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On prosodic variation in child directed speech in Swedish

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Abstract
My goal is to describe nonverbal, especially prosodic and paralinguistic characteristics in child directed speech in order to set a prototype for child adjustment in Swedish in these respects. An efficient way of gathering speech material for this purpose is by using carefully prepared texts as well as spontaneous speech material. In my oral presentation of this paper I will discuss criteria for naturalness conditions in lab speech situations with reference to my collection of speech material. I will argue that it is possible to find text samples which can be used in everyday communication situations in a natural way. I will report on findings from my corpus containing both child directed and (for comparison) adult directed speech.

Child adjustment in speech
Speech directed towards children has been considered as a special speech register called Baby Talk, BT (Snow & Ferguson, 1977), motherese, or more recently Child Adjusted Communication (Junefelt, 1987, which also includes body language). Child directed speech is normally adjusted in several ways irrespective of the adult's intention in this respect. The purpose of my investigation is to find nonverbal cues for child adjustment in speech by going from individual data to a more general description. The analysis will focus on both the form and the function of the adjustments.

Material
The speech material is collected through book and newspaper reading. It consists of carefully prepared texts as well as spontaneous speech. The text samples are described in detail in Bredvad-Jensen (1991).

Informants and recordings
12 dyads (parent - child) were recorded as the parent read a children's story for the child. The children were 1–4 years old. Each parent also read a newspaper article for another adult, so that for each parent - child dyad there is a control adult - adult dyad, for comparison.

Focus on focus
In determining which nonverbal cues are important for adjusting one's speech to the child, it seems as if focus strategies are of vital importance in several respects.

In adult directed speech, focus position is clearly marked by Fo, whereas amplitude and duration only seem to play a secondary role. In the child directed speech samples both duration and amplitude play a more independent role in focusing, although Fo is also the major tool for focusing in child directed speech.

Another respect in which there is a clear difference between child and adult directed speech concerns pragmatics: which items are focused. Identical utterances (lexically, syntactically, and with equivalent discourse structures) may receive focus in different positions in child directed speech in comparison with adult directed speech.

A third respect is register expansion or register shift for Fo, resulting in e.g. higher Fo maxima in child directed speech. Sometimes this is done in combination with defocusing outside the focus position. The function of these strategies is probably to guarantee that the young child's attention will be on the focused word, which, in turn, may be a prerequisite for the child's understanding and learning, or at least for more efficient understanding and learning. This idea is supported by the fact that these strategies in the child directed speech is more pronounced for young children who are preverbal or in the early stages of language acquisition.

Concluding remark
The linguistic use of the term focus (information or semantic focus) will be discussed and
compared with the notion of psychological focus (Fraurud, 1996) in relation to the child's language acquisition and development.

References


