

How children interpret adult speech: A corpus study of morphological and morphosyntactic features in children's register variation

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It had been observed that children start to adapt to speech register during their 3rd year of life, mainly by modifying the prosodic structure (Dunn & Kendrick 1982, Hoff 2010), and that from age 6 on children choose the appropriate lexical and morpho-syntactic features for different registers (Aronsson & Thorell 2002, Blum-Kulka 2004, Sachs & Devin 2008).

The main subject of studies that investigate the development of spontaneous child language by analyzing and comparing CS and CDS, are utterances in direct child-parent interaction. Children's interactions with other communication partners, such as siblings, peers or other adults, are much less considered (but see Havron et al. 2019, Levie et al. 2019), and adult-directed speech overheard by children is usually not included in the analyses at all, following the assumption that it does not (essentially) contribute to the children's input (see Shneidman et al. 2013).

The aim of the presented study is to identify morphological and morphosyntactic features (such as modality marking) of children's different registers in different communicative situations and with different interaction partners. For this aim, a quantitative and qualitative analysis of spontaneous children's conversations in a longitudinal corpus of two monolingual German speaking siblings with an age difference of 3;3, in interaction with parents, peers, and among each other is conducted. For the quantitative analysis, two data points are compared: age 3;0 (younger child) & age 6;3 (older child) and age 6;0 & and age 9;3.

It will be demonstrated that certain complex morphological and morphosyntactic structures (for example expressions of subjunctive modality; see Stephany & Aksu-Koç 2021) that are only rarely found in child-adult or child-child conversations are well used by the children when imitating adult ADS or CDS in role play. This highlights that the usage of complex and / or low frequency structures is not only a matter of cognitive and linguistic development, but also strongly depends on the children's experience with different registers in different social interactions including those in which they are not directly involved. Furthermore, it suggests that overheard adult speech (see Oshima-Takane et al.

1996, Akhtar et al. 2001), plays a more prominent role for language acquisition than usually acknowledged.

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