

Comment on Ann Peters' 'Filler syllables: what is their status in emerging grammar?'

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Peters' note is valuable as an overview of current knowledge about filler syllables, in part because it clarifies how much we do NOT know about these elements. The note also points to the potential value of filler syllables for theoretical accounts of early language development, including contrasting predictions derived from nativist accounts against those that Peters describes as 'constructivist.' Characterizing the nature and function of filler elements could be very helpful for distinguishing these accounts, particularly if the focus is on identifying changes that might reflect a transition from phonological to morphological functions. As Peters indicates, differentiating these functions is unlikely to be easy. Indeed, it will be particularly difficult if Peters is correct in believing that the morphological categories are constructed; that position predicts a gradual transition from phonological to morphological functions and thus a period during which filler syllables are neither phonological nor morphological but, instead, somewhere in between.

The developmental sequence that Peters proposes, with premorphological, protomorphological and morphological stages, is a useful theoretical framework. In practice, however, these distinctions could be difficult to identify. Although Peters makes an effort at defining 'recognition criteria,' these criteria are not sufficiently precise. Evidence favouring a purely phonological function for filler syllables (the premorphological stage) is likely to be somewhat more clear-cut than that required for the protomorphological stage. Peters discusses evidence, including lack of vowel differentiation and the ultimate disappearance of the fillers from the child's vocabulary, which suggests that at least a subset of early filler syllables are purely phonological in nature. An additional source of evidence favouring a phonological account comes from filler syllables that occur within a word rather than in the extra-lexical positions on which Peters focuses. Word-internal filler syllables (e.g. Echols, 1993) appear to be similar in form to those that occur external to words. That word-internal fillers are similar to word-external fillers is nicely consistent with a phonological account; in both cases, these syllables appear to serve as rhythmic place-holders.

The protomorphological stage is particularly important for the constructivist account but, at the same time, is especially tricky to identify. Peters suggests that protomorphological fillers can be distinguished from premorphological fillers because the former will be differentiated, both

phonologically and distributionally, into distinct subcategories that function to some degree like their adult counterparts (e.g. determiners, auxiliaries). However, even that definition may be less straightforward than it seems. For example, children who produce filler syllables as part of unanalysed multiword sequences (i.e. amalgams) may appear to be distinguishing morphological categories but in actuality may have little or no knowledge of the relevant morphological distinctions; the apparent distinctions simply may reflect the phonological properties of the target utterances. Of course, an analysis of the breadth of the distribution of specific filler elements would quite quickly distinguish these cases from true protomorphemes.

There may be cases, however, that are more difficult to identify: a child could have an utterance-level production template containing fillers that help to achieve rhythmic and phonological similarity to a frequently heard sentence type (e.g. a declarative sentence containing an auxiliary or modal); filler syllables in different locations within a sentence would be differentiated in ways that approximated the adult target, for example, with a schwa in sentence-initial position and an /ɪ/ or nasal in sentence-medial position. I do not know how common such a phenomenon is but, given children's remarkable abilities to approximate the rhythm and phonology of an adult sentence despite virtually no knowledge of how that sentence is analysed (as in a 1;7's production of /ʌp-ə-bʌ-di-a-i-ai/ for 'up-above-the-world-so-high,' a phrase from the children's song 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star'), it is highly plausible that children could produce fillers with appropriate phonology in appropriate locations within an utterance even without any morphological analysis. To determine whether a child truly is making the distinction between a protodeterminer and a protoauxiliary or protomodal, it will be necessary to look across utterances of different lengths and complexity.

Of course, even if children do produce this more sophisticated version of a phonological filler, that does not preclude the possibility that the phonological distinctions reflected in such productions could lead to true morphological distinctions, a prospect that is consistent with Peters' 'holding tank' idea. Indeed, such ambiguous patterns are exactly what we should be looking for if seeking evidence for a constructivist account. Unfortunately, despite some valuable contributions from Peters and her colleagues (e.g. Peters & Menn, 1993) we have too little information on how specific filler syllables change over development to construct the detailed characterization of this period that is needed.

In addition to detailed histories of filler syllables, a rather different source of data could enrich our understanding of filler syllables, and of their implications for theories of language development: a comparison of data from children's filler syllable productions with evidence regarding their perceptual abilities during the same period could be informative. Gerken's

research documenting differential imitation of real versus nonsense functors (e.g. Gerken, Landau & Remez, 1990) showed that children represent the phonological content of function words during a period in which they tend to omit those words or produce them as filler syllables. Nate Marti and I (e.g. Echols & Marti, 1999) have shown that by 0;11 infants can use function words to assist in the segmentation of content words from the speech stream, suggesting that by this point in development these syllables are more than rhythmic placeholders, instead being treated as distinct units that are entities in their own right. By 1;6 infants can apparently use functors to discriminate nouns from verbs (or at least object from action words), suggesting that by this age, these words have taken on a function more akin to a grammatical one. Even so, the function of these elements still could be fairly limited in scope, potentially taking the form of simple rules like ‘words following “a” are likely to be object words,’ and ‘words preceding “-ing” are likely to be action words.’ Unfortunately, in the realm of perception as in the realm of production we have limited knowledge about how the precise nature of children’s perceptions of morphological elements changes across the second year of life.

Peters has done us a service in this note, not only by summarizing where we are with regard to our knowledge of filler syllables and their functions but also by providing pointers as to how to proceed. Two approaches that could help to distinguish nativist from constructivist approaches are (1) to obtain additional data on the precise developmental course of filler syllables in individual children’s repertoires and (2) to identify correspondences between changes taking place in perception and production across this period.

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