The Impact of Parental Input on Children's Discourse Development

Çocuklarda Söylem Gelişimi Üzerinde Ebeveyn Girdisinin Etkisi

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Abstract

Child-directed speech might have an accelerating or decelerating effect on language development. Cross-linguistic research has recently implied the need to reconsider 'the more interaction, the more acquisition' model. We are also reminded that structural-linguistic measures, such as vocabulary size and mean length of utterance are only one aspect of a child's communicative competence, but some other skills related to pragmatics and conversation are required for language competence. The present study investigates the development of conversational and socio-pragmatic strategies in child discourse from a functional perspective. We especially focus on the impact of the parental input, and examine the role of child's mother in the development of a child's conversational skills with particular regard to the question-answer formation, positive and negative reinforcement, the effects of frequency, and length of conversation. Our research aims to establish the relationship between the challenging communicative environment (lengthy conversations, parent-initiated speech, answers-at-hand, avoidance of motherese, etc.) and the development of a child's communicative competence. Our participants have been selected from 5 families. The group comprises totally 5 Turkish-speaking mothers and 5 children. We classified the families as conservative, conservative-pragmatic or modern-educated, and the children as younger and older. The data were collected via open-ended interviews, and transcribed and tagged for analysis. We found various patterns in parental input shaping a child's discourse, and the results revealed a significant difference between the two target groups' conversational strategies, which is due to the critical age for discourse strategies.The mother's attempt to adapt her discourse resulted in self-confidence and freedom to question in children, as well as encouragement in initiating conversation with the older children, discouragement from asking questions and from discussing with older individuals had the reverse effect on the older children.

Key words: Discourse development, language acquisition, motherese, parental input.

Öz

Çocuk yönelimli konuşmanın, dil gelişimi üzerinde hızlandırıcı ya da yavaşlatıcı etkisi bulunmaktadır. Farklı dillerdeki güncel araştırmalar, 'ne kadar etkileşim, o kadar edinim' modelinin yeniden gözden geçirilmesine ihtiyaç olduğuna işaret etmektedir. Aynı zamanda, sözcük dağarcığı ve sözce uzunluğu ortalaması gibi yapısal-dilsel ölçütler, çocuğun iletişim yeterliliğinin sadece bir yönüdür. Dil yeterliliği için edim bilgisi ve karşılıklı konuşma ile ilgili diğer beceriler de gereklidir. Mevcut çalışma, karşılıklı konuşma ve sosyolojik edim bilgisi ile ilgili söylem stratejilerin çocuklardaki gelişimini, işlevsel bir perspektiften ele almaktadır. Bilhassa ebeveyn etkisine odaklanarak, çocuğun karşılıklı konuşma becerilerinin gelişiminde annenin rolünü, soru-cevap oluşturma, olumlu ve olumsuz pekiştiren, sıklık etkisi ve konuşmanın uzunluğu faktörlerini dikkate alarak yakından incelemekteyiz. Bu araştırma, zorlu iletişim ortamı (uzun süren karşılıklı konuşmalar, ebeveynin başlattığı konuşmalar, hazır cevaplar, bebek dilinden kaçınma, vb.) ile çocuğun iletişim yeterliliğinin gelişimi arasındaki ilişkiyi ortaya çıkarmayı hedeflemektedir. Katılımcılar, 5 aileden seçilmiş olup, araştırma grubu Türkçe konuşucuları olan 5 anne ile 5 çocuktan ibarettir. Aileler; geleneksel, geleneksel-faydacı veya modern-eğitimli olarak, çocuklar ise yaşça büyük veya küçük olarak sınıflandırılmıştır. Veri, açık uçlu görüşmeler aracılığıyla toplanmış, sonrasında yazıya dökülüp çözümleme için işaretlenmiştir. Ebeveynden gelen girdinin, çocuğun söylemini şekillendirdiğine dair çeşitli desenlere rastlanmıştır. Sonuçlar, söylem stratejisi kritik dönemine bağlı olarak, karşılıklı konuşma stratejileri gelişimi noktasında iki grup arasında önemli farklılıklar bulunduğunu göstermiştir. Annenin söylemini ayarlama girişimi, çocukların gelişimine özgüven, soru sorma özgürlüğü ve kendinden büyük çocuklarla diyalog başlatma cesareti olarak yansımışken, yaşça büyük çocukların kendilerinden yaşlı bireylere soru sorma ve onlarla tartışma girişimlerinin anne tarafından olumsuz pekiştirilmesi tam tersi bir etki yapmıştır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Bebek dili, dil edinimi, ebeveyn etkisi, söylem gelişimi.

