

Early Speech Acts in Child Language

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Abstract

The development of language in children began early from infants start to babble, produce single-word utterances, until they produced more complex sentences. However, how is the process of the evolution at the early stage of child language development? How do children use their language at the early stage of the development? What are the forms of speech acts produced by children? In this short paper, the writer describes the forms of speech acts produced by children.

Key words: speech acts, child language development

INTRODUCTION

Each utterance is designed to serve a specific function. It may be meant to inform the listeners, warn them, and order them to do something, question them about the fact, or thank them for a gift or act of kindness. All of these speech acts are called as the communicative functions of language or the functions of speech acts. In the process of language development in children, the development of the language functions or speech acts (i.e. illocutionary speech acts) occur simultaneously with the development of linguistics aspects of language.

Therefore, in communicating, people do not just “say things”, but also perform certain “actions”. In the process of language development in children, the development of the language functions or speech acts (i.e. illocutionary speech acts) occur simultaneously with the development of linguistics aspects of language (phonemes or sounds, morpheme, words, and sentences) in each stages of language development. The development began early from infants start to babble, produce single-word utterances, until they produced more complex sentences. However, how is the process of the evolution at the early stage of child language development? How do children use

their language at the early stage of the development? In this short paper, the writer describes the some forms of speech acts produced by children.

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

Stages in Child Language Development

The early development of child language involves three stages: “babbling”, “single-word utterances”, and “two-words utterances”. Infants start babbling from about the age of 6 months. Around this they start producing particular strings of sounds co-occur with particular situations and objects. Then, at around the age of 10 or 11 months, children start producing their single-words. Piaget defines this stage as “sensori-motor” stage (Clark & Clark, 1977). At this stage, children begin to represent events and objects in their memory. Finally, from the age of around 2 years, children begin to combine the single-words into two-words utterances. The combinations of the words may be in the form of “noun-and-noun”, such as “mama chair”.

a. Babbling

Before infants start speaking —from about the age of 6 month— they produce speech-like sounds that is known as “babbling” or “pre-language” state(Crane, Yeager, & Whitman, 1981). Babbling consists of strings of sounds comprised of strings of vowels and consonants; it is more clearly more language-like than other early vocalizations such “crying” and “cooing”. The sounds are usually produced with a great deal of repetition, such as “bababa”, “papapa”, “mamama”, “tatatata”, etc.

There are two types of babbling: “reduplicated babble”, and “non-reduplicated or variegated babble”(Harley, 1995). Reduplicated babble is characterized by repetition of consonant-vowel syllables, and often producing the same pair for a long time. The examples of this type of babbling are as follows: “bababa”, “tatata”, “dadada”. Non-reduplicated or variegated babbling is characterized by strings of non-repeated syllables, such as “bamido”.

b. Single-words Utterances

Between twelve and eighteen months, children begin to produce a variety of recognizable single-unit utterances ((Yasin, 1991; Yule, 1985). The words that are produced by the children refer to the objects around them (Yasin, 1991; Aitchison, 1984). By the time, children have vocabularies of fifty words, and most

of the children use some words for food, body parts, clothing, animals, household items, vehicles, and people.

At this stage, the words—in these categories—that most frequently occur are those as follows: “juice”, “milk”, and “cookie” for food; “ear”, “eye”, and “nose” for body parts; “shoe”, “hat”, and “shock” for clothing; “dog”, “cat”, and “duck” for animals; “clock”, and “light” for household items; “ball”, and “block” for toys; and “car”, “boat”, and “truck” for vehicles.

The early words produced by children, at this stage, may refer to different roles. They do not just refer to objects, but also may name roles. Greenfield and Smith in Harley (1995: 356) states that the early word “mama” might be used to refer to particular action carried out by the mother (Harley, 1995). Thus, children use words not just to name the objects, but also to pick out the roles that the objects play in certain event.

c. Two-words Utterances

The process of combination of “single-word” into “two-word” utterances begins within a few months of children early “one-word” combination. It begins when children are at the age of two years. At this stage, children begin to combine single-word into two-word utterances (Yasin, 1991). The early two-words utterances produced by children are commonly said to be “telegraphic” in that they consist primarily of content words, with many function words absent. The words are arranged according to the case relation used in “verb-and-noun” combination and the pairs of cases used in “noun-and-noun” combination.

