

Self- and other-repairs in child–adult interaction at the intersection of pragmatic abilities and language acquisition[☆]

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Abstract

Children's language acquisition develops at the crossroads of the appropriation of the linguistic system and its use in dialogue. Analyzing how children and adults cooperate to overcome production or comprehension troubles in repair sequences can help us understand those interesting moments when the interdependence of 'language' and 'speech' in interaction is brought to light. These sequences also reflect the mutual influence of linguistic development and socialization in children's language acquisition through the organization of child–adult interactions as socially constructed practices (Forrester, 2008). Furthermore, if other-repairs in dialogue are efficient and help children acquire the linguistic system, self-repairs illustrate children's language development through conversation. Children's capacity to self-repair rests on their ability to monitor conversation, position themselves in dialogue and handle the linguistic system well enough to alter, adjust or correct the form and/or the content of their productions according to conventions and to their communicative intent. Both other and self-repairs could therefore be analyzed as indicators of the child's cognitive, social-pragmatic and linguistic development.

The notion of 'repair', whether it be self-repair or other-repair, implies some intentionality, a target to reach, either from the point of view of the meaning of the utterance or the point of view of its form. A sequence with a repair is a sequence during which one of the interlocutors is confronted with a comprehension or production problem and tries to remediate that in order for the 'cooperative principle' to hold good (Grice, 1989 quoted by Bernicot and Clark, 2010).

Repair sequences have been mainly studied within two theoretical frameworks: conversation analysis (Schegloff et al., 1977; Forrester, 2008) and pragmatic analyses of child–adult interactions (Chouinard and Clark, 2003; Bernicot et al., 2006). The present study on self and other-repairs is at the crossroads of these two theoretical approaches.

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1. Framework and issues at stake

1.1. Repair sequences in conversation analysis

1.1.1. Repair sequences in adult–adult interaction

In the conversation analysis framework, previous research has mainly focused on very detailed descriptions of the progress of repair sequences and on speakers' strategies to solve comprehension or production problems occurring in the

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course of conversations. As Schegloff et al. (1977) have shown, repair sequences consist of several stages: (1) an utterance containing the source of the problem is produced by one of the co-speakers; (2) the problem can be signaled by the speaker (self-initiation) or the co-speaker (other-initiation) who may therefore initiate the repair; (3) the repair is produced by the speaker (self-repair) or the co-speaker (other-repair); (4) the co-speaker can acknowledge the understanding of the repair and the conversation continues. But as these authors also pointed out, the different possibilities are not equivalent: adult speakers tend to show a preference for self-initiated repairs on the one hand, and self-repaired utterances on the other hand.

1.1.2. Repair sequences in child–adult interactions

However, Schegloff et al. (1977) also underlined that in some cases, other-repairs may be the preferred configuration in repair-sequences. Norrick (1991) has shown that in interactions between native speakers and learners, native speakers may spontaneously repair the learners' utterances. Schegloff et al. (1977) also suggested that in mother–child interactions, other-repairs are predominant. However, in a longitudinal study of the development of his daughter's self-repairs between one and three, Forrester (2008) demonstrated that self-repairs are more numerous than other-repairs from the beginning of the data. Very early on, children therefore seem to construct a social practice shared by their linguistic community: the preference for self-repairs. According to Wootton (1997), repairs reveal the child's capacity to make sure comprehension is shared by both co-speakers, and "these local understandings are central to the young child's emerging grasp of the world of everyday life in which her linguistic behavior is situated. Through recognizing their existence, the child's sensitivity to "context" in which she acts undergoes an enormous developmental step" (Wootton, 1997:9).

In his study, Forrester (2008) also showed that the strategies developed by the child to self-repair her utterances evolve in parallel to her cognitive, linguistic and interactional capacities. When she is young, Ella uses sound alteration to repair her utterances. As she grows up, she then introduces grammatical alterations and uses gaze more and more to monitor the adult's attention on her speech productions. In the light of Vygotsky's account of dialogic thinking (1978) and its impact on children's productions, self-repairs could thus be viewed as the indication of an internalization process of linguistic and interactional rules.

1.2. The study of repairs in pragmatic studies on language development

1.2.1. Scaffolding language development

Whereas conversation analysts mostly focus on children's ability to self-repair their verbal productions, language acquisition specialists are interested in the role played by the adults as 'expert' speakers in language development. Therefore, their studies do not concentrate on the progress of repair sequences in the course of adult–child interactions, but on the content of the utterances produced by the adult and the child, especially when the adult takes up and reformulates what the child says and the child subsequently takes up the adult's reformulation. Acquisition specialists have thus mostly been studying other-repairs and elicitions of self-repairs.

Among the studies on children's verbal productions, the question is often whether repair sequences favor long-term language acquisition. The research on French data has focused mostly on children and adults' reformulations as a potential device to acquire language in the context of dialogue (Bernicot et al., 2006; De Weck, 2000). When adults and children take up each other's linguistic productions, it enables children to experience dialogic continuity with simpler means. As shown by Huang (2011), the use of parental other-repetition is an extremely important communicative strategy and is the major device for acknowledging the receipt of information. And when children repeat adults' reformulations of their own productions, they incorporate the conventional forms of the linguistic system in their new utterances (Clark, 2006). This process facilitates their acquisition of new words, new constructions and complex utterances (Veneziano et al., 1990). These studies therefore focus on local reformulations of the interlocutor's utterances. Reformulations can be viewed as being "negative evidence". This concept was first introduced by Gold (1967) to justify innateness, and linked to explicit disapproval, but has then been enlarged by Saxton (1997), to include implicit disapproval as well and it can refer to all types of "information that identifies children's errors AS ERRORS during acquisition" (Chouinard and Clark, 2003:638).

In some cultures such as the Kaluli described by Schieffelin (1979) and Ochs and Schieffelin (1984), parents do not seem to have direct face-to-face interactions with their children as long as they are not considered as competent speakers, but they speak *for* them, modeling adequate productions in various situations in a high pitched voice and moving the baby up and down. Later on, the Kaluli caregivers do not simplify their speech, nor use repairs or expansions since they consider the child as needing to be "hardened" and believe that "one cannot guess what another thinks" (Ochs and Schieffelin, 1984:304). These features cannot be considered as having a language-facilitating function. Similar findings have been described for lower-middle class American families (Hart and Risley, 1995). If middle-class Western caregivers are described as trying to fit to their children's needs and adapt their speech by using simplifications or making expansions and repairs of the children's utterances, that "negative evidence" is not always explicit or even intentional on their part. It is therefore important to acknowledge the presence in adult–child conversations of embedded repairs,

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