The role of Consonant Harmony in child's language

Consonant Harmony is defined as assimilation between non-adjacent consonants (e.g. Hebrew /tuki/ ‘parrot’ → [kuki]). Although Consonant Harmony is relatively rare in adult languages, it is widely reported in language acquisition (e.g. Goad 1997), a fact that has drawn the attention of many linguists. Yet, numerous studies on the subject could not reach definite conclusions regarding the function and properties of child Consonant Harmony.

In this talk I will present results of a study on Consonant Harmony in the speech of two typically-developing children acquiring Hebrew. The analysis of the longitudinal data suggests, in contrast to previous studies (e.g. Stoel-Gammon & Stemberger, 1994; Pater & Werle, 2003; Tzakosta, 2007), that Consonant Harmony is not governed by a trigger-target markedness hierarchy. In addition, Consonant Harmony seems marginal for both children, comprising only a fraction of the children's productions. Crucially, many of the harmonic shaped utterances are suspected to result from non-assimilatory phonological processes, such as stopping which seems to result from harmony in /gezer/ ‘carrot’ → [geder], but also appears in non-harmonic environment in /zeev/ ‘wolf’ → [deev]). These findings, together with the conflicting conclusions of previous studies, challenge the view of Consonant Harmony as a universal grammatical process (cf. Fikkert & Levelt, 2008). This argument also resolves the intriguing question addressed in various studies: Why there is Consonant Harmony in child language but not in adults' language.

However, despite the negative evidence, Consonant Harmony may have some correlation to patterns within the developing grammar. The chart on the next page shows the development of onset and coda in the productions of /ken/ ‘yes’ in the speech of the child R. The circulated area represents a period in which R starts producing the coda faithfully, while showing a certain regression in the previously rather faithful onset productions. It is in this stage of development that Consonant Harmony starts appearing (though infrequently), and it seems to act together with other phonological processes to reduce the complexity of the word in order to help the child focusing on the coda (cf. Vihman, 1978; Ben-David, 2001).

To conclude, for the children examined Consonant Harmony is rare and not entirely predictable in form (but also not completely random) on the one hand, and on the other hand its appearance seems to correlate with other phonological processes in critical periods of the phonological development. Therefore, I will propose that Consonant Harmony is not an integral part of the child's grammar, but it does have a grammatical base, perhaps as a kind of performance error ("slip of the tongue") that occurs due to cognitive overload that is typical of the acquisition process of new segmental or prosodic material.
Onset-Coda productions in /ken/ 'yes' (R)

References