Bowerman in Clark and Clark (1977: 307) lists some examples of two-word utterances from a two-year girl called Kendall (Clark & Clark, 1977). In the “verb-and-objective” case combination and “locative-and-objective” combination, Kendall sometimes places the “objective” first, such as **Kimmi kick** (“kick Kimmi”), or **Towel bed** (“the towel is on the bed”), and sometimes second as in **look Kendall** (“look at Kendall”). However, in her “agentive-and-objective” case combinations, Kendall always places the “objective” case in the second position as in **Kendall book** (“Kendall is reading a book”).

DISCUSSION

Forms of the Speech Acts in Child Language

The early development of the communicative functions of child’s language occurs simultaneously with the development of

the linguistic aspects of child language. The early communicative functions of child language or speech acts (i.e. illocutionary acts) are determined by three kinds of intonation: “terminal”, “interrogative”, and “continuous” intonation (Yasin, 1991). Children’s speech acts are determined by the gesture accompanying their utterances. Two groups of gestures are “pointing”, and “reaching”. These two groups of gestures are considered as the precursors to speech acts of “asserting” and “requesting”(Clark & Clark, 1977).

a. Assertions

To communicate with their parents and other adults, at the single-word utterances, children begin to produce single words accompanying with certain gestures such as “bye-bye + (hand waves)” or “boo + (peeping from behind hand)”. These early gestures and word combinations tend to be part of a routine that adults insist on in a certain *context*. The first assertions in the child language development usually consist of a general “deictic” or “pointing” words (like “there” or “that”) combined with a gesture such as: “Da + (point)” (in single-word utterances) and “see boy + (point)” (in two-word utterances).

b. Requests

Request is one of speech acts that most frequently occur in various social interactions. A request is made when an addressor asks the addressee to “do” something (Vintoni, 2009). It is a directive speech act which counts as an attempt to get the addressee to do an act that the addressor wants the addressee to do, in which the addressor believes that the addressee is able to do, and which it is not obvious that the addressee will do in the normal course of events or of the addressee’s own accord.

Safianou (in Fukushima: 1996) states that request can be categorized into two: *requests for action* and *request for information* (Fukushima, 1996). He notes that request for action involves a higher degree of imposition than requests for information. He states that *requests for an action* refer to naming the object that the child wants to be given, and *requests for information* tend to be in form of questions. In making request (when they want the candy) children might say “give candy + (pointing)”. In addition, children might ask questions demanding a simple “yes” or “no” answer by using “rising” intonation such “Sit water?”. Another requests for information might be in forms of “Where” questions such as “Where doggie go?”, “Where

mama?”, “Where ball?”. Besides, children also tend to make some negative requests such as “No more” (don’t do that anymore).

There are some examples of both speech acts (“asserting” and “requesting”) produced by the children in both in the single-word and two-word utterances stages of child language development(Clark & Clark, 1977). They are represented as shown in the following tables:

Table 1. Asserting and Requesting with Single-words

CHILD	SPEECH ACTS	UTTERANCE	CONTEXT
Nicky	Assertion	Ba + (look)	Looking at the ball
	Request	Mama + (whine) + (reach)	Reaches towards any object desired
Matthew	Assertion	Dada + (look)	Looking at father
	Request	Ma + (whine) + (point)	Pointing at microphone

Table 2. Assertions and Requests at the Two-word Stage

	SPEECH ACT	UTTERANCES
Assertions	Presence of object	See boy. See sock. That car.
	Denial of presence	Allgone shoe. No wet. Byebye hot.
	Location of object	Bill here. There doggie. Penny innere.
	Possession of object	My milk. Kendall chair. Mama dress.
	Quality of object	Pretty boat. Big bus.
	Ongoing event	Mommy sleep. Hit ball. Block fall
Request	For action	More taxi. Want gum. Where ball?
	For information	Where doggies go? Sit water?
Refusal		No more.

CONCLUSION

Early from the age of around six months, children were able to communicate with their parents and other adults; they are able to “assert” or “request” their interlocutors, although in forms of incomplete syntactic structure of sentences. They perform

speech acts with the combination of their utterances and certain gestures and intonations. The communicative functions of language (i.e. speech acts) produced by children develop simultaneously together with the development child linguistic competence. They developed together with the development of linguistic aspects (phonemes or sounds, morpheme, words, and sentences) of language, through a process involving some stages.

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Aridem Vintoni is a lecturer of English Department of Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) Kerinci. He has been teaching English at IAIN Kerinci since 2005. He was born at Tanjung Pauh Mudik, Kerinci, Jambi, on September 25, 1979. Educated at Universitas Bung Hatta and Universitas Negeri Padang, he has degrees in English Teaching and Education.

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