

When Do Mothers Address Their Children By Name? A Corpus Analysis

Vocatives are used to attract the attention of addressees, to identify addressees, and maintain social contact (e.g., Leech, 1999; Zwicky, 1974). One goal of the present study was to more precisely determine the contexts in which vocatives are used, in part to better understand how they are retrieved in speaking. We examined when middle class mothers in the U.S. used their children's names vocatively. Such information may also provide insights as to why parents sometimes fail to retrieve the correct name for their children (Griffin & Wangerman, 2008).

The transcriptions of spoken conversations between a mother and child were selected from the CHILDES database (MacWhinney, 2000). The selected corpora included seven children from the ages of 1;2 to 5;1 years (Brown, 1973; Demetras, 1989ab; Higginson, 1985; Sachs, 1983; Weist & Zevenbergen, 2008; Weist, Pawlak, & Hoffman, 2009). Transcriptions included children's real names or pseudonyms. To maximize the likelihood of finding vocatives that were not used solely to identify the addressee, we excluded conversations in which a third person actively participated. Altogether, analyses were based on 300 files that contained 69,028 utterances by mothers of which 1,871 contained vocatives.

Each utterance containing a child's name was extracted along with the two utterances preceding and following it to allow for sufficient context to determine the functions of the utterances. Vocatives, after Schmerling (1975) and Leech (1999), were defined as syntactically and functionally isolated uses of a name. For comparison, an equal number of utterances without vocatives were randomly extracted from each conversation and analyzed for discourse function. The functions included attention getting, requests for action, compliments, reprimands and warnings, providing instruction, requests for labels, and opinions.

For each discourse function, generalized linear models were constructed to test whether the rate of function use varied as a function of vocative name use and the child's age (as measured in half-year increments), with child included as a random effect. Several functions were used equally often with and without vocatives. Instructive utterances (e.g., "That's a flower") were more frequent without vocatives whereas attention-getting ("Nomi. Up here.") and reprimands/warning utterances ("Nomi, careful.") were more frequent with vocative names.

In our presentation, we will further discuss the relationship between discourse functions and vocative name use as well as the use of nicknames and the implications for understanding the retrieval of vocative name forms.

References

- Brown, R. (1973). *A first language: The early stages*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Demetras, M. (1989a). *Changes in parents' conversational responses: A function of grammatical development*. Paper presented at ASHA, St. Louis, MO.
- Demetras, M. (1989b). *Working parents' conversational responses to their two-year-old sons*. University of Arizona.
- Griffin, Z. M., & Wangerman, T. (2008, July). "Lisa, Patty, Selma, Snowball ... Maggie!" Names that parents call their children by mistake. Poster presented at the Fifth International Workshop on Language Production, Annapolis, MD.
- Higginson, R. P. (1985). *Fixing-assimilation in language acquisition*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Washington State University.
- Leech, G. (1999). The Distribution and Function of Vocatives in American and British English Conversation. In Hasselgård, Hilde and Signe Oksefjell (eds.). *Out of Corpora: Studies in Honour of Stig Johansson* (pp. 107-118). Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- MacWhinney, B. (2000). *The CHILDES project: Tools for analyzing talk*. Third Edition. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Sachs, J. (1983). Talking about the there and then: The emergence of displaced reference in parent-child discourse. In K. E. Nelson (Ed.), *Children's language, Vol. 4*, Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Schmerling, S. F. (1975). Subject Deletion and Some Related Matters. *Linguistic Inquiry*, 6(3), 501-511.
- Weist, R. M. & Zevenbergen, A. (2008). Autobiographical memory and past time reference. *Language Learning and Development*, 4(4), 291-308.
- Weist, R. M., Pawlak, A., & Hoffman, K. (2009). Finiteness systems and lexical aspect in child Polish and English. *Linguistics*, 47, 1321-1350.
- Zwicky, A. (1974). Hey, what's your name! *Chicago Linguistic Society*, 10, 787-801.