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

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Peters sets up a very useful initial structure for classifying elements which are not yet well-defined morphemes, especially those that seem to be modelled phonologically on adult functors. Some of these primitive elements (pre-morphological items) have neither semantic content nor distributional properties that correspond to any adult morpheme, while the more advanced (protomorphological) items have begun to take on some of the syntactic/semantic characteristics of particular classes of adult-language morphemes.

This basic picture is a good way to introduce these elements to a broader readership, because most traditions of transcription and analysis are deeply rooted in identifying the child's forms as versions of identifiable adult target words or grammatical morphemes. Moving beyond the adult-centred tradition to deal with pre- and proto-morphemes is challenging, especially if the researcher relies on standard orthography instead of IPA for transcription (Peters & Menn, 1993; Johnson, 2000). However, for researchers actually working with unidentified transitional elements, we propose an elaboration of Peters' framework.

Peters' Table 1 sets out four dimensions of potential variation; then, to keep things manageable, these are shown as varying in parallel (i.e. not independently), not treated as independent axes. However, this impression of a linear parallel development is an oversimplification. Feldman's (1998) high-density data, collected from one child, Steven, show the value of an approach that allows several dimensions (including a semantic/pragmatic axis) to vary independently. We illustrate the utility of this elaboration as we consider some of the questions posed in Peters' article.[1]

Peters asks whether a position marked with some phonological material can serve as a 'holding tank' for the accumulation of phonological and functional information. Feldman's data support a 'yes' answer, as two of Steven's fillers seemed to be points of information accumulation. He had two phonologically and pragmatically distinct fillers which occurred in sentence-initial position: [lala], apparently existential; and [nInInI], with a presentative function. Both were followed by increasingly complex constructions

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[1] Feldman videotaped her son 'Steven' for three hours/week from ages 0·5–2·9; the data have been contributed to CHILDES.

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over time. As the copula and deictic locatives and demonstratives began to appear in Steven's speech, [lala] moved on to fill in for comparative *than* and incipient relative clause markers. The filler [nInInI] eventually was replaced by [nIsIsI] *this is it* and developed into demonstrative *this is* and *these are*.

From the child's point of view, a filler is not distinguished from other words; eventually, more is learned about each item along all of the dimensions (which we would label with the conventional terms phonology, syntax/distribution, semantics, pragmatics). In this sense, the filler – and indeed, any lexical entry – could be a 'holding tank' for accumulating information about what goes in that position and sounds roughly like it. By recognizing independent variation of dimensions, we achieve more precise description: in the present case, [lala] and [nInInI] develop increasingly rich pragmatics, so along that axis, they become more like proto-morphemes. But they remain pre-morphological for a long while, because they are phonologically primitive, positionally unchanged, and morphologically unanalysed.

Peters also asks if there are identifiable pressures that might lead the learner to try to grammaticize particular bits of language. We suggest that two pressures – social-interactive and sentential-prosodic – can explain some of Steven's fillers, as well as items from Peters' Seth (Peters & Menn, 1993) and Bloom's Allison (Bloom, 1973). The connection between Steven's relatively long fillers and the shorter ones that Peters has discussed will become clearer in this context.

Children seem quite sensitive to the ambient language's prosodic 'minimum word length' constraint (Demuth, 1996).[2] Similarly, we propose that children tune in to the prosody of a 'minimum sentence length' appropriate for the discourse function of the utterance. Fillers tend to appear when the child is limited to utterances of very few words (MLU less than 3), but where the model utterances are considerably longer, often because they contain politeness formulas or other strings of low-content words. Both Steven and Seth had initial two- or three-syllable fillers in requests, probably based on adult models of polite locution (*Wouldja pick that up for me? May I please have the diaper?*). They knew that SOMETHING comes before imperative verbs, but not exactly what. We suggest that their fillers served to pad out sentences to a discourse-appropriate length, just as dummy syllables bring words up to appropriate length before morphology and phonology are sufficiently developed to provide the needed segments.

Are these longer fillers 'amalgams'? Peters, following MacWhinney (1978), considers amalgams as protomorphological, because these child forms reflect the semantics of an adult inflected form (e.g. plural, past).[3] To avoid

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[2] This constraint is not an absolute minimum; rather, items that are shorter are 'marked' – functors, in particular, are likely to be shorter.

[3] The English suppletive past 'went' is an example of an adult-language amalgam: it is semantically *go*+past, but it has no form components. Yet the /t/ at the end is reassuringly past-like, and of course it was, historically, the past of 'wend'.

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confusion, the word 'amalgam' should continue to be reserved for proto-morphological items, so it is essential to apply the semantic criterion. Recall that the several axes which define an item in a child's lexicon may develop at quite different rates. For example, Allison's [widə], a phonologically rich content-word placeholder, has a probable bi-morphemic model (read + ing), but since it is meaningless, it is only pre-morphological, hence not an amalgam. In other words, although its complex and stable phonology might suggest that it is proto-morphological, its semantics – or rather, lack thereof – places it as pre-morphological. In contrast, Seth's *didja* has content, though it differs from adult usage (Seth uses it as a past tense declarative 1st person marker); therefore, it is proto-morphological. And it is an amalgam, because he doesn't have the separate 'pieces' of the form.

Is Steven's [nInInI] an amalgam? Phonologically, it is internally simple, but long; morphologically/semantically, it is primitive (virtually meaningless). Its distribution is rigidly utterance-initial, so it is positionally well-defined, but has little syntax. Its semantics becomes better defined over time; and pragmatically, it is quite well specified, although it does not match any adult model. Taking all these factors into account, we suggest that it starts out a little way from the zero-point of pre-morphology, but still far from proto-morphology. If one wants to mark the multi-morphemic adult model of such pre-morphological items by calling them amalgams, one might compromise on a term like 'primitive amalgam'. But the important point is that the description of the development from [nInInI] through [nIsIsI] *this is it* to adult-like *this is* and *these are* requires separate consideration of the several dimensions of linguistic development. General recognition of the Peters-Dressler sequence 'pre-morphology > proto-morphology > adult-like morphology' would represent considerable developmental progress for our field, but everything in Peters' work as well as in Feldman's data tells us not to stop there.

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