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CONVERSATIONAL PROPERTIES AND EARLY LANGUAGE ACQUISITION¹

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ABSTRACT

It is argued that the reasons why conversational functioning may provide useful experiences for early language acquisition can be traced back to some general properties of conversations, as these have been described by conversational analysts. Conversations as joint actions and the property of mutual understanding by default, emphasised in interlocutory logic, can explain the creation and stabilisation of shared forms and meanings that will come to constitute the child's early lexical repertoire. Adding to these properties the notion that conversational sequences are emergent phenomena whose properties go beyond those of their component parts, conversational functioning becomes a privileged site for laying the bases of combinatorial speech. On a deeper level, the more general underlying reason may be that these basic properties of conversations seem to well realise in action some of the conditions that can lead to the emergence of new knowledge in Piaget's constructivist approach.

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RESUME

Dans ce papier, on soutient que la raison pour laquelle le fonctionnement conversationnel fournit des expériences fertiles pour les premières acquisitions langagières peut être retracée à certaines propriétés générales des conversations, telles qu'elles ont été décrites par les théoriciens de la conversation et de la pragmatique conversationnelle. La conversation comme action conjointe et l'intercompréhension par défaut, particulièrement soulignée en logique interlocutoire, peuvent rendre compte de la création et de la stabilisation de formes et de significations partagées qui vont constituer le premier lexique de l'enfant. En ajoutant à ces propriétés la notion que les séquences conversationnelles constituent des phénomènes émergeant dont les propriétés vont au-delà des propriétés de leurs composantes, la conversation devient un espace privilégié pour jeter les bases du langage articulé. En dernière analyse, la raison encore sous-jacente peut être à chercher dans le fait que ces propriétés de base de la conversation semblent bien réaliser en action certaines conditions susceptibles de faire émerger des nouvelles connaissances dans la théorie constructiviste de Piaget.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent appraisals of the socio-cognitive bases of language acquisition point towards a plurality of possible venues. Among them, caretaker-child interaction and specific features of conversational exchanges are considered to provide experiences likely to help children in early language acquisition (for recent reviews see Gallaway & Richards, 1994; Snow, 1995; Veneziano, to appear(a)).

In this paper I would like to argue that the reasons why conversational functioning may provide a well suited setting and facilitatory experiences for language acquisition do not reside only in the 'mechanics' of the exchanges (for example, providing a well-timed interpretation of the child's utterances in the form of an expansion², or reformulating and simplifying one's utterances). They reside, more profoundly, in some of the inherent and basic properties of conversations. I will emphasise in particular the following properties.

1.1. Conversation as joint action and mutual understanding by default

The first property has to do with the idea that conversation is a form of joint action where speaker's meaning and addressee's understanding are co-ordinated. These are 'participatory acts' in the sense that they are

² 'Expansion' refers to an adult's interpretation of a child's utterance, that uptakes its elements and expresses its supposed meaning in a grammatically well-formed utterance (Cazden, 1972).

individual acts whose meaning derives only from their being parts of a joint action (Clark, 1996). Meanings are constructed and reconstructed by the participants as conversational moves unfold, via the interpretation that one participant makes of the other's previous intervention, according to the 'principle of dialogic interpretation' (Roulet et al., 1985) or, more precisely, via the reaction to the partner's previous intervention, providing 'an interpretation in action' of the previous turn (Trognon & Brassac, 1992). Mutual understanding is not granted by the process of 'interpretation in action' but it is held by default (e.g., Livet, 1994; Trognon, 1991, Trognon & Brassac, 1992). According to Trognon, the mechanism of mutual understanding by default is provided by a conversational structure larger than the adjacency pair, constituted of three successive elements containing three turns, T1, T2, and T3, that can be pulled apart into two substructures: (T1, T2) and ((T1, T2) T3). T2 in (T1, T2) provides the interpretation in action by the addressee of the previous speaker's intervention (T1), and T3 in ((T1, T2) T3) evaluates the interpretation in action (T2), either by implicitly accepting or by correcting it. T3 is thus itself an 'interpretation in action' of the interpretation that T2 makes of T1 (e.g., Trognon & Kostulski, 1996).

