An Investigation of Overlap in Children’s Speech

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The simultaneous speech of six 4-year-old girls was investigated within three-party conversation. The data reveal two major types of overlap, one providing instances of turn completion projections and the other reflecting tension for the turn at speaking. The data are discussed in terms of the Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) model of conversational interaction.

INTRODUCTION

A major aspect of conversational organization is the orderly exchange of the speaker role. Within adult discourse an intricate system of rules entailing the integration of linguistic and pragmatic knowledge regulates turn exchange (Sacks et al., 1974). The Sacks et al. (1974) model, developed from adult multiparty conversations, proposes an ordered set of rules that depend upon the listener-respondent’s ability to predict turn boundaries well enough to exchange turns at “transition-relevant places.” Transition-relevance place is the first possible completion of a current speaker’s turn. This need not be the end of the current speaker’s turn if the remaining portions of his turn are predictable. Accurate prediction of turn boundaries requires that the structure of the current speaker’s turn be projected early enough to allow minimal gaps or speech overlap at the turn exchange. Accurate prediction, therefore, depends crucially on the listener-respondent’s knowledge of the semantics, syntax, and pragmatics of the current speaker’s speech.

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It is these reasons—the central role turn exchange plays within conversational interaction and its dependence upon semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic integrational skill—that investigation of turn exchange behaviors raises interesting questions regarding the young child’s developing communicative abilities. Is there evidence that, following the period of rapid semantic-syntactic development in the child, his integrational skills are great enough to facilitate prediction of transition-relevant places in running speech? Is he able to participate successfully in peer multiparty conversations or is the allocation of speaker role (more complex in this situation) too demanding for his communicative abilities? Are the turn exchange mechanisms employed by the child more primitive than those inherent in adult conversation?


Craig and Gallagher (1982) explored the role of gaze and proximity as nonverbal turn regulators in the speech of same-aged, same-sexed child triads and dyads. The data indicate that 4-year-old girls are sensitive to speaker-based and listener-based nonverbal turn exchange mechanisms.

Ervin-Tripp (1979) also examined children’s turn-taking behaviors within triads and dyads. Her subjects ranged in age from 1–3 to 9–6 years of age. Samples included telephone and videotaped child-child, child-adult, and child-parent interactions. Unsuccessful turn transitions or “interruptions” were analyzed within monologues as well as dyads and triads. The interactions were mixed age and mixed sex in composition. This relative status differential was reflected in the data. Ervin-Tripp reported that older children overlapped younger children more frequently than vice versa, particularly when vying for the attention of an adult. She also observed a greater likelihood of overlap in triads and preliminary evidence of possible transition-relevance places as loci for overlap. She reported that “interruptions at syntactic or prosodic boundaries,” possible examples of the kind of prediction hypothesized by Sacks et al. (1974), represented approximately 27% of the overlaps observed in the speech of children over 4½ years of age. It is not possible to determine the potential facilitating or debilitating effects that variable status differences