ANALYZING ADULT TIME TALK TO INFANTS AND TODDLERS

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In both the laboratory and naturalistic situations researchers have demonstrated that the ability to form expectations for future events occurs early in life (Haith, Benson, Roberts, & Pennington, 1994). Adults use narrative discourse to engage young children in routine events, and Nelson (1998) has suggested that temporal concepts, which are important for expectation formation, emerge from such early linguistic experiences. However, little research exists on adult talk to infants and young children that documents the degree to which adults orient children to events in the past, present, and future.

We developed a coding system to investigate whether the content and temporal orientation of adult talk to infants and young children is equally emphasized among events located in past, present, or future time, or changes emphasis from one predominant time frame to another during early development. This coding system was developed from an analysis of transcribed adult utterances to young children obtained from CHILDES, the Child Language Data Exchange System (MacWhinney, 1995).

Portions of eight CHILDES transcripts were selected and analyzed. These transcripts contained adult talk to 4 males and 3 females (two transcripts from 1 girl at different ages) who ranged in age from 20 to 36 months. Each adult utterance was analyzed in terms of its discourse function by noting event time and three "timeless" categories. Event time was defined as the time frame of the subject or event of the utterance and was coded as: a) past; b) current; or c) future. If verb tense and event time did not agree, event time took precedence, but tense was noted (e.g., "We are eating turkey" said while looking at photos of last Thanksgiving was coded as past event time, current verb tense). Timeless discourse function was coded as: a) naming - utterance was informational (e.g., "This is a duck."); b) imperative - utterance was a command (e.g., "Put the chicken to bed."); or c) unsure or ambiguous - function or event time of utterance was impossible to determine (e.g., "What?"). Finally, adult utterances as part of routines were noted and defined as occurring during encapsulated episodes about a familiar, highly-focused topic/event sequence (e.g., "peek-a-boo", bedtime).

Three judges coded 8 CHILDES transcripts until 100% agreement was reached. This coding system is now being applied to additional CHILDES transcripts. Based on the analysis of coded transcripts, we expect to find that adult talk to very young children is initially oriented more to the future than the past, which would suggest one possible mechanism by which very young children are able to form expectations for future events. We also expect that as children acquire language skills, adults recognize such skills as vehicles for memory and thus shift emphasis from future to past events. These and other findings will be discussed, along with a complete description of the coding system.