This theoretical framework considers thus meanings and intentions, and the understandings of meanings and intentions, to result from an inherently dynamic process, distributed among the conversational partners, and linked, on the one hand, to the sequentiality of conversational turns and, on the other, to the interlocutory logical relation that holds between the satisfaction of a particular speech act and its successful accomplishment (Vanderveken, 1988): the satisfaction of a speech act implies its successful accomplishment. For some authors (e.g. Livet, 1994), the attainment of mutual understanding is inherently indeterminate, and such tacit indetermination provides the best approximation to being understood by the partner, unless an explicit declaration of misunderstanding is made.

This property of conversations emphasised in the theory of interlocutory logic— mutual understanding by default — is particularly fruitful for the study of early language acquisition and for understanding the role of conversational functioning in it. In fact, mothers tend to interpret children's behaviour, and to attribute early on (even when children's vocal productions are rather indeterminate language-wise) intentions and meanings to their utterances, that probably go beyond what the child had originally intended. If the child, in his/her third turn, doesn't contest the mother's interpretation, the mutual understanding by default that ensues should be regarded as a new conversationally-generated event on which future shared

meanings and intentions may base themselves (Dore, 1985; Veneziano, 1997): *Mutual understanding by default creates shared meanings.*

As we will show in the section on lexicalisation of the children's vocal repertoire, shared forms and shared meanings may indeed be created in this way.

From this perspective, some of the special features of mother-child early conversational functioning should not necessarily be seen as the expression of a qualitatively different register, but simply as the manifestation, though rather extreme, of more general and basic properties of conversations at large.

1.2. Conversational sequences as emergent phenomena: Their properties go beyond the sum of their component parts

The former property is linked to the idea that although conversations are created from individual utterances, and that "people talk in order to get things done, they don't know in advance what they will actually do [...] Conversations are purposive but unplanned" (Clark, 1996:319). Trognon (1991:20) distinguishes situations in which the interacting partners jointly reach aims on the basis of cognitions that each already has at his disposal, from situations in which they reach a result that is irreducible to the individuals' cognitions. Thus, in conversation, some results emerge from the interactional functioning in a way that was not foreseen by either interactant at the time they entered the conversational space. Given the dynamic properties of conversations and their strongly-embedded sequentiality, conversational sequences bear out new totalities, presenting properties that go beyond the sum of their component parts. As Clark puts it, "though conversations are created from individual utterances, they are more than the sum of their parts" (Clark, 1996:318).

This property, when considered in its deeper epistemological meaning, appears to fit very well with the piagetian constructivist approach to acquisition of knowledge. Indeed, in Piaget's epistemology, the acquisition of new behavioural patterns are seen to grow out from the possibilities opened up by earlier adapted behaviours (e.g., Piaget & Garcia, 1983; Gréco, 1985:23). This is due to the fact that children either encounter new problems to be solved or, functioning as it is usual for level n , may find themselves producing behaviours that go beyond that functioning, opening thus the way to behaviours of level $n+1$. The property we are discussing renders the conversational sequence a privileged site for these processes to take place.

Drawing from naturalistic data of mother-child interaction during the second year of life, we will show how the child's ability to produce articulated utterances may grow out of the child's functioning as a usual speaker of single-word utterances who satisfies the conversational requirements proper to each successive move. Through this process, however, a new conversational totality emerges from the relationships that the substructures of the sequence hold among themselves, a totality that wasn't planned in advance by neither of the interactants. Developmental data will also show clearly how conversations are inherently joint actions that are more than the sum of their parts: we will show that the same kind of two-turn conversational pair contributes differently to the overall conversational result, depending on the nature of the larger sequence to which it belongs.

2. THE DATA

The data presented here come from two research projects consisting in longitudinal studies of mother-child dyads observed in their homes at regular intervals, during naturally-occurring interaction. Each session was video and audio-recorded for approximately one hour every two weeks. One project — referred hereafter as the Hebrew study — concerns the longitudinal study of 6 dyads followed in the period when the children were between 9/10 and 17/19 months old, and were in the process of acquiring Hebrew (Veneziano, 1988). The other project — referred hereafter as the French study — concerns the longitudinal study of 8 dyads followed during the period when the children were between 12/15 and 22/29 months old, and were in the process of acquiring French. The results reported here relate to the fine-grained analyses of one of these dyads analysed in detail when the child was between 15 and 26 months old (Veneziano, to appear (b)).

3. DEVELOPMENTAL RESULTS

3.1. Learning principles of conversational responding

Both studies show that during their second year children undergo developmental changes in conversational responding and in the way they handle conversational continuity. The relationship of content with the preceding turn:

a) starts to be established by an imitative uptake of parts of the adult's preceding utterance, as in example (1)³:

(1)

³ For simplicity, the examples will be drawn from the French study.

Mother₁: voilà le bouchon
'here is the bottlecap'
(offering a toy bottlecap to the child who is looking at a toy
bottle in her hand)

Child₁: /fõ/
(taking the toy bottlecap from mother's hands)

to which, later, pure semantic relations are added, as in example (2):
 (2)

Mother₁: qu'est-ce que t'as mangé aujourd'hui?
'what did you eat today?'

Child₁: /kako/
for 'gâteau', 'cake'

Mother₂: hmhm, un gâteau d'anniversaire
'hmhm, an anniversary cake'

b) starts to consist in 'simple responding' (as in example 2 above, where the child does not continue the theme after M₂), to which is added 'an extended thematic continuity' that goes from reciprocal imitation (example 3) to semantic responding and/or continuation of the theme (example 4):

(3) *Mother and child look at a mechanical frog running and jumping on the floor.*

Mother₁: t'as vu la grenouille comment elle saute?
'have you seen the frog how it jumps?'

Child₁: /sot/

Mother₂: elle saute
'she jumps'

Child₂: /sot/

(4) *Mother and child look at a picturebook. The child points at the picture of children in a merry-go-round.*

Mother₁: où sont les enfants?
'where are the children?'

Child₁: /zɛn/
'carrousel' ≈ 'merry-go-round'

Mother₂: en carrousel? ils sont dans le carrousel
'on the merry-go-round? they are on the merry-go-round?'

Child₂: /afã/
'enfant(s)' ≈ 'child(ren)'

Mother₃: les enfants sont en carrousel?
'children are on the merry-go-round?'

Child₃: hein

As presented in Figure 1, the Hebrew study shows a clear developmental progression of these different kinds of exchanges: up to about 13 months the proportion of simple exchanges outweighs that of all the other kinds of three-turn thematic exchanges; exchanges presenting thematic continuity by mutual imitative uptakes (reciprocal exchanges) increase at 14-15 months and the other types of thematic continuity exchanges at 16-17 months (depending on the dyad). Similar results have been found in the French study. Figure 2 presents results of a mother-child dyad between 15 and 19 months. Reciprocal exchanges are already well represented at 15 months, the time the study began for this dyad, while the other types of thematic continuity exchanges appear at 16 months.

Mean percentage of simple, reciprocal and discursive exchanges (Hebrew sample)				
	Children			
	Simple	Thematic continuity's: Reciprocal	Thematic continuity's: Other	
11 – 13 months	137	25	7	169
14 – 15 months	183	136	29	348
16 – 17 months	136	117	73	326
	456	278	109	843
Percentage over CRT's – Children				
	Children			
	Simple	Thematic continuity's: Reciprocal	Thematic continuity's: Other	
11 – 13 months	81%	15%	4%	
14 – 15 months	53%	39%	8%	
16 – 17 months	42%	36%	22%	

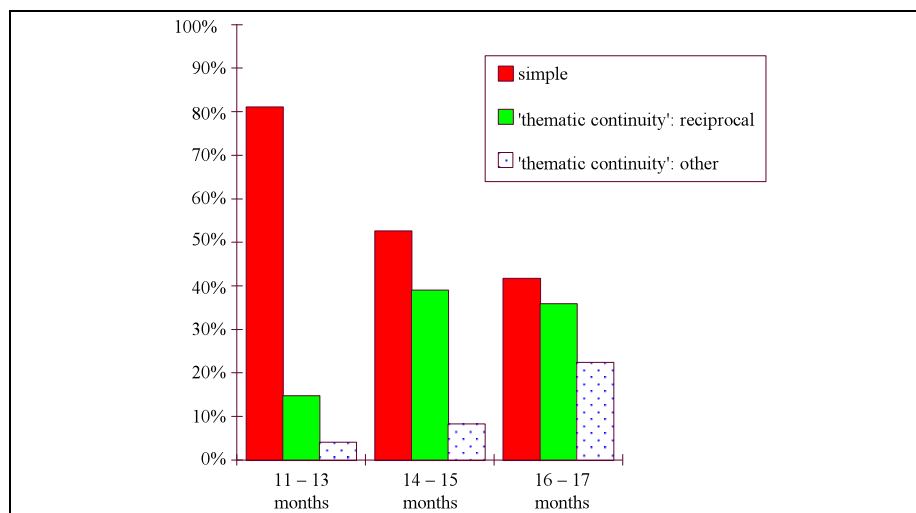


Figure 1. Proportion of simple, reciprocal and other 'thematic continuity' exchanges in Hebrew Study. Data averaged over children and time periods.

