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Maternal communicative functions and mind-mindedness at 16 months as predictors of children's internal and non-internal language at 20 months

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ABSTRACT

The effects of Communicative functions and Mind-Mindedness on children's language development have been typically investigated in separate studies. The present longitudinal research was therefore designed to yield new insight into the simultaneous impact of these two dimensions of maternal responsiveness on the acquisition of expressive language skills in a sample of 25 mother-child dyads. The frequencies of five communicative functions (Tutorial, Didactic, Conversational, Control and Asynchronous) and two types of mind-related comments (attuned vs. non-attuned) were assessed from a 15-min play session at 16 months. Children's expressive language was examined at both 16 months (number of word types and tokens produced, and number of words attributed to the child in the Questionnaire for Communication and Early Language development) and 20 months (number of internal and non-internal words attributed to the child in the Italian version of the Mac Arthur-Bates Communicative Development Inventory). The main finding was that mothers' use of attuned mind-related comments at 16 months predicted internal state language at 20 months, above and beyond the effects of CFs and children's linguistic ability at 16 months; in addition, mothers' Tutorial function at 16 months marginally predicted non-internal state language at 20 months, after controlling for MM and children's linguistic ability at 16 months. These results suggest that different expressions of maternal responsiveness influence distinct aspects of children's expressive language in the second year of life, although the effects of MM appear to be more robust.

1. Introduction

A host of factors have been found to contribute to the language development of young children (e.g., Waxman & Lidz, 2006). On the one hand, it has been assumed that some factors are biologically determined or represent universal features of vocabulary learning. For example, constitutionally-based individual differences in temperamental dimensions such as attentional control and positive affectivity predict early language production and comprehension (Dixon & Smith, 2000; Slomkowski et al., 1992). On the other hand, there is general consensus on the notion that environmental factors play a crucial role in shaping the rate of vocabulary acquisition. Several researchers, for instance, have investigated the effects of family SES on children's cognitive and language development (see Hoff, 2006, for a review). As noted by Devine and Hughes (2016), SES is a multifaceted construct which is often

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measured through a combination of parental income, occupation and education. Available studies suggest that higher SES mothers talk to their children more than do lower SES mothers; furthermore, their child-directed-speech has been shown to have different aims: high SES mothers use language to elicit conversation more often than low SES mothers, who in contrast use language primarily for directing their children's behavior (Hoff, Laursen, & Tardif, 2002). These differences have substantial consequences on the acquisition of language skills, as children from lower SES families often lag behind those from higher SES families in vocabulary size (Hoff-Ginsberg, 1998; Pan et al., 2005; Rescorla, 1989) and grammatical development (Arriaga, Fenson, Cronan, & Pethick, 1998; Dollaghan et al., 1999). Another environmental factor which has received increasing attention is maternal responsiveness, a multidimensional, modular, and specific construct which "defines the prompt, contingent, and appropriate reactions parents display to their children in the context of everyday exchanges" (Bornstein, Tamis-LeMonda, Hahn, & Haynes, 2008, p. 867; see also: Bornstein et al., 1992). Studies has thus far demonstrated that mothers who respond promptly, contingently, and appropriately to their infants' verbal and non-verbal behaviors support advances in children's language by providing labels for objects and events under episodes of joint attention, thereby facilitating the matching of novel words to concrete references (Cleveland, Schug, & Striano, 2007; Landry & Smith, 2011; Landry, Smith, & Swank, 2006; Masur, Flynn, & Eichorst, 2005; Tamis-LeMonda, Bornstein, & Baumwell, 2001; see Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2014, for a review). A study by Tamis-LeMonda et al. (2001), for instance, found that children whose mothers responded appropriately and contingently to their vocalizations and play activities achieved four out of five language milestones (spontaneously produced first words, reached a 50-word vocabulary, engaged in combinatorial speech, and used language to talk about past events) earlier than children having less responsive mothers. Furthermore, there was high specificity, such that certain types of maternal responses predicted certain linguistic milestones only in particular developmental periods. Thus, mothers' affirmations and descriptions at 9 months (but not at 13 months) predicted children's first imitations and words, whereas imitations, expansions, and play prompts at 13 months (but not at 9 months) predicted 50 words in production and the emergence of combinatorial speech.

