Discriminating between constructivist and nativist positions: fillers as evidence of generalization

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In her note, Ann Peters distinguishes between two types of fillers: (1) pre-morphological, whose presence in the utterance is motivated by purely phonological considerations (the child attempts to produce an adult utterance at the prosodic level, or approximates the prevalent rhythmic pattern in the language); and (2) protomorphological, which function as place-holders for grammatical morphemes and eventually differentiate into various grammatical morphemes. I would like to suggest that there may also be a third type which sometimes appears when the child begins to generalize over a set of related words. Just as protomorphological fillers can provide valuable information about how children acquire function words, these 'generalized' fillers may offer insights into how children form categories of function words. I will illustrate this phenomenon with data from the Naomi corpus in the CHILDES database (Sachs, 1983).

When she was 2;0 Naomi began to produce utterances with filler syllables consisting of a neutral vowel which was sometimes followed by an alveolar fricative. In the note on Naomi's lexicon accompanying the corpus, these were described as phonologically consistent child forms, and they were orthographically transcribed as *uh* and *uhs*. Many of the utterances containing fillers were questions (e.g. *uhs@kitty doing?* *uh@a passy?*), but she also used the same syllables in the preverbal position in declaratives (where the intended meaning appears to be either 'I' or 'want'). Filler syllables were reasonably common in Naomi's speech during the period from 2;0 to 2;3 (about 4·4% of all words), and then disappeared. The following remarks will concentrate on the use of fillers in interrogative utterances (i.e. sentences which end with a question mark in the transcripts).

What is interesting about these syllables is that they appeared in Naomi's speech at a time when she was already using the adult forms of the morphemes that should appear in these positions, although at this stage her use of these forms was restricted to a small number of highly formulaic and hence presumably rote-learned phrases. Thus, they were clearly not precursors of grammatical morphemes. Furthermore, the fillers did not displace the adult-like forms: both forms co-existed during this period (cf. examples (1)–(7)). Thus, the appearances of these 'empty' syllables marked a tem-

porary dip in performance, in that the utterances with fillers are less adult-like than the earlier utterances without them.

(1) (a) 1;11·20 did Daddy fall down?
    (b) 2;0·18 uh@ Nomi fell down?
(2) (a) 1;11·16 is toaster?
    (b) 2;0·18 uh@ a passy@?
(3) (a) 2;0·18 can I draw the cart?
    (b) 2;0·18 uh@ draw this?
(4) (a) 2;0·18 what's donkey doing?
    (b) 2;0·18 uhs@ lamb doing?
(5) (a) 2;1·7 what's Daddy got?
    (b) 2;1·7 uh@ pinger@got?
(6) (a) 2;0·26 where salt go?
    (b) 2;0·18 uh@ skunk go?
(7) (a) 1;11·21 where's Sandy's pants?
    (b) 2;1·9 uh@ Georgie blanket?

Why then did Naomi use them? It seems *uh* and *uhs* functioned as a kind of question marker. They were always utterance-initial, and, with one exception (*uh@ where going*?), they always appeared where the auxiliary or the WH-word would have been in the adult version of the utterance. Furthermore, Naomi sometimes replaced adults question markers with fillers in imitations.

(8) 2;0·18 *FAT: what-'is the kitty doing #Nomi?
             *NAO: uhs@ kitty doing?
(9) 2;1·17 *MOT: what does she want?
             *NAO: uhs@ she want?

However, the fillers occurred in a variety of question types, both WH and Y/N, and hence they were distributionally more promiscuous than any adult form. Phonologically, they can be regarded as the 'lowest common denominator' of all question markers, since all of the latter contain a vowel, and many end in -*s* (e.g. *is*, *does*, *what's*, *where's*: at this stage, forms such as *what's* or *where's* were unanalysed amalgrams). Thus, the fillers in Naomi's questions appear to be a kind of generalized question marker which captures the features shared by all the words occurring in a particular position and expressing a particular meaning. Her use of these 'empty' syllables suggests that she was aware that interrogative utterances share certain properties – in other words, that she had begun to generalize over her repertoire of rote-learned phrases. Furthermore, she was aware that some kind of explicit interrogative marker was required, but was either temporarily unable to access it or else was not sure which of several forms that could occur in this position was to be used on that particular occasion.

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I suggest that the use of such 'generalized' fillers deserves special attention because they are a unique source of evidence on the emergence of grammatical categories, particularly relevant to discriminating between the nativist and the constructivist position on this issue (positions 2a and 2b in Peters' note). Two observations about Naomi's early usage are especially interesting in this connection. First, Naomi used filler syllables in place of preposed auxiliaries and WH-word-plus-auxiliary amalgams, but not auxiliaries in declaratives. Thus, if her use of fillers is indeed evidence of an emergent grammatical category, this category does not correspond to any category of adult grammar. Secondly, as noted earlier, the vast majority of fillers first appeared in contexts where the adult forms of the auxiliary or the WH + Aux amalgram were already well established. If she already had adult auxiliary and WH categories and was merely learning their various phonetic realizations, we would expect the majority of fillers to occur in sentences which require a novel form. In fact, only two of Naomi's interrogative fillers occur in positions which would require an auxiliary form which is not yet well established in her speech, and, as far as it is possible to infer her meaning from the context, there are no instances where the emergence of a new form was foreshadowed by a filler. Both of these facts lend support to the constructivist view that grammatical categories are not available *a priori*, but are acquired by generalizing over previously learned instances.

Of course, the data is open to other interpretations, and even if the interpretation suggested here is correct, we cannot draw any firm conclusions on the basis of evidence from a single child. Furthermore, the course of development seen in Naomi, where filler syllables appeared at a time when the child was already using adultlike forms, is unusual: I do not know of any other child who followed a similar trajectory. On the other hand, such children are likely to go unnoticed, precisely because the developmental pattern is rather unexpected. There are many reports in the literature of fillers alternating with more adultlike pronunciations. When no further information is available, we naturally assume that the filler appeared first and was gradually displaced by the target form – but this may not always be the case. If they are found in other children as well, generalized fillers could provide a unique source of evidence on the emergence of grammatical categories, and thus they deserve special attention.

REFERENCES

Sachs, J. (1983) Talking about the there and the then: the emergence of displaced reference in parent-child discourse. In Keith E. Nelson (ed.), *Children's Language*, Vol. 4. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.