

The role of input contrast in phonological acquisition

This paper is concerned with a study of empirical issues in the analysis of the phonological production of children acquiring Moroccan Arabic (hereafter MA) as a first language.

Before attaining complete mastery of their L1, children go through a phase of ‘weird’ talk. They apply -among other things- a number of phonological processes to ‘simplify’ their production. Examples of these processes include syllable deletion, segment deletion, fronting, gliding, lateralisation, labialisation, onset stopping...etc. The last process -and its counterpart- are the focus of this paper.

Most studies on child phonology demonstrate that there is a tendency amongst children to avoid fricatives. One of most reported ways of avoiding the latter is via stopping –a process whereby the fricative is turned into a stop -mainly in the onset position. On the other hand, the reverse is rarely attested. We shall present a new set of data from children acquiring MA as L1 to demonstrate that the reverse does indeed apply. In other words, spirantisation is favoured by some children. Consider the following examples.

(1)

adult	child	Gloss
ʕəmm <i>t</i> i	ʕəmm <i>s</i> i	my aunt
swarə <i>t</i>	swarə <i>ʃ</i>	Keys
<i>k</i> tab	<i>ss</i> ab	Book
<i>t</i> uta	<i>sus</i> a	strawberry

These examples are taken from three different 3 year old children acquiring MA. They reveal a process not commonly encountered in child phonology: spirantisation. In particular, /t/ is produced as [s] in onset as well as in coda position. We shall outline an analysis to argue that the process in question is motivated by the nature of the input. The language contrasts emphatic and non-emphatic stops in the coronal place, neither of which is produced faithfully by the children and we will conclude that this phonetic contrast present in the input directs the child’s production.