Introduction

Acquiring a language needs mastery of discourse strategies, in addition to grammatical rules and lexical knowledge. These strategies have rather to do with sociocultural rules and appropriate use of language as well as metalinguistic skills to maintain conversation. If we

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accept discourse strategies as a part of linguistic skills (Nicoladis & Genesee, 1998), we might observe a parallelism between these strategies and language development. Similar factors and actors like environment, parents, cognitive development, ipso facto, might have an impact on the development of discourse strategies.

The type of conversation between adults and child is known to be influential on linguistic development (Nelson et al., 1984). Language acquisition, as well as discourse development might be supported by actors in the environment by the simplification of linguistic input. Mothers or, as it is recently called, child-directed speech (CDS) (Saxton, 2008; Warren-Leubecker & Bohannon, 1984) is viewed as 'training wheels' by Snow and Ferguson (1977) who stress the role of tone in addressing children in terms of being direct, using a high pitch and using semantically simple words and short sentences. According to a less adaptive and thus more challenging view, communicative environment may have a facilitating effect on the development of children's conversational skills. Stern and Stern (1907) stress that the main factor for the development of speech is environment, but limit its role to only accelerating and decelerating development. According to Gleason (1975), a situation in which the child needs to adapt its discourse to the interest of an interlocutor might have a benign impact on their discourse competence. Structural-linguistic measures, such as vocabulary size and MLU (mean length of utterance) are classified as 'traditional' (Conti-Ramsden & Friel-Patti, 1987), and are only one aspect of a child's communicative competence. Some other skills are required for language competency, particularly skills related to pragmatics and conversation. Accordingly, we formed our research questions as follows:

> To what extent does the mother adapt her discourse to the child?
> To what extent can children adapt their discourse to the needs of different listeners with different knowledge of the topic?
> How do reactions of children vary in different sociocultural environments?

Thus, the current study investigates the development of conversational and social-pragmatic strategies in child discourse from a Vygotskyan perspective. Our first aim is to establish the relationship between the challenging communicative environment (avoidance of motherese, lengthy conversations, parent-initiated speech, answers-at-hand etc.) and the development of the children's communicative competence. Secondly, we aim to question the impact of the parental input, and lastly to examine the mother's role in the development of children's conversational skills with particular regard to the question-answer strategy, positive and negative reinforcement, and the effects of frequency, as well as length of conversation. The children up to 6 and 7 are known to talk mostly about themselves, to be uninterested in the interlocutor, not to struggle to transfer any message, not to expect responses (Siegler, 1986). Conversely, in socialized speech, children who are old enough try to communicate with others, beg, order, threaten, transmit information and ask questions (Vygotsky, 1986).

Method

Participants

Our subject population comprises totally 10 participants from five Turkish-speaking families. Each family consists of a mother and two children (4-7 and 8-10 ages). Younger children did not participate, so the data gathered from the mothers is expected to represent the younger group. Based on the literature we discussed above, we assumed that the younger group would be around the beginning stage of acquiring certain conversational strategies. The mothers have reported that they along with the children have spent most of their time in Isparta, a city in south-western Turkey and that they are monolingual speakers of Turkish. The families are from similar social backgrounds, such as manual laborers, farmers or shop owners, and we

categorized them as *conservative*, *conservative-pragmatic* or *modern-educated* based on the answers that mothers gave in the interview.

Materials and Design

The elicitation instrument used for data collection was an open-ended interview with 3 different lists of questions. List 1 was prepared in order to gather data about the younger children and was addressed to the mothers. The other two had questions about the older children. List 2 was addressed to the older children themselves, and List 3 to the mothers in order to gather data about older children. Each list included 4 multiple-choice and 9 open-ended questions. The questions were designed to reveal conversational and social-pragmatic strategies the children employed and the impact of parental input on them with particular regard to question-answer forming, positive and negative reinforcement, the effects of frequency and adjustment the length of conversation.

Procedure

During separate visits to each family, the interview sessions (6-10 minutes per participant) were carried out in the home environment and voice-recorded with the permission of the parents. The questions given to mothers are aimed at gathering data about younger and older children from a mother's perspective, and the secondary purpose was to specify the type of family (*conservative*, *conservative-pragmatic* or *modern-educated*), for which we specifically embedded questions in the lists. On the other hand the questions directed to children were to investigate their communication strategies and to propose a model of these strategies. In this respect, our interview questions in the lists were targeted at measuring issues, such as the reaction to a question, the cases which require apology, talking to elderly people, stirring up parent's interest, turn-taking, the strategies used to persuade the parent, objecting, refusing to respond. The spoken data collected from the interviewees have been transcribed and tagged for analysis.

Results and Discussion

The transcribed data from the recorded interview sessions has been analyzed, and the families are categorized based on the responses taken from the mothers.

One family has been classified as *conservative* (not to be confused with religion-wise conservatism). In this family, the mother's reaction to excessive questions by children was partially negative, and the age factor was found to be important in choosing topics and carrying out conversations.

Protocol 1: "I answer only the questions appropriate for her age." (the mother)

Again, the age factor might be the reason for her children to tend not to start a conversation in their daily speech. Similarly, the mother reported that she did not spend much time with her children in conversation and playing games, but she showed her emotion as much as possible. In this respect, we could suggest that the child's self-esteem might be insufficiently boosted by discussion opportunities and that the mother herself had a strong emotional association for the child, which could be figured out from the older child's statement:

Protocol 2: "When I see my mom, I jump and hold her shoulders." (the older child)

Obviously, the age factor triggers the feeling of belongingness, which might result in a more emotional approach and less self-confidence. Another interview question has allowed us to find that the mother does not adapt her discourse to the child's expectation, which, we think, results in the excessive questions by the children. In parallel with the mother's approach, both

children were found to avoid adapting their discourse to the need of different listeners having different degrees of knowledge about the conversation topics.

Two families have been classified as *conservative-pragmatic*, and certain characteristics have been determined. The mothers reported that they spent time playing with the children, but still some parental authority was felt in the mothers' discourse.

Protocol 3: "When I cannot find any answer, I try to explain it in an understandable way." (The mother)

As it is understood from the mother's statement above, the mother's role in conversation and games is more like that of a moderator. She simplifies the sentences and the content, depending on the difficulty of the topic in question, which helps us tentatively speculate that the mothers in this family type are likely to adjust their discourse for the children. In other words, these mothers is expected to use more child-directed speech or alternatively-named mothers (Saxton, 2008; Warren-Leubecker & Bohannon, 1984) by adapting their conversational tone in terms of directness, semantic simplicity and syntactic complexity (Snow and Ferguson, 1977).

While the older children followed the same discourse adaptation pattern, the younger children failed to do so, which could be due to their age. Thus, this finding provides evidence for the critical ages of 6 and 7 which Vygotsky (1986) defines as the starting point of showing interest in the interlocutor. Until this period, as Siegler (1986) informs, children are inclined to talk mostly about themselves and not to struggle to transfer any message. Furthermore, both of the mothers have been observed to reflect the characteristics of a *conservative-pragmatic* family in that they had certain rules, as well as pragmatic solutions. As in the *conservative* family type, this family reflected patterns highlighting the prominent role of the age, but with considerable flexibility. Eye contact and initiating talk to their elders were partially discouraged although children's interaction with the environment is encouraged. Compared to the *conservative* family type, the older child was freer to reflect her insight and discuss certain topics, such as injustice she experienced at school and the reasons why she needs to participate in the school trip. In short, the child was courageous to ask questions to her peers and willing to respond frankly. To a greater extent, their older child's discourse reflected freedom and productivity along with the rules of ethics determined by the society. The following protocol shows how the older child tries to understand how much her mother loves her.

Protocol 4: "I use my computer for that. I go to the other room, and do a love test on internet. It is usually 90-95 percent." (The older child)

This protocol is a good example of self-learning mechanism in children of these families. Interestingly, the child is not direct in asking to learn the mother's emotion, but she rather tries to find a more professional and technological way of calculating it, which lends a support to the pragmatic profile of the family type. The mother's skill in finding practical solutions can be spotted in the child's discourse, as one can see.