I will argue that these developments in conversational responding allow children's active participation in joint conversational exchanges that, given the properties we have discussed earlier, creates opportunities for them to acquire new language knowledge.

In this table we did not take account of CONF, RECALL, DCLAR, nor of the repetitions by the same speaker after CONF, CLAR, DCONF

age months	All exchanges							Mean number per half hour						
	sim- ples	sim- ple	recip rocal	them atic conti nuity : recip rocal	dis- cur- sives	them atic conti nuity : other	Total exch- anges	sim- ples	sim- ples % over total exch- anges	recip rocal	recip rocal % over total exch- anges	dis- cur- sives	discu rsive % over total exch- anges	Tot- al exc- han- ges
15	13	42%	18	58%	0	0%	31	6,5	21%	9	29%	0	0%	15,5
16	54	53%	41	40%	7	7%	102	18	18%	13,7	13%	2,3	2%	34
17	51	57%	30	34%	8	9%	89	25,5	29%	15	17%	4	4%	44,5
18	39	40%	35	36%	23	24%	97	39	40%	35	36%	23	24%	97
19	23	42%	39	35%	13	24%	55	23	42%	19	35%	13	24%	55

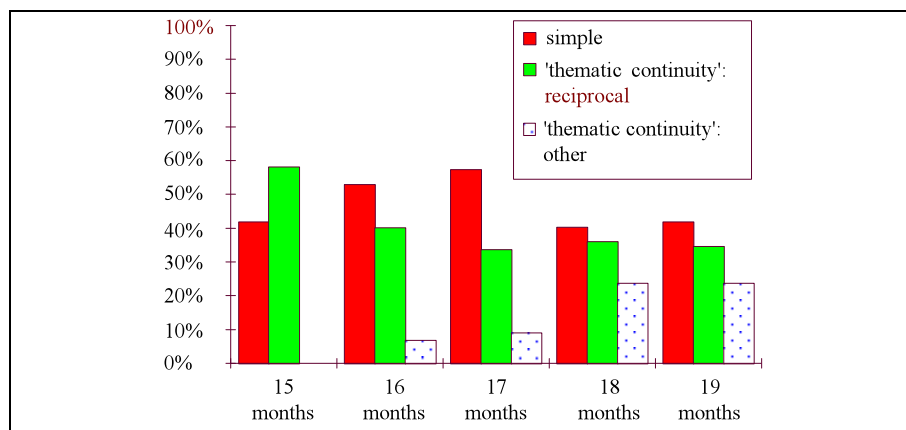


Figure 2. Proportion of simple, reciprocal and other 'thematic continuity' exchanges in a mother-child dyad from the French Study.

3.2. Early lexical acquisitions: Mutual understanding by default creates shared meanings

Reciprocal exchanges, presenting thematic continuity by mutual imitative uptakes, appeared particularly suitable for fostering early lexical acquisition. Indeed these structures, containing minimally three-turns, imply the mutual attention and activity of both partners on one lexical item, at the time its signified has good chances to be also on the dyad's centre of attention. When, as in example 3 above, the child uptakes 'saute', 'jump', the mother accepts the child's vocal turn as the uptake of the 'elle saute' ('she jumps') part of her previous utterance. Within the model of mutual understanding by default, we can say that the child's uptake of part of the mother's previous utterance provides evidence 'in action' for some kind of understanding of that utterance, and the mother's intervention in M_2 implicitly accepts that understanding. In other exchanges, it is the mother who provides the first interpretation in action, as in the following reciprocal exchange, whose structure can be noted as $C_1M_1C_2$, with $C_1 = C_2$:

- (5)
- Child₁*: /dodo/
 'night night'
 (placing a toy bottle in its container)
- Mother₁*: elles font dodo les bouteilles?
 'they go night night the bottles?'
- Child₂*: /dodo/
 'night night'

In M_1 , the mother provides an interpretation of C_1 that the child doesn't disconfirm in C_2 . By this mutual focalisation, agreed upon by default, shared forms and meanings are thus jointly reinforced, if not created at the same time.

