“What do you want?” The emergence and development of ‘want’-constructions in adult-child conversational interaction

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‘Want’ is one of the most frequently used verbs by young children, although its syntactic functions are constrained, its meaning is relatively abstract (compared to action verbs), and its discursive functions are diverse and sometimes complex (e.g., intent, request, wish, verification) (Stephany, 1986). The present study therefore examines the following questions: (1) in what syntactic and discursive configurations does ‘want’ emerge in early child and child-directed speech? And (2) do the trends of usage of these configurations change over time, as children’s grammar develops?

In Hebrew, as in other languages, ‘want’ can function both as a main verb in (S)VO constructions (e.g., ani roce mocecer ‘I want (a) binky’) (Berman, 1990; Ninio, 1999), and as part of complex-predicate V+V constructions (e.g., ani roce lesaxek ‘I want to-play’) (Berman, 1978). In order to track the emergence, development, and usage context of these constructions, the present analysis examines all occurrences of the verb roce ‘want’ in early adult-child conversations in longitudinal corpora, based on weekly-recorded naturalistic speech samples from three Hebrew-acquiring toddlers, documenting their first year of verb production (age range: 1;3-2;5). Analyses cover all uses of roce ‘want’ and two other modal operators (yaxol ‘can’, and carix ‘need/have-to’) during conversation by both children and adults (a total of 5,292 analyzed utterances) and show the following developmental trends: (a) early adult uses of ‘want’ in child-directed speech are almost exclusively in the form of verification Yes/No questions (e.g., ata roce lashevet? ‘you want to-sit?’, ata roce tapuz? ‘you want (an) orange?’), and are frequently used by adults months before each of the children starts using ‘want’; (b) children start using ‘want’ as a main verb, and only gradually show increase in their use of ‘want’ as part of complex-predicate V+V constructions; and (c) as children start using more complex predicates, adults also start using more complex predicates in child-directed speech, and gradually use less Yes/No questions and more prompts that can elicit complex predicates from the children (e.g., ma ata roce la’asot? ‘what (do) you want to-do?’). That is, early child usages of ‘want’ are restricted at first and develop gradually, in terms of both syntactic and discursive functions, with continuous support and prompting from the adult interlocutors, that also change over time.

This gradual expansion of syntactic functions and usage contexts by the children in this study provides further support for previous research on the conservative nature of early verb constructions (Tomasello, 1992; 2003), and the prolonged route of language acquisition from emergence to mastery in various grammatical domains (Berman, 2004; Lustigman, 2016). The concurrent changes in child and adult usage patterns over time shed further light on the role of adult-child conversational interaction in children’s gradual development of grammatical knowledge (Clark, 2016; Clark & de Marneffe, 2012; Lustigman & Berman, 2016; Lustigman & Clark, 2019; Veneziano, 2014).

References:


