

ON THE TONOSYNTAX OF A HUNGARIAN CHILD'S
EARLY QUESTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The paper reports on the process of question acquisition from the perspective of prosody. The analysis of prosodic errors observed between 1 and 3 years reveals that the child has not acquired yet certain syntactic structures.

INTRODUCTION

Questions are an important means of cognitive development. Therefore the evolution of the verbal means of questioning highlights the intellectual development of the child on the one hand and its linguistic, especially syntactic development on the other.

In the present paper I give an account on a tentative analysis of questions gathered from the spontaneous speech of one child (a girl) produced in interaction with adults and regularly recorded from 1 to 3 years of age. I was particularly interested in the acquisition of the prosodic shape of questions, a topic largely neglected in child language research across the world.

THE SYSTEM TO BE ACQUIRED

In the process of language acquisition Hungarian children are faced with the following basic question types differing in form.

Wh questions. They require a question-word and a specific word order characteristic of emphatic sentences in which the emphasized element (here the question-word) is obligatorily followed by the unstressed verb. The remaining constituents can either follow the unit formed by the focus and the verb as part of the comment or precede it and constitute the topic of the sentence. In case the question-word stands for the predicate it can even be the last element of the sentence. If, in the neutral sentence, the predicate contains at its head some modifier, this latter must be postponed to the verb in the emphatic sentence [1],[2]. As in the case of wh questions the type of utterance is signalled both morphologically and syntactically, prosodically they are not autonomous in the sense that they do not have a specific intonation. They show the same falling contour as statements, with, however, a somewhat wider frequency range. This is a fourth or a fifth while that of statements is a third. This slight F_0 -difference seems to contribute to the recognition of questions [3]. As for stress patterns, this question type is usually realized with a single heavy stress located on the question-word. (In the Hungarian language word stress affects the first syllable.)

Yes/no questions. This question type has two varieties. The one is constructed by an interrogative particle added to the verb or the nominal predicate. Due to morphological marking the prosodic shape does not differ essentially from that of emphatic statements. Moreover, in present-day Hungarian this variety occurs rarely as main clause. Its use is more and more restricted to subordinate clauses. The other, almost exclusively used variety is expressed by means of intonation. The basic form from which all the remaining forms can be derived seems to be the rise-fall movement appearing on the last three syllables in questions containing only one trisyllabic or multisyllabic word. The magnitude of the rise is about a musical third while that of the fall is a fourth (Fig. 1a,b).

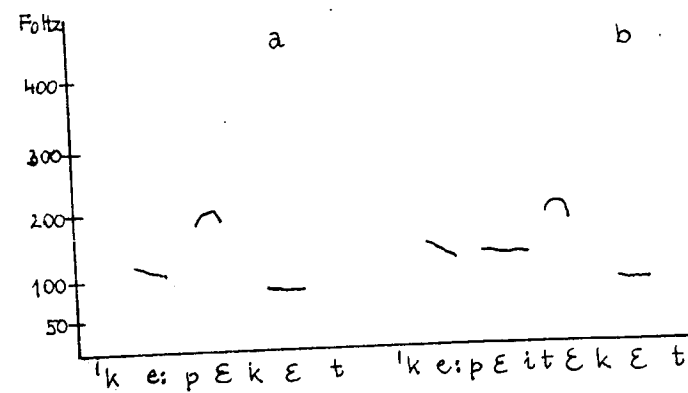


Fig. 1

In questions containing a bisyllabic word both the rise and the fall take place on the last syllable (Fig. 2). Finally, in monosyllabic questions only the rising part of the pattern is realized (Fig. 3).

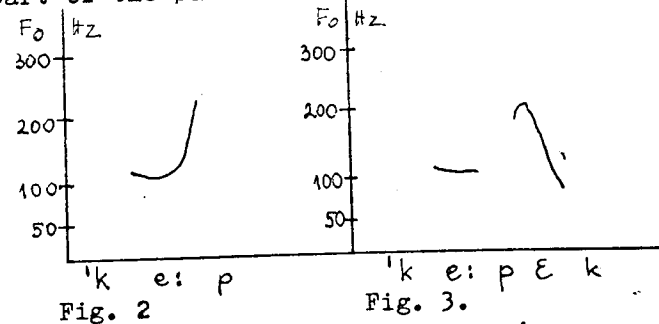


Fig. 2

Fig. 3.

This fairly simple picture becomes more complicated in case the question contains more than one word and more than three syllables. The intonation of such question is determined by the number of syllables of the last stress group regardless of the number of words it contains. The rule is as follows. If the last stress group is monosyllabic it displays the contour of monosyllabic questions. If the last stress group is bisyllabic, it shows the pattern characteristic of bisyllabic questions. And, lastly, if in the last stress group there are three or more syllables, the intonation pattern is that of the corresponding one-word question. In other words, the prosodic shape of a morphologically unmarked yes/no question consisting of more than one word and more than three syllables strongly correlates with its topic-comment structure. For the word order the following holds. The constituent bearing the main stress is usually the first element of the sentence but it can also be located in sentence-medial or sentence-final position. If the focussed element is other than the verb, wherever it stands in the sentence, it must be followed, as a rule, by the verb.

Tag questions. They are constructed from a statement and the interrogative morpheme *ugye* 'isn't it' added to either the beginning or the end of the statement. In the first case the intonation can only be falling, while in the second there is a choice for the interrogative morpheme to be realized as a statement or a bisyllabic question. The phonetic difference conveys an attitudinal one: the falling contour means that the speaker expects a positive answer. The rise-fall pattern refers to the speaker's desire to elicit a positive answer.

Elliptic questions. This question type shows a rising contour. Syntactically it is elliptic, i.e. only one part of the intended content is expressed. The elliptical part can be completed from the nonverbal context as either a wh question or a yes/no question.

THE PROCESS OF QUESTION ACQUISITION

Within the recorded material I analysed questions in order to find out how the interrogative system of the adult language emerges and evolves in the child. The examination has revealed first of all that the productive use of questions is preceded by the imitation of adult models. Imitation has two forms. Part of adult questions was rehearsed by using the prosodic component only: the child hummed the intonation of the question. The other and greater part of imitative questions had an accurate intonation but only approximate segments. The first form of imitation decreases as the child's phonological competence progresses but the second form remains for long enough and occurs whenever the child does not understand or cannot answer the question addressed to her. The main function of imitation seems to be the learning of the verbal means of questioning. Besides, imitative questions may serve to maintain contact with the adult, thus they can perform a discourse function.

As for the order of emergence of the question type treated above the following may be assumed. First appear yes/no questions expressed by means of intonation (1;6,22). Wh questions come next in the developmental order (1;9,18). Tag questions do not appear before 2;4. Elliptic questions come last of all, at 2;7,20. The yes/no question constructed with particle, as expected on the basis of its adult use, did not appear as main clause in the periode examined.

The analysis of the formal aspect of question acquisition has revealed the following prosodic and syntactic tendencies. Prosodically wh questions do not cause any problem to the child as their intonation is almost identical with that of statements already acquired. However, from 2;2 in certain utterances one can hear an extra stress on the last syllable, which is in contrast to adult realizations but very characteristic of Hungarian children's performance. At closer examination it turns out that extra stress occurs mainly in longer, multiword utterances beginning with the stressed question-word. Another characteristic of the child's Wh questions is the topicalization of unstressed constituents which results in shifting the question-word towards the end of the sentence. These different strategies have the same goal: to give the end of the sentence perceptual prominence. The explanation for it might be the child's desire to provoke an answer or to get the partner's attention by all means. From among word order changes required by this question type verb-object ordering takes place at once but postposition of the verbal modifiers shows inconsistencies and does not stabilize until the end of the periode examined. The observed difference in the application of the inversion rule concerning subject and verbal modifiers may be given a multiple cue explanation. One seems to be handled by the structure of the Hungarian language which, according to recent research on syntax, is identified as a "topic prominent" language [1]. Another explanation might be the generally observed fact that children between 2 and 3 years, independently of the word order rules of their mother tongue, are inclined to place the verb at the beginning of the sentence. Accordingly, all the child has to do is to add a question-word to statements.

Yes/no questions expressed by intonation, though they appear first, are found to cause the child more difficulties than any other type. As demonstrated above, this question type shows three distinct intonation patterns according to the number of syllables contained in the word constituting the question by itself. This basic distributional rule seems to be acquired early and accurately. Nevertheless when the question contains more than one word its intonation patterning becomes dependent upon the location of the emphatic stress which, in turn, is dependent on the topic-comment articulation of the question. In multiword questions one can often detect intonational mistakes: the child uses a pattern contradictory to the topic-comment structure signalled by one or several of the following factors: stress assignment, word order, nonverbal context. The analysis of prosodically mistaken questions has shown some regularities in the seemingly chaotic patterning. There are utterances in which the child uses the pattern required by the number of syllables of the last word independently of its stressed or unstressed nature. In a few examples the intonation mistake can be considered as the consequence of misplaced stress. A part of the mistakes is supposed to be triggered by the non-application of the obligatory word order of emphatic sentences. On the other hand, it often happens that the child corrects herself within the same discourse turn and produces the appropriate prosodic solution. For tag questions the source of trouble is the sentence-initial position of the question morpheme prescribing a falling contour contradictory to the semantic content of the question morpheme. Elliptic questions are produced correctly.

DISCUSSION

The findings strongly suggest the conclusion that children below 3 are in the process of learning the complex rule-system governing the prosodic articulation and the topic-comment articulation. However two facts allow some other explanation too. Self corrections and the marked tendency in all erroneous items to shift the stress or the intonation peak to the last syllable make one think of an unconscious endeavour to ensure continuity in discourse.

(For a more detailed version of this paper see Hungarian Papers in Phonetics, vol. 17)

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