

Poster Workshop

NORMAL AND ATYPICAL LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT: FROM BABBLING TO FIRST LANGUAGE.

(report by the organizer)

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This poster workshop contained initially seven presentations divided into two sets, a more descriptive one, and a more theoretical one. Its aim was mainly threefold:

- to present two sets of related papers with new descriptions and questions on very early language acquisition

- to show the state of the art in one of the main groups working in this domain in France

- to discuss the rise of new problematics about the different strategies and gateways to communication and language.

The theoretical frame of all the papers is the model calléd interactive develomental intonology (KONOPCZYNSKI under press in *The Cognitive Sciences of Prosody*) which consists in the search of the linguistic functions of prosodic cues in the course of early language development, looking not only at the child's productions par se, but examining also the environmental and social conditions in which these productions appear.

Only four papers of the whole lot will be presented here in a longer version written in French, with an English Abstract, the four others will only be given under the form of an abstract in English.

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The seven posters all deal with emergent language at the pivotal period between prelanguage and articulated referential language.

1. FIRST SET : MAINLY DESCRIPTIVE.

It aims at discovering the main characteristics of babbling and of the very first language in populations with normal or atypical language development. Six papers focus on three aspects:

1.1. the language in the exchange process: interactions between mother/child. The influence of different interactive styles may be responsible for the big individual differences observed in the language development of children, especially when they have a handicap. The studies presented here looks at the musical agreement between mother/child productions at the pivotal stage 9-16 months (Isabelle SAUVAGE). Let's note that this social aspect of language acquisition is one of the main pre-requisites for language acquisition.

1.2. the child's language itself : this set presents descriptions at the prosodic level (syllabic, temporal, vocal and melodic organization) of babbling, proto-language and first referential language in French. The results show that from 9 months on, the child is already able to use differentiated utterances depending on the situational context and the interlocutor. In solitary non-communicative babbling, the productions are unstable, non structured in all their parameters; in contrast, in proto-language in interaction, the child fits nearly all the parameters into an adult-like pattern. He also adapts the range of his/her voice to his interlocutor, and does not use the same vocal characteristics with a male or a female interlocutor. On the whole, the utterances are linguistically structured and linguistically interpreted by the interactant (Gabrielle KONOPCZYNSKI)

1.3. comparison of different populations and languages, with typical and atypical development (deaf, decannulated, apraxic) so as to point out common points and differences, in order to establish a development rate of normal language development and to have a basis to predict delayed or deviant productions.

For the deaf group (twelve children studied), the results show that, at least for the vocal aspect, the non hearing child has acquired his/her basic voice just the same as the normally developing child, but s/he is not able to practice exploratory vocal behavior, nor to adjust his/her voice to the situation of communication. However, hearing aids allow the deaf child to receive the acoustic information s/he needs, and thus to practice at least some exploration of his/her vocal capacities and to build up his/her voice, which is the basis of any oral communication (G. KONOPCZYNSKI & S. VINTER)

One paper, instead of examining the child's productions, looks at the input language s/he receives and compares it to the language to an elderly (Marie-Agnès AUBRY). It appears that both languages (to a child/to an elderly) share the main features of the so-called baby talk, but the aim is reversed: while the mothers' baby talk aims to help the child to progress toward language and to acquire autonomy, the same kind of baby talk to an elerly depreciates him/her, lowers him/her to a non human status, and makes him/her regress and loose his/her autonomy.

All these papers also have important theoretical outcomes, even if the second set is more theoretical in his object.

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2. SECOND SET : MORE THEORETICAL CONTENT.

It tries:

2.1. to have a new look at two problems: the problem of continuity between prelanguage and language, and the problem concerning the necessity of going through all the stages of development or skipping some of them.

Both the analysis of the deaf and of the decannulated child suggest some ideas about possible and divergent strategies permitting an efficient and original access to language development. First of all, it should be noted that every babbling event does not become a language.

For the deaf child, and probably some other groups, babbling can participate in general communication, especially in its phatic aspects, and nevertheless never evolve into language. It stays expressive, and does not change into a linguistic behavior which needs a specific kind of organization. The study of the deaf child also shows that babbling is not the unique and compulsory gateway to language. The acquisition process is not only variable in order and speed in different children, but also the process itself can be different. Normally developing children seem to be able to choose between different strategies, whose repertoire is not yet completed. However the very profoundly deaf child (hearing loss> 110dB) who has no remnant of audition and thus no access to oral language, even with hearing aids, has to go into language in a totally different way, passing through the acquisition of isolated elements, instead of going into the language through the more global prosodic gateway. S/he can acquire an oral language, but his/her speech may remain unintelligible, because of the absence or distortion of the adequate prosodic and segmental cues. These results also highlight once again the large individual differences and variations in acquisition (S. VINTER, abstract).

Empirical studies of single-word production in children with Specific Language Impairment (SLI) have moved away from a "linguistic disorder" and concluded that this language disorder may reflect a more general "cognitive deficit or executive dysfunction". Both explanations, however, ask the question about what happens phonetically during single-word production failure. The children studied were severely impaired on naming, repetition tasks, and continuous speech in free play situation. They had virtually non consonants and low intelligibility but were otherwise developing normally, with a good comprehension level A speech model analysis including syllable lengthening and pausing (IDI model) was used to explain this unusual impairment. An integration of this model, illustrated by longitudinal data over a two year period, showed a good language outcome of these children (M. LE NORMAND et al., abstract).

For the tracheostomized child decannulated at 8 months, although there was a delay in the production of speech at the prosodic (canonical syllables) and segmental level (consonant inventory), language in itself, especially production of words, did not seem to be profoundly affected by the lack of early babbling experience. Such findings support the notion that babbling experience and vocal self-stimulation from 8 months on may promote the emergence of the first words appropriate to cognitive abilities at the age of 2 (Marie LE NORMAND & Virginie GRANBOULAN, abstract) .

It should be highlighted here that there are urgent needs of doing more and more comparative studies (cross-linguistic and typical/atypical development), to better understand the main processes of language acquisition.

2.2. to spot early signs of possible dysfunctioning of the later language competence and performance of the child, and to predict as early as possible his/her future linguistic development (the 3 papers)

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2.3. to propose an acquisition model which should be general enough to be applied to different populations, both normal and atypical, and, of course, to different languages (S. VINTER abstract , G. KONOPCZYNSKI first set).

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