Phrasing and intonation patterns in early Catalan and Spanish multi-word speech.

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Recent studies on prosodic development have shown that children can produce some adult-like nuclear pitch contours from the onset of speech (Frota & Vigário, 2008 for European Portuguese; Prieto & Vanrell 2007; Prieto, Estrella, Thorson & Vanrell, 2010 for Catalan and Spanish). Yet, very few studies analyzed the intonational realization of prosodic phrasing through the use of prenuclear pitch accents and intermediate boundary tones. Recent studies on the prosody of two-word utterances have shown that, before making two-word combinations, children master the production of a diversity of language-specific pitch accents and boundary tones (Vanrell, Prieto, Astruc, Payne & Post, 2010). Yet, a study of Italian children showed that during the production of the first multi-word utterances, the capacity to link two or more words in a single intonational contour is not developed (D’Odorico, Laura & Carubbi, Stefania, 2003). We believe that it is necessary to analyze the overall intonational pattern of the production of two-word combinations to reach a more precise view of the development of prosody.

The goal of the current paper is to analyze the intonational production of early multi-word utterances, reporting quantitative evidence from statements produced by Catalan and Spanish infants at the onset of multi-word speech. The database for this investigation is a CHILDES corpus consisting of the spontaneous speech of four Catalan (Gisel.la, Guillem, Laura and Pep) and two Spanish children (Irene and María) between 0;11 and 2;4 (from the Serra-Solé and the Llinàs-Ojea & López-Ornat corpora). Statements, from the beginning of the multi-word production until the child is 2;4, will be segmented and prosodically transcribed, in Cat_ToBI and Sp_ToBI (Prieto et al., 2009 and Estebas-Vilaplana & Prieto, 2010) using Praat (Boersma & Weenink, 2005) and Phon (Rose et al, 2006). Attention will be focused on the production of prenuclear pitch accents and boundary tones. MLU and vocabulary size measures will be taken into account.

Are Catalan and Spanish children able to produce appropriate and prenuclear intonational patterns in their early multiword utterances? Qualitative analyses of the data seem to demonstrate that children master the production of the prenuclear region of the contour as soon as they start producing two-word utterances. The following figure shows the first production of a two-word utterance by a Spanish-learning child, Irene, at 1;02.05. This utterance is an adult-like intonational contour. The rising pitch accent of the prenuclear contour (L+>H*) is produced in a posttonic position. Yet, late peaks are also present in adult speech. Hence, this evidence shows that children can master the f0 alignment of prenuclear pitch accents of multi-word utterances very early.
Figure 1. Waveform display, spectogram, f0 contour, orthographic transcription and prosodic labelling of the utterance “otro tonto” (“another silly boy”).

REFERENCES


