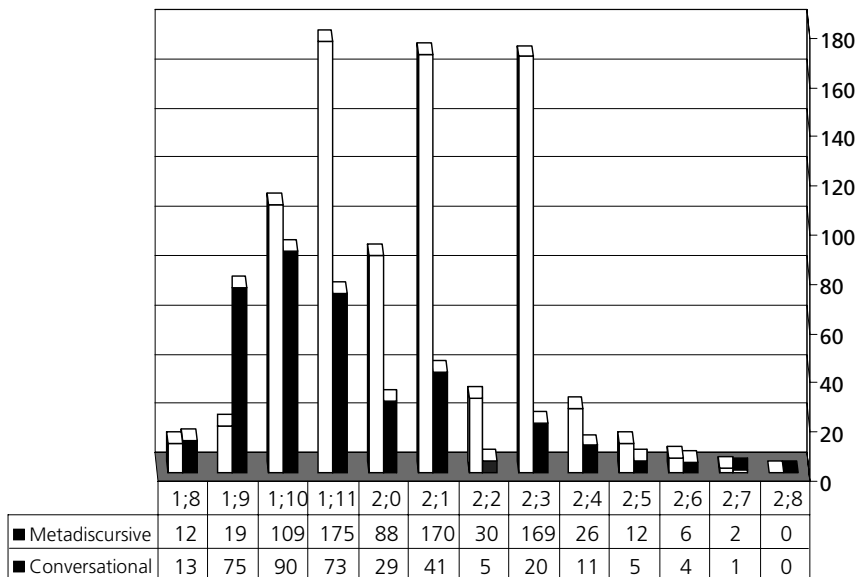


Figure 3. Distribution of the mother's reactions to grammatically incorrect utterances of the child

MOTHER: Šita.

'This:ACC.' (1;11)

(13) Sit: Monika is playing with coins.

CHILD: Sudėti.

'Put [= + modal verb].'

MOTHER: Į taupyklę reikia sudėti.

'[you] need to put [them] to the box.' (2;1)

The **questions** are also used frequently as metadiscursive reactions to children's incorrect utterances. The mother does not correct Monika's speech; by asking a metadiscursive question she directs the child's attention to the incorrect part of her previous utterance and expects Monika to detect the error herself (14), (15).

(14) CHILD: Šunis [= šuo].

'Dog.'

MOTHER: Šunis, pasakei?

'Dogs, did you say?' (1;10)

(15) CHILD: Pušinas [= tušinukas].

'Pen.'

MOTHER: O "pušinas" – tai tušinukas?

'Does 'pušinas' mean a pen?' (1;10)

Other metadiscursive reactions (**reformulations** and **expansions**) are rarely used as responses to the grammatically incorrect utterances of children.

4. Conclusions

In summary, the following conclusions can be made. In natural spontaneous conversations parents generally tend to react to the content of the child's previous utterances more frequently (74–92%) than to the form. The reliable difference between the distribution of the conversational and metadiscursive parental reactions was discovered while analysing them separately and comparing the parental reactions to the correct and incorrect utterances. When the child produces grammatically correct utterances, the parents usually react (79–96%) to the content of the utterance, whereas only 48–89% of incorrect utterances are followed by the parental reaction to their content. The most typical parental reactions both to the grammatically correct and incorrect utterances of children include conversational expansions and questions and metadiscursive questions. The metadiscursive corrections are used very frequently as a reaction to incorrect utterances.

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VANEMA REAKTSIOONID LAPSE MORFOLOOGILISELT KORREKTSETELE JA EBAKORREKTSETELE LAUSUNGITELE

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Vytautas Magnuse nimeline Kaunase Ülikool

Esimese keele omandamine on kauakestev ja komplitseeritud protsess. Lisaks ebakorrektssele hääldusele esineb laste varases kõnes mitmesuguseid morfonoloogilisi, grammatilisi ja leksikaalseid vigu. Uurimuse eesmärk oli analüüsida nii kvalitatiivselt kui kvantitatiivselt vanema reaktsioone lapse korrektsetele ja ebakorrektssetele lausungitele ja uurida vanema reaktsiooni sõltuvust vea tüübist. Analüüs põhineb leedu tüdruku (1;8–2;8) ja tema ema vestluste longitudinaalsel uuringul. Uurimistulemused näitavad, et vanem reageerib lapse ebakorrektsse lausungi vormile sagedamini kui sisule, ja vastupidi: vastused korrektsetele lausungitele seostuvad enamasti lause sisuga.

Võtmesõnad: lastekeel, keele omandamine, longitudinaalne korpus, vestlusanalüüs, psühholingvistika, leedu keel