Learning to focus: How Stockholm and Skåne Swedish children produce and comprehend contrastive intonation – work in preparation

Gilbert Ambrazaitis¹, Nadja Althaus², Anna Sara H. Romøren³, Susan Sayehli⁴

¹Linnaeus University, Växjö; ²University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK; ³Oslo Metropolitan University; ⁴Stockholm University

Despite several studies demonstrating sophisticated prosodic discrimination and pattern finding in infant perception (see Frota & Butler, 2018, for a recent review), research on the use of prosody for encoding information structure (in particular: focus prosody), shows this skill to be mastered fairly late in children’s language development, and to be systematically affected by the prosodic system a child is acquiring (Chen, 2018; Ito, 2018). Furthermore, the relationship between perception and production of focus prosody is still unsettled. Previous studies have indicated that the production of focus prosody is mastered by preschool children (around 3-5 years), while comprehension does not reach adult-like performance until the early teens (see Ito, 2014, for a review). This asymmetry reverses the general tendency in language acquisition where comprehension precedes production (e.g., Hendriks & Koster, 2010; Grimm et al., 2011). Although the view that production precedes perception has already been challenged (Chen, 2010), we still lack evidence proving the opposite. In this study we explore the production and perception of contrastive intonation in two varieties of Swedish whose contrasting prosodic/accent realisations will allow us to tap into the factors that drive prosodic development at an early stage.

Previous work has indicated that Stockholm Swedish speaking children master the use of a prominence marking H(igh) tone for focus earlier than Dutch speaking children master the use of pitch accents for focus (Romøren, 2016; Romøren & Chen, 2016). One possible explanation for this finding is that the salient contours of the combination of lexical accent + prominence H in Stockholm Swedish makes prosodic focus marking particularly salient in this variety. Another is that the presence of lexical accents makes Swedish speaking children particularly sensitive to prosodic contrasts. While both Skåne and Stockholm Swedish make use of a lexical accent contrast, the marking of contrastive focus can be considered phonetically subtler in the Skåne variety than in the Stockholm variety (Ambrazaitis et al., 2012; Bruce & Gårding, 1978). By studying the acquisition of contrastive focus in Stockholm and Skåne Swedish we will explore whether the phonetic realization of contrastive focus affects the way children learning these varieties both perceive and produce the contrast.

We are designing a production/perception experiment in order to address our research questions. The production part will involve eliciting noun-adjective phrases (a green ball, a RED ball) from children via a digital picture book. In the perception part we will use eye- tracking to investigate whether and how children make use of contrastive intonation for reference resolution (look at the green ball, now look at the RED ball) (see Ito, 2018). By designing parallel tasks for the two varieties, and by designing an experiment that mimics games children are accustomed to, we hope to understand more about how the prosodic system a child is acquiring affects the way prosodic focus marking develops, in both production and perception.

References


