

Early fillers: undoubtedly more than phonological stuffing

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With great clarity Ann Peters has summarized the way we have been viewing ‘fillers’ from the time they were considered a nuisance for seriously studying the development of language; the different roles they fulfill, depending on the developmental stage; and important open questions that should bring our understanding of fillers ahead. She notes that the reason for having ignored fillers for quite a while is that ‘they do not fit neatly into linguist’s notions about ‘modules’ of language because at the very least they straddle pre-conceived boundaries.’ In fact, it is not a coincidence that researchers began to develop an interest for such neglected entities, as the interfaces of grammar began to play a central role in our understanding of language architecture. Being at the crossroads of phonology, morphology and syntax, fillers resist a rigidly compartmentalized view of language.

Although interest in fillers has grown amazingly, we definitely need more detailed descriptions of filler production and development, in order to be able to distill individual and language specific trends. On this note, I want to emphasize some of the general features of early fillers and argue that they neither support nor justify the assumption of a pregrammatical stage. On the contrary, their very presence argues against it.

Is there a pregrammatical stage?

Following Dressler’s classification (to be found, for instance, in Dressler & Karpf 1995), Peters proposes three stages for the development of fillers: a pregrammatical stage, in which fillers would only show a phonological function, a protomorphological stage lacking morphophonological specialization and a final morphological stage, in which they reach a full morphosyntactic status as fully-fledged function words. I want to argue here that the pregrammatical stage of fillers is not well-supported and that the evidence we have on fillers only justifies two stages, a protomorphological and a final morphological one.

What are the alleged phonological functions for fillers? ‘Producing phonologically and prosodically unmarked forms’ or ‘reflecting the target language prosodic structure’ are often mentioned as possible phonological goals. These proposals are not only vague, they are also in conflict. If we compare two groups of children like Spanish- and German-speaking children, that have been studied in Lleó (1997), (1998), (in press a), it becomes

clear that Spanish children begin very soon, several months earlier than the German children, to produce protoarticles. This same early emergence of protodeterminers in Spanish has been noted by López-Ornat (1997), Aguirre (1995) and Mariscal (1997). Let us suppose that the early emergence of such pronominal elements in Spanish had exclusively a phonological or prosodic purpose.

Concretely, they could respond to a binarity constraint, i.e. a bisyllabicity constraint, in which case only monosyllabic lexemes should add a filler. Although in my initial analyses I was expecting something of this sort (Lleó 1997), and although monosyllables tended to be preceded by a filler, not all occurrences were, and many disyllabic lexemes were also combined with a filler. Notice that the production of a syllabic filler, generally the vowel [a], [ɐ], [ə] or [ɛ] often preceded by a laryngeal, followed by a disyllabic noun leads to the production of unfooted syllables, although such syllables are not universally preferred and not expected at the early stages.

Another alleged reason for such phonological fillers is that, in spite of the markedness of unfooted syllables, Spanish early vocabularies contain many target trisyllabic words stressed on the penultima, and therefore children may tend to add a filler to make their productions in general conform to a $\sigma'\sigma\sigma$ target pattern (Lleó, 1998). Most target nouns in the early Spanish vocabularies are disyllabic, though, the amount of trisyllabic target nouns being relatively high only when compared with early German vocabularies. In a similar vein, Veneziano (in press) proposes a template V'CV for C, a French child, that was applied to monosyllables like *pain* and to iambic disyllables like *chapeau*, the two words being produced [a'pɛ] and [a'po], respectively, although earlier the latter type of word had been produced with its initial onset. The author proposes an exclusively phonological explanation for this result, i.e. the V'CV template. Certainly, the iambic structure of the French language had a large prosodic impact on C, but this does not exclude French determiners as one of the motivations for such a template.

In the Spanish children's data I have found a comparable case to Veneziano's C, María. In Spanish, the majority of target words are trochees, with a few monosyllables and iambs and some paroxitonic trisyllables. María developed a sort of trisyllabic template as well, $\sigma'\sigma\sigma$, which acted as a filter to trisyllabic as well as to disyllabic nouns. The first syllable of the template often had a laryngeal consonant, which for trisyllabic nouns substituted initial supralaryngeal consonants, whereas the initially added syllable to the disyllables could be left without an onset. This implies that although the ultimate reason for fillers might have been prosodic, the child might still have been making some distinction between the first syllable of a target trisyllabic lexeme and the syllable corresponding to a determiner. Certainly, in María's data the morphosyntactic basis of fillers is not transparent. Other Spanish children's fillers, though, clearly manifested their morphosyntactic origin

from the start. Miguel, for instance, preferred to truncate the initial syllable of trisyllabic lexemes, but had a high degree of initial syllable addition to target disyllabic nouns, with an initial syllable clearly coined on the basis of the determiners. A third child, José, harmonized the initial onset of trisyllables to the following onset of the stressed syllable in the same word (e.g. *zapato* 'shoe' was pronounced [pa'pato] or *caballo* 'horse' [ba'bajo]), and added a vowel with a laryngeal onset to disyllabic or monosyllabic nouns.

A further phonological reason for fillers has been proposed by Allen (1985), as a strategy to produce initial prevoicing of voiced stops in French. Even though I would not deny that for some children this could be partially the case, in Spanish at least, which has prevoiced stops as well, fillers are produced preceding all types of consonants, voiceless stops and nasals as well as voiced stops. Although such a strategy might play a role for some children, it cannot be the exclusive reason, and Allen himself does not deny that such phonologically motivated fillers are shaped on the French articles.

As Ann Peters mentions in her paper, 'the developmental curve itself is informative about the nature of fillers' as purely phonological. Thus a U-type of curve would tell us that the first fillers were not target-oriented. With this idea in mind, I analysed the production of fillers by the German child, Bernd (described in Lleó, in press b), who had a typical U-curve development. I found that his fillers, however, were not only based on phonoprosodic factors. It is true that some of them were possibly due to the monosyllabicity of the target lexeme, but not all of his fillers could be analysed in this way. Although the amount of morphophonologically unspecified fillers progressively decreased, at the same time, the proportion of clear articles out of fillers progressively increased. In fact, in none of the Spanish- or German-speaking children is there a clear U-curve, but rather continuity, from a small proportion of fully- fledged articles to a progressively higher one.

Concentrating on a language like German, with rich suffixation, if fillers had mainly phonoprosodic causes, one would expect to find them more often postposed to the lexeme than preposed. I analysed the data under that assumption, and found very few, in fact a negligible amount of cases of postposed syllables, mainly added to a few monosyllabic words.

Given these pieces of evidence, I do not find any support for a pre-grammatical stage. Certainly, these early protomorphemes are morphophonologically unspecified; gender agreement is incomplete and phonological form inaccurate. On the other hand, syntactic position is right (they appear before nouns) and the context is also right (they are not used in the vocative, for instance).

CONCLUSION

Fillers are protomorphological entities, phonologically and syntactically governed by the phonological and syntactic features of function words in the

target language. Morphologically and phonologically they are still unspecified, so that most of the development taking place after they make their first appearance is morphophonological. But being morphophonologically unspecified should not be confused with being pregrammatical. Even those fillers that can be ultimately interpreted as phonological are coined onto the target function words.

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