Learning To Be Fluently Disfluent

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Introduction

Disfluencies are a normal part of everyday conversation, yet until the past few years, they were viewed only as speech errors and little attention had been paid to their potential functions. Recent research has determined that some of these disfluencies help to coordinate conversational processes. For example, speakers use both *um* and *uh* to indicate a delay in speech production, with *um* indicating a longer delay than *uh* (Smith & H. H. Clark, 1983; H. H. Clark & Fox Tree, 2002). These signals not only are systematically conveyed by the speaker but also appear to be used by the listener when recognizing words (Fox Tree, 2001).

Children are observed to use *um* and *uh* as young as two-years-old, about the same time that they are starting to learn many other content and function words (Van Der Wege, 1996). However, the proper adult-like use of these disfluencies requires cognitive abilities that most other words do not. A child must conceive of a listener as a separate being with a separate understanding from his own.

Preschool-aged children are often described as egocentric, unable to take another's perspective when reasoning or using language (Flavell, 2001; Glucksberg, Krauss, & Weisberg, 1966). Nevertheless, two-year-old children frequently make spontaneous repairs to their speech for the benefit of their listener, indicating that they have an awareness both of the communicative purpose of language and of what their listeners may or may not understand (E. V. Clark & Anderson, 1979).

The current study addresses whether this level of metalinguistic awareness is sufficient for the child to use disfluencies in systematic ways or if the ability to take another's perspective is critical.

Method

Sixty children between the ages of 3 years, 11 months and 6 years from two different preschools were interviewed. All children completed two tasks with a familiar adult. First, they recounted the details of a story, heard for the first time the morning of the interview. Second, they described and discussed a favorite toy.

All conversations were transcribed and digitized. Using a sound editing computer program, the lengths of the pauses surrounding all *um*s and *uh*s were measured and recorded.

Results and Discussion

When talking about their toys, older preschool children (age 5-6 years) used *um* and *uh* systematically, in the same way that adults do (i.e., *um* preceded longer pauses than *uh*). Younger children (age 3-4 years) did not appear to distinguish between their use of the two disfluencies. The distinction was also not seen when the children were recounting the details of the story that they had heard. This was a significant three-way ANOVA interaction ($F[4,2210] = 4.01$, $p < 0.01$).

Apparently, children begin to use *um* and *uh* early in their linguistic lives, recognizing the need to mark speech difficulties. However, they do not have the ability to use these disfluencies in an adult-like manner until later, when they have sufficient cognitive resources to take another's perspective.

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