

L1 ACQUISITION OF FIJIAN PRONOUNS

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Abstract : In an exploratory cross-sectional study^{n.1}, twenty-four children growing up with Fijian as their first language were recorded. Ages ranged from 22 months to 58 months. The focus is the children's ability to use the notably elaborate pronoun system of Fijian, with its 4-way contrast in number (SINGULAR / DUAL / PAUCAL / PLURAL) and an INCLUSIVE / EXCLUSIVE distinction for 1st person non-singulars. Possessive forms cross these features with an INALIENABLE / ALIENABLE difference, and there are 3 types of alienables. The data indicate that singular forms are acquired first and plurals last. The group shows less control over number distinctions in possessives than among the personal pronouns. A further indicator that cognition influences acquisition here is a correlation between the children's errors over pronoun number and errors they made with numerals.

Keywords : acquisition, cognition, fijian, number, pronouns

GENERAL RESULTS

Geraghty (1994) can be consulted for a concise account of Fijian pronominal forms and Schütz (1985) for a lengthier one. Details of method for the present study are set out in Griffiths & Bavadra (1997, ms).

We found similarities to the acquisition sequence reported for European languages, e.g. by Wells (1985). Every child had at least one 1st person singular form (the most widespread being a possessive form translatable as *my*) and at least one demonstrative, usually the proximal-to-speaker demonstrative. Demonstratives are equivalent to 3rd person forms. These were the only types of pronoun present in every record. Eight of the children, mostly younger ones, sometimes used their own names instead of 1st person singular proforms, again as reported in the literature for other languages. We found some case errors too, e.g. object pronouns were occasionally used by 10 of the children instead of either possessive forms or nominatives. The only notable difference observed between what is

commonly reported in the child language literature and the acquisition of Fijian pronouns was the absence of reversals between 'I' and 'you'.

The inferred acquisition order for Fijian pronominal number distinctions is:

SINGULAR before {PAUCAL, DUAL} before PLURAL^{n.2}

The criterion for acquisition of a number category was a minimum of two apparently correct uses of pronouns in that category. All 24 children had singulars. Five children had only singulars. Only 14 children had plurals. With one exception, a child who met the criterion for plurals also did for paucals and duals. Tokens of paucals appeared half as often as singulars, but twice as often as duals, which perhaps indicates that paucal forms are controlled before duals.

Whereas 13 children could be credited with having proforms in all four of the number categories, the level is dramatically lower if we consider only possessive forms. Only one child exhibited all four numbers in possessive forms. Eighty-four percent of possessive tokens (286/340) are singular, against only 33% of the non-possessive pronouns being singular (218/657). Given that two *a priori* complex systems (number and possession, in Fijian) can combine to reduce the sophistication of the output, the brake could be cognition.

Among the 1576 occurrences of proforms in our data are 71 errors relating to pronoun number. For example a child of 3 years 9 months said *Ira na gone* (literally 'them-many the children') when asked, in Fijian, 'Who are rolling tyres?' about a picture showing 3 children doing so. She was erroneously substituting a 3rd person plural pronoun *ira* for a 3rd person paucal pronoun. We detected similar intersubstitutions of pronouns of the wrong number in the records of 13 of the 24 children. The frequency of such errors per child ranged from 0 to 20.

ANSWERS TO 'HOW MANY?' QUESTIONS

Having mentioned the existence of errors in the linguistic category of pronominal number, I now consider indications in the transcripts that some of the children, some of the time, had trouble with the concepts underlying counting, as revealed in their use of numerals (words corresponding to *one*, *two*, *three* etc). Thereafter, pronoun number errors will be shown to relate to counting errors.

Unplanned, it turned out that the research assistants making the recordings put 113 'how many?' questions to 22 of the children. Fifty-two of these questions were answered with numerals. In 36 cases it is clear what the answer should have been, and in 23 of these we got wrong answers, from 10 children. For example, a girl aged 4;3 (4 years 3 months) was asked *Yabaki vica?* 'Year how-many?' (i.e. How old [are you]?) and replied *Ki tolu* 'Year three' ([I'm] three years). And a girl of 2;4, looking at a picture of three birds, responded to *E vica na manumanu?* 'How many birds?' with *Ira sa: rua* 'Them-many are two', where the point of current interest is that she said *rua* 'two' instead of *tolu* 'three'. The fact that she used a plural pronoun *ira*, where a dual form was needed to agree with the numeral she was offering (or a paucal, had she got the answer right with *tolu*) is another illustration of pronominal number error, as discussed in the previous section. To the 10 who answered 'how many?' questions with wrong numerals (1 to 8 errors per child), we can add a child of 3;9 who volunteered that his aunt, an adult known to me, was 3 years old!

THE CORRELATION

The Spearman Rank Correlation between, on the one hand, frequency of pronoun number errors and, on the other, the frequency of errors made in using numerals is 0.38. This

is statistically significant ($P < 0.05$, on a one-tailed test, $df = 20$). In other words, children who made a lot of pronoun number errors tended to be those who ranked high for making errors with numerals; and those who ranked low on one of these types of error tended to rank low on the other; etc.

Correlations are non-directional and do not even guarantee that a link is causal. However, there is a plain reason for a connection here: Fijian children need to grasp numerosity - the concept underlying counting - before they can correctly select singular, dual, paucal and plural proforms. I am suggesting that this is an area in which cognitive development sets the pace for an aspect of language acquisition.

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NOTES

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2. A PAUCAL pronoun denotes a group of individuals numbering between three and somewhere around a dozen or a score. PLURALS denote more than the number for a paucal pronoun. For appropriate use of DUALS there have to be exactly two individuals.