

Toward a better understanding of initial consonant deletion in acquisition

Sharon Gerlach, University of Minnesota, gerla008@umn.edu

Initial consonant deletion in child speech as in *fish* [ɪʃ] has received relatively little attention in phonological research. Since it is unattested in adult phonology and violates both faithfulness and the universal preference for syllable onsets, it seems to defy standard phonological principles. Instead, it has been attributed to the transient emergence of child-specific constraints (Velleman and Vihman 2003) or a set of prominence assigning constraints with a child-specific ranking that reverses during the course of phonological development (Dinnsen and Farris-Trimble 2008).

Based on a cross-linguistic survey of studies of early phonological acquisition (e.g. Menn 1971, Savinainen-Makkonen 2000, Grijzenhout and Joppen Hellwig 2002, inter alia), I show that initial consonant deletion is actually a systematic process, typically affecting consonants with continuant airflow or the first in a sequence of consonants that differ in place and/or manner. In order to better understand the role of initial consonant deletion in a given child's phonology, I additionally analyze longitudinal data from a diary study of my daughter Grace from age 1;5 to 1;8, when her strategies for dealing with problematic consonants included initial consonant deletion, consonant harmony, and [h] substitution, as exemplified in (1)-(2).

(1) Initial stop deletion, age 1;5-1;6:

milk [ɛʊk] *book* [oʊk] *please* [is] *snake* [ɛɪk] *duck* [ʌk]

(cf. consonant harmony: *coat* [kɔk], *cut* [kʌk], *boat* [boʊp])

(2) Deletion of initial continuant consonants, age 1;5-1;8:

fish [ɪs] *shoes* [us] *woof* [ʊɸ] *wash* [aʃ]

(cf. [h] substitution: *sock* [hak], *rock* [hak], *wipe* [haɪp], *sleep* [hip])

Based on a close examination of her longitudinal data, I highlight specific factors favoring one strategy over another, including sequences of particular consonant features, onset sonority preferences, and a constraint against initial velars (which are disfavored in mature languages, particularly in nasal inventories). By appealing to independently motivated constraints that are also active in adult phonology, we avoid the need for child-specific constraints or rankings.

References

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