Perspectivation and Present Play in Language Acquisition: A Corpus Study

Michael Pleyer
English Department, Universität Koblenz-Landau
mpleyer@uni-koblenz.de

In this paper I present a corpus analysis of perspectivation and pretend play in language acquisition. Specifically, I am using the CHILDES database (MacWhinney 2000) to analyse instantiations of the Cognitive-Linguistic concept of event schemas (Radden & Dirven 2007) in the domain of pretend play.

Pretend play seems to be a uniquely human behaviour that is culturally universal and displays a predictable developmental sequence (Lillard 2017). Pretend activities also make up a significant amount of children's daily interactions (Haight & Miller 1993). This has prompted many researchers to propose that pretend play has a crucial role in children's development (e.g., Bergen 2002). Indeed, pretend play has been found to be closely connected and tightly integrated with other uniquely human cognitive and interactional abilities. For example, pretend play has been positively related to Theory of Mind, executive functions, and advanced sociocognitive capacities, especially in the form of pretend social role play (e.g., Carlson & White 2013).

Pretend play is also strongly associated with language and language acquisition (Lillard 2017). This view is consistent with the general framework of Cognitive and Usage-Based Linguistics, which sees language as being based on and as being tightly integrated with general cognitive capacities. For example, Cook-Gumperz & Kyratzis (2001) have shown that pretend play situations can be seen as a training ground and crucial scaffolding for the acquisition of progressive and simple present constructions. Regarding the relationship of pretend play, language and sociocognitive capacities, Rakoczy (2006) has argued that pretend play can be seen as a crucial cradle of the development of shared intentionality, that is, the capacity to engage in shared cooperative activities with others with shared intentions, which is a crucial foundation of language acquisition (e.g., Tomasello 2008). Research on cultural variation in pretend play has shown that pretend play universally serves the function to practice and internalize culturally salient frames, scripts, schemas and routines with the aid of linguistic interaction (Gaskins 2013). This can also be seen as a crucial aspect of language acquisition, which also depends on the acquisition of linguistic frame knowledge in order to express and understand utterances regarding situations and events containing frame slots and schemas such as transactions, actors and objects in various situations.

It is therefore not surprising that, as Lillard (2007: 136) notes, "[l]inguistic cues to pretending are the most researched topic in the area of how pretend differs from real." In addition to the examples given above, there have been numerous experimental studies of children's use of pretend language (e.g. Whitebread & O'Sullivan 2012; Orr & Geva 2015; Garvey & Kramer 1989). The pretend lexicon of children is therefore of immense research interest. However, little is actually known about how children use these words in their everyday life (Bunce & Harris 2008: 446). The fact that pretense is important in children's language acquisition is evident, for example, in the fact that the lexical item pretend is part both of the MacArthur-Bates Communicative Inventories (CDIs) (Fenson et al. 2007) as well as the 200-word Level II Short Form Vocabulary Checklist of the CDI for young children aged 16-30 months (Fenson et al. 2000: 108-109). There is then, a wealth of data on the acquisition of the lexical item pretend. What we do not have is corpus study investigating how the lexical item pretend is actually used by children and caregivers in their everyday interactions. In this paper, I present such a study, using two densely sampled CHILDES corpora: the Thomas-Corpus (Lieven et al. 2009) and the Manchester Corpus (Theakston et al. 2001). Specifically, I will present my data on which types of event schemas (e.g. Radden & Dirven 2007) children and their caregivers evoke in in play using the lexical item pretend. In other words, I will investigate which perspectives they express and adopt on pretend situations in interaction.

Selected References

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