Results of the Hebrew study indeed show a specific effect of reciprocal exchanges on the rhythm of lexical acquisition by the children. In this study we could find a time period in which children had a similar number of words in their repertoire — when the children were 14 months old — and another time in which this measure differentiated the children — when they were 17 months. We then looked if, and which kind, of conversational functioning of the dyads at 14 months could predict the differential gain in vocabulary observed three months later. We find that while reciprocal exchanges, both of the MCM and of the CMC type, correlate significantly with gain in vocabulary by the children, simple initiative exchanges — expansions by the mother not followed up by a reciprocal imitation of the child (CM type) and imitative uptakes by the child not followed up by the mother's (MC type) —, do not correlate with vocabulary gain (Veneziano, 1997).

This result confirms the analysis that considers mutual agreement by default to be best instantiated in a three-turn structure, and provides support to the notion that conversations are co-constructions. Thus, the interpretative activity of the mother, reflected in her expansions, acquires potentialities for lexical acquisition in so far as the child relates to it 'in action'; in the same way, the child's imitative uptake of a mother-produced lexical item has greater potentialities for lexical acquisition if the mother, in her following turn, provides 'recognition in action' that the child's production is an uptake of her previously produced word: Third turn reciprocation allows mutual sharing of lexical forms and meanings.

At the same time we may say that the way early forms and meanings start to be shared (and to provide children's early lexical repertoires) relies strongly on basic properties of conversations, such as mutual understanding and recognition by default, and the inherently joint nature of conversational sequences.

3.3. Compositionality of words: Conversational sequences as emergent phenomena whose properties go beyond the sum of their component parts

Studies of the transition from single to multi-word speech have given particular importance to certain kinds of Successive Single-Word Utterances

(SSWUs) that Bloom (1973) had identified as *holistic*, Ochs, Schieffelin & Platt (1979) as “propositions across utterances”, and Scollon (1979) as “vertical constructions” : they are SSWUs in which the meaning of the words produced in successive utterances can be combined to give rise to a higher level unit of meaning (see also Fonagy 1972; Greenfield & Smith 1976; Greenfield Reilly Lieper & Baker, 1985; Barrett 1989; Veneziano Sinclair & Berthoud 1990)

In order to improve our understanding of the processes underlying the change, we made finer distinctions among SSWUs⁴ in order to see whether the dyad’s conversational functioning might have a specific role in this important language change.

The main relevant distinction I will make here is that between conversationally-generated and conversationally-unsustained SSWUs. In conversationally-generated SSWUs at least one of the words is uttered by the child with the support of the partner’s intervention. In this case the child may produce SSWUs following the conversational moves, producing each word as the conversational needs demand it. In conversationally-unsustained SSWUs, instead, the adult’s intervention either is not determinant for the production of the related SSWUs, as in example 6 below, or is absent, as in example 7 where the single-word utterances are separated by a detectable pause greater than half a second:

(6) *Mother and child look at a picturebook. The child points at the picture of children in a merry-go-round.*

Child₁: /afã/
 ‘*enfant(s)*’ ≈ ‘*child(ren)*’

Mother₁: hmhm

Child₂: /zɛn/
 ‘*carrousel*’ ≈ ‘*merry-go-round*’

Mother₂: oui, les enfants sont en carrousel
 ‘*yes, the children are on the merry-go-round*’

(7) *Mother and child look at a picturebook. The child points at the picture of children fallen off a sled.*

Child: /afã/ # obbé ‘enfant(s) tombé(s)’
 ‘*child(ren) fall(en)*’.