The present study was designed to contribute to this second research field, by investigating the predictive roles of two specific dimensions of maternal responsiveness (Hoff, 2006) on child expressive language: communicative functions (Camaioni, Longobardi, Venuti, & Bornstein, 1998) and mind-mindedness (Meins & Fernyhough, 1999). As concerns the first construct, several studies have highlighted how maternal speech can be used to elicit and maintain conversations (McDonald & Pien, 1982), direct children's actions (Barnes, Gutfreund, Satterly, & Wells, 1983), and provide novel information (D'Odorico, Salerni, Cassibba, & Jacob, 1999). Working in this direction, Camaioni et al. (1998) and Longobardi (1992, 1995) developed a coding scheme in which the caregivers' interactive behaviors are classified into five exhaustive communicative categories serving different pragmatic purposes – namely: the *Tutorial* function (maternal comments that support the child's attempts to communicate, maintain the focus of attention or repeat, expand, reformulate, or otherwise acknowledge the child's previous verbal or non-verbal expressions), the *Didactic* function (maternal comments that transmit new information/knowledge to the child, or confirm the knowledge/ability already available to the child), the *Conversational* function (maternal comments that promote and maintain the communicative exchange with the child), the *Control* function (maternal comments that re-orient attention or guide/modify the ongoing action of the child), and the *Asynchronous* function (maternal comments that ignore or are blatantly incongruent with the child's focus of attention/action). In two previous studies, Longobardi (1992, 1995) found that the use of the Tutorial and Didactic functions at 16 months was positively associated to child language at 20 months; in contrast, the use of the Asynchronous function was negatively correlated to children's vocabulary size at 20 months. Similar conclusions have been recently reported by Majorano, Rainieri and Corsano (2013), who showed that mothers' and fathers' tutorial functions at 15 months predicted child sentence complexity at 30 months (assessed with the McArthur Communicative Development Inventory: MCDI), and fathers' tutorial function at 15 months uniquely predicted child language comprehension at 36 months (assessed with the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test).

Another relevant dimension of maternal responsiveness examined in our study is mind-mindedness. Originally introduced by Meins (1997), the term 'mind-mindedness' refers to the caregivers' proclivity to treat their young children as individuals with independent mental states. In infancy, mind-mindedness is typically inferred via the analysis of mothers' mind-related comments, which can be either attuned (i.e., accurately reflecting the infant's mental states) or non-attuned (i.e., denoting a misunderstanding of infants' mental states) (Meins, Fernyhough, Fradley, & Tuckey, 2001). Since Meins' (1997) seminal work, considerable evidence has accumulated indicating that this measure predicts several aspects of cognitive and affective development, including attachment security (Lundy, 2003; Meins et al., 2001, 2012), Theory-of-Mind (Laranjo, Bernier, Meins, & Carlson, 2010; Laranjo, Bernier, Meins, & Carlson, 2014; Lundy, 2013; Meins et al., 2002, 2003; Meins, Fernyhough, Arnott, Leekam, Rosnay, 2013), symbolic play (Meins, Fernyhough, Arnott, Leekam, & de Rosnay, 2013), school readiness (Bernier, McMahon, & Perrier, 2017), externalizing and internalizing behavior problems (Meins, Centifanti, Fernyhough, & Fishburn, 2013), and receptive/expressive language (Bernier et al., 2017; Laranjo & Bernier, 2013; Meins, Fernyhough et al., 2013; Meins, Centifanti et al., 2013).

Three studies have specifically addressed the relations between maternal mind-mindedness and children's language development (Bernier et al., 2017; Laranjo & Bernier, 2013; Meins, Fernyhough et al., 2013; Meins, Centifanti et al., 2013), yielding mixed results. Meins, Centifanti et al. (2013), Meins, Fernyhough et al. (2013) found that the frequency of attuned and non-attuned mind-related comments at 8 months did not predict child expressive language at 26 months (assessed by asking mothers to complete the MCDI). Non-attuned comments, however, were negatively correlated with internal state language at 26 months (although this relation became non-significant in the following path analysis), and attuned comments positively predicted receptive verbal ability at 51 months (assessed with the British Picture Vocabulary Scale). These findings are partially in contrast with those obtained by Laranjo and Bernier (2013) and Bernier et al. (2017). Laranjo and Bernier (2013) reported that attuned mind-related comments at 12 months predicted children's expressive language at 26 months (again investigated through the use of the MCDI), above and beyond the variance explained by family socio-economic status; furthermore, only maternal comments on children's cognitions (but not desires

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