The use of verbal inflections in Inuktitut child-directed speech

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Introduction

- Inuktitut is a polysynthetic language with 900 verbal inflections.
- Children use verbal inflections (VI) in 97% of obligatory contexts at a young age (Crago & Allen, 2001).
- Questions:
  - Do mothers simplify their speech to help children acquire verbal inflections?
  - What are the patterns of simplification?
  - Do those patterns affect children’s speech?

Participants and Data

- Eight Inuktitut-speaking mothers and their children (1-4 years).
- Video recordings of spontaneous naturalistic interactions collected every month across a nine-month period.
- Transcribed / translated by native speakers following CHILDES standards.
- Data divided into 6 stages based on children’s MLU in morphemes (Johnson et al., in press).

Results

- A significant increase in number of different VIs in mothers’ speech (Pearson correlation test: \( r(42) = .33, p = .003024 \)).
- A significant increase in total number of VIs in mothers’ speech (Pearson correlation test: \( r(42) = .49, p = .00067 \)).
- Categories of VIs most used by mothers:
  - Singular (87% - 94%)
  - Second person (51% - 66%)
  - Imperative mood (23% - 57%)
  - Intransitive (69% - 81%)
- A significant increase in number of different and total number of VIs in children’s speech.

Discussion

- Most frequent VIs for mothers and children:
  - 13 out of 20 shared.
  - VIs not shared: Second person (mothers), first person (children).
- Inuktitut-speaking mothers simplify their use of VIs in CDS in accordance with the stages.
- The patterns of VI use in CDS affect the production of VIs by children.
- Children rely less on input from CDS as they progress linguistically.
- Future research:
  - Compare the use of VIs in CDS and adult-directed speech.
  - Investigate how the use of VIs in CDS of other family members and in overheard speech affects children’s speech.
  - Study the use of variation sets in CDS.

References


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