Among SSWUs of the first type — the conversationally-generated ones — there are those in which the child, after having produced a first

⁴ Finer-grained distinctions in SSWUs have been made (see Veneziano, to appear (b)). Here we retain the most relevant distinctions.

word, and after the adult's interpretation in action of this first verbalisation, uptakes a word contained in the adult's interpretation, but the word she produces is different from the one she had uttered in her initial turn, as in example 8 below:

- (8)
- Child₁*: /dodo/
 'night night'
 (placing a toy bottle in a toy basket)
- Mother₁*: *elles font dodo les bouteilles?*
 'they go night night the bottles?
- Child₂*: /tei/
 'bouteilles', 'bottles'

These exchanges, called 'imitative discursive' (Veneziano, 1988), are based on the conversational mechanism of the imitative uptake used in other exchanges, in particular in the thematic continuity exchanges in which the mother's recognition by imitative uptake is reciprocated by the child in her third turn (see the reciprocal exchanges in examples 3 and 5 above). However, if both kinds of exchanges have a three-turn structure $C_1M_1C_2$, in discursive exchanges C_2 is different, rather than the same, as C_1 , thus conferring to the sequence a different overall result, a point I will come back later (see example 5 for an exchange that is the same as this one for the pair C_1M_1 but differs for the relation that C_2 holds with C_1). They are among the 'other' exchanges presenting thematic continuity which are developmentally subsequent to reciprocal exchanges in which the child, under similar conditions, continues to keep her attention on the word she had initially produced (see Figures 1 and 2 above).

Another kind of conversationally-generated SSWUs, called 'semantic discursive' (Veneziano, 1988), is that in which the child produces a second word replying to a specific solicitation of the adult partner, the classic case being answering to a question, as in the following example:

- (9)
- Child₁*: /bebe/
 'baby'
 (placing a baby doll in a plastic box)
- Mother₁*: *qu'est-ce qu'il fait là ton bébé?*
 'what is the baby doing there?'
- Child₂*: /ðbẽ/
 'bain', 'bath'

Here the additional word the child produces is not contained in the previous adult's utterance but is simply solicited by it.

What is relevant for our purposes here is that in both types of exchanges, the imitative and the semantic, the child is led to produce meaningfully-related words by following the conversational moves thanks to the relation that the child's secondly uttered word holds with the adult's preceding utterance.

The meaning-relation between the child-produced single-word utterances, a property that prepares the way for combinatorial speech, can be considered an emergent product of the conversational sequence, a relation that wasn't planned neither in C_1 nor in M_1 , and that wasn't contained in C_2 either. Moreover, if the emergent product of the sequence presents already properties of combinatorial speech (the meaning-relation between the child-uttered words), this is not the case of the child's contributions to its realisation, consisting of single-word utterances, typical of her present level of functioning. These characteristics confer to conversationally-sustained SSWUs a pivotal role in the change from single to multi-word speech in that they allow the child to produce a behaviour of a higher level of functioning at a time when she is just showing her mastery as single-word speaker and conversational partner.

Results from analyses of the longitudinal data of one dyad of the French study show that, in accord with this theoretical appraisal, conversationally-generated SSWUs are among the first kinds of SSWUs to occur.

— insert Figure 3 about here —

Figure 3 presents the proportion of communicative acts expressed by two-word(+) utterances, by SSWUs and, among the latter, the proportion of conversationally-generated ones, by child's age. Figure 3 shows that the overall production of SSWUs increases with age, reaching a maximum between 19 and 20 months, and that between 16 and 18 months, the majority of SSWUs are produced in a conversationally-propped way. The proportional decrease in conversationally-generated SSWUs observed at 19;18 corresponds to an overall increase in the production of conversationally-unsustained SSWUs. Shortly after this increase, two-word(+) utterances make their appearance: at first they are produced to the same extent as conversationally-unsustained SSWUs, while from 21 months onwards they become the dominant way of expression and SSWUs gradually disappear. The close temporal relation existing between conversationally-unsustained SSWUs and two-word(+) utterances proper shows that a

qualitatively major step has already taken place with the production of the former, the difference between the two phenomena probably residing in the progress that still needs to be made in the temporal fluidity with which the component words are articulated (Branigan, 1979; Veneziano, Sinclair & Berthoud, 1990). Conversationally-generated SSWUs appear to have provided one of the primary supports for this major qualitative step.