Two families classified as *modern-educated* consisted of shop owner and teacher parents. On the basis of the responses given by the mothers, it seems fair to suggest that concentrated talk with children shapes the profile of the family type. As in the other two family types, there are prominent rules (such as, for turn-taking and other politeness rules) in the *modern-educated* family type, but they are seemingly rather agreed-on by the children and have been practiced as a part of disciplinary training, such as reading hours. One of the reasons why the children accepted the rules as a part of their daily routine might be that the parents spent more time on

explaining phenomena and events and on giving reasons for taken decisions, which the following protocol exemplifies.

Protocol 5: "I explain to them till they understand… I want them to be more transparent with me, so I do the same with them. No secret…" (The mother)

The older child also reported that he showed just enough (non-emotional) reaction to a certain criticism, which verifies the impact of the mother's attempt at explaining as much as possible. As mentioned, giving explanations to children is a notable characteristic of this family type, and we can put forward the claim that there is a close relation between this characteristic and the children's critical thinking skills, which needs to be tested in a further study. Moreover, the mothers simplified their sentences depending on the content and on the level of the topic, which was due to their struggle for clarification and agreement, and this led them to adjust their discourse for the children. While the older children followed the same discourse adaptation pattern, the younger children failed to do so, which could be due to their critical age, which is before the period that Vygotsky (1986) describes as the starting point of showing interest in the interlocutor and the end of the egocentrism. Another characteristic of this family type is that they give more responsibility to the children, and the formal boundary between the parent and the child is more apparent. Besides, the parents reported that they encouraged environmental awareness and responsibility in their conversation with the children. One interesting finding is that the older children signal the completion point during conversation, which is a skill to be acquired with the assistance of the mother. This finding was different from the other two family types, which, we can assert, is due to the level of education that the families had.

To conclude with a general discussion, *conservative-pragmatic* families and *modern-educated* families had much in common, especially in terms of the mothers' attempt to adjust their discourse. On the face of it, this attempt reflected the older children's discourse skills. One noticeable difference was that the older children in *conservative-pragmatic* families showed almost no disappointment when getting no response to their question but asked for some possible reasons for it to another person. Also, the *modern-educated* family children were more inclined to show prompt reaction. As a general evaluation of the three family types, older children obviously had more scripts, which is "a dynamic schema, in which a series of conventional actions takes place" (Yule, 1996, p. 147). In this respect, the older children knew when and why to thank their elders and were more successful in adapting their discourse according to the needs of the interlocutor, both of which are based on discourse competence (Gleason, 1975). As we have assumed, we see a parallelism between discourse strategies and linguistic skills (Nicoladis & Genesee, 1998) due to the age factor.

Conclusion

This pilot study was an attempt to propose a Turkish family model of parent-child discourse. The data suggest that the family profile determines the discourse strategies that children use. There are apparently various patterns in parental input which might shape the child's discourse as Nelson et al. (1984) states, and there seems to be a significant difference between younger and older children's conversational strategies depending on the family type. While the younger children failed to adapt their discourse to the interlocutor, the older children in *conservative-pragmatic* and *modern-educated* families considered the interlocutor's background during conversation, which helped them to carry out the dialogue and to compensate conversational gaps. "In fact, one of the most noticeable features of conversational discourse is that it is generally very co-operative." (Yule, 1996, p. 144). Furthermore, we might postulate that talking to children in the role of their peer in a free discussion atmosphere helps them acquire various conversational skills along with self-

confidence and critical thinking skills. On the other hand, in families that consider age as a criterion for respect, children are inclined to be left unanswered and to be interrupted in their dialogues, which might force them to ask fewer questions and to fail to initiate a conversation.

To generalize by targeting a concrete discourse model of these families, we definitely need more participants from different family types. Being conservative, pragmatic or educated is a gradable concept, so a further study could consider developing a standard scale of family profiles (*conservative*, *conservative-pragmatic*, *modern-educated*, etc.) rather than using a tentative list of criteria. A limitation of our study was that data from/about younger children was not representative enough, because they could not speak about themselves, for which we compensated with the information about them taken from the older children and the mothers. Moreover, the reactions of the children can just as well be explained by individual differences such as character, attitude and motivation. A more detailed study which is isolated from these differences and has representative data is likely to provide with different and more representative results.

In a further study, data to be gathered from observation of parent-child verbal interactions rather than from an interview has potential to yield different results. Using multi-modal methods, such as a video-audio corpus, may enable us to interpret data along different dimensions. Furthermore, it might be expected that involvement of fathers in conversation between children and mothers may provide us with more naturalistic and interactive data and richer data, including gestures and facial expressions.

Acknowledgments

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