

Expressing certainty and uncertainty in child and child-directed speech in three typologically different languages

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The study aims to describe the acquisition of certainty and uncertainty expressions (epistemic markers) in child speech, as compared to child-directed speech, in three typologically different languages – Estonian, Russian and Hebrew. Our goal is to examine to what extent language typology affects the means that children and their main caregivers use for expressing epistemic semantics.

Naturalistic speech samples of typically developing monolingual children (three per language) recorded from ages 1;3 to 6;2 were analysed. 280,5 hours of recordings were transcribed and morphologically coded using CHILDES (MacWhinney 2000). Then the certainty and uncertainty expressions in the data of both children and their caregivers were isolated and coded for part-of-speech, degree of confidence (high, middle, low), position in utterance (initial, middle, final) and pragmatic function. The age at which expressions of certainty and uncertainty emerge, their diversity (*lemmas*) and frequency (*tokens*) in spontaneous speech, as well as similarities and differences in epistemic development between the children and caregivers, were also taken into consideration.

A developmental analysis of the epistemic markers revealed that they emerge at the multi-word utterance stage, after the expressions of deontic and dynamic modality (Stephany, Akcu-Koç 2020). Regardless of typological features of the language acquired, all children under observation start with uncertainty markers, cf., however, (Hickmann, Bassano 2016). In all three languages epistemic markers used by children are mostly adverbs (e.g., *vist* and *äkki* ‘maybe’, *muidugi* ‘of course’ in Estonian; *betax* ‘sure’, *ulay* ‘maybe’, *kanir’e* ‘apparently, it seems like’, *batu’ax* ‘certain’ in Hebrew) and parenthetical modal words (e.g., *naverno(e)* ‘probably’, *možet (byt’)* ‘maybe’, *konečno* ‘of course’ in Russian). Marking their utterance (proposition) epistemically, children start by evaluating objective situations, viz. by guessing the location or identity of objects. Later they begin to reflect on the cognitive (viz. psychological, mental) state of others and still later of themselves (see children’s theory of mind). The functions of epistemic markers develop from pure epistemic ones (primary) towards secondary functions (e.g., conversational strategy and politeness). Differences between speakers of the languages under investigation lie in the frequency of usage of epistemic markers and the degree of confidence. Particularly, in Russian, epistemic marking begins with high-degree markers in both uncertainty and certainty domains, in Estonian, with middle-degree, in Hebrew, with middle uncertainty and high certainty.

The results suggest that both frequency and diversity of epistemic markers in the child-directed speech and cultural factors like politeness strategies may have greater effect on the acquisition of these markers across languages than the typological characteristics of the language.

References

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