4. DISCUSSION

Mutual understanding by default — a general property of conversations emphasised in the theory of interlocutory logic — underlies and backs up the conversational functioning of mother-child dyads during the early period of language acquisition. Mothers' interpretations of children's utterances, children's uptakes and responses to mothers' solicitations, take place in a framework of mutual recognition in action that creates sharing of forms and meanings (i.e., an early lexical repertoire), and a functional mutual understanding. As mentioned above, the fact that conversationally-generated SSWUs constitute one of the pivotal experiences in the change from single to multiword speech is very tightly linked to another general property of conversational sequences that allows totalities to emerge from the individually-produced component parts, totalities that are not planned beforehand by the participants. As the nature of conversational responding changes with development, the child may produce a behaviour of a higher level — a SSWU — by functioning as a usual single-word speaker and conversational partner. The meaning-relation between the child-produced single-word utterances, a property that prepares the way for combinatorial speech, can be considered an emergent product of the conversational sequence, that wasn't planned neither in C_1 nor in M_1 , and that wasn't contained in C_2 either.

The developmental data seem to be particularly suitable to illustrate clearly that the same kind of two-turn subpart of a conversational sequence contributes differently to the overall conversational product depending on the relationship it holds with other subparts.

Results presented above show that reciprocal exchanges (e.g. example 5 above) are helpful for early lexical acquisition, while discursive exchanges (e.g. example 8) appear to be helpful for the transition from single-to multiword speech. What is the difference between these conversational sequences?

Let us consider more carefully the reciprocal and the imitative discursive types of exchanges. Both can be schematised to have a $C_1M_1C_2$

structure. Both structures are constituted of two two-turn pairs — C_1M_1 and M_1C_2 — linked by the imitative relation. Each pair is however caught into different kinds of larger conversational sequences. What differs in these examples is the relationship that C_2 holds with C_1 . In the case of the reciprocal exchange of example 5, C_1 is the same as C_2 ($C_1=C_2$), and the relation between C_1 and M_1 , and that between M_1 and C_2 , concern one and the same lexical item present in M_1 : The sequence creates a mutually shared relationship between a word of the language and a sonoric sequence of the child. In the case of the imitatively-based discursive exchange of example 8, C_1 differs from C_2 ($C_1\neq C_2$), and while the relation between C_1 and M_1 concerns one lexical item, that between M_1 and C_2 concerns another lexical item present in M_1 : Imitative discursive exchanges let emerge a particular kind of successive single word utterance, the conversationally-generated one.

In themselves, the subsequences M_1C_2 , present in the two types of exchanges, are similar as they consist both in the child's imitative uptake of a lexical item contained in the previous mother's utterance. However these similar contributions give rise to quite different overall conversational products in virtue of the relationship between the second and the first interventions of the child, and of the relation that each of the two M_1C_2 subsequences holds with the previous two-turn pair: When $C_1=C_2$, M_1C_2 gives rise to a reciprocal sequence which creates favourable conditions for the acquisition of mutually shared meaningful units, and thus for lexical acquisition; when $C_1\neq C_2$, M_1C_2 gives rise to a primitive kind of successive single-word utterance, creating favourable conditions for progress into combinatorial speech. This analysis provides a clear illustration that a conversational sequence is more than the sum of its component parts: It has properties of its own that go beyond those of its individual component parts.

In a wider sense, the conversational functioning of adult-child dyads in the early period of language acquisition point to the importance of *co-construction* in the realisation of acquisition-relevant conversational events. Reciprocal as well as discursive exchanges require the active responding of both participants over a minimum of three, thematically-linked, turns, and the interpretation of the partner's responses within a framework compatible with the property of mutual understanding by default. The overall product that emerges depends on the nature of each partner's responding.

It also points to the necessity of the *child's cognitive elaboration* of the products that emerge from the conversational sequences. First, in order to benefit from the overall result of the sequential event, the child needs to apprehend the sequential moves as having some unity. Then, particularly for

conversationally-generated SSWUs, the relevant features of the overall event need to be sorted out and integrated to other features before a reorganisation can take place.

This paper has argued that the formalisation of basic and general properties of conversations allows to take a considerable leap forward in understanding how and why the child's participation in conversational activity may help early language acquisition. One of the reasons to be emphasised is the fit that exists between some of these properties and the piagetian constructivist approach to acquisition, in particular the fact that behaviours of level $n+1$ can be acquired by the new possibilities offered by behaving as it is usual at level n .

I hope to have shown, at the same time, that the study of mother-child conversational functioning during the early period of language acquisition is a fruitful ground for illustrating simply, but clearly, the existence and the working of some of these basic and general conversational properties.

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