SEGMENTAL DETAIL IN CHILDREN’S EARLY LEXICAL REPRESENTATIONS

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ABSTRACT
Analyses of Dutch children’s (1:0 – 2:11) production data have shown that both place and voice features show asymmetrical behavior in early productions. This study aimed to test whether these asymmetries also emerge in perception. Results show that children are able to detect mispronunciations of place and voice features in certain contexts, but not all. The same asymmetries attested in production are also found in perception. These findings suggest a tight link between perception and production in acquisition.

INTRODUCTION
• Production data suggests underspecified early lexical representations [1, 2]
• Perception data from Swingley & Aslin [3] (a.o.) seem to indicate detailed representations: children are able to detect small mispronunciations of well known words.
• However, different types of mispronunciations were not tested in a systematic way. We used the same procedure as in [3], keeping factors clearly balanced. We tested two aspects: voice and place.

METHOD
SUBJECTS
• Forty-eight 24 month-old Dutch-learning children

PROCEDURE
• Split-screen Preferential Looking Paradigm

STIMULI
• Five Dutch cat pictures:
  - "Kijk naar de poes! Mooi he?
  (Look at the cat! Do you like it?)"

The initial stop of the target word (e.g. ‘poes’) was either:
1. pronounced correctly (CP condition)
2. mispronounced with a change of the voice feature (MPvoice condition) (“Kijk naar de boes!”)
3. mispronounced with a change of the place feature (MPplace condition) (“Kijk naar de toes!”)

The initial stop of the target word was changed in different conditions as follows:
- for place: [p], [b], [t], [d]
- for voice: [p], [b], [t], [d]

RESULTS
There were four different tests; subjects were presented with target words starting with either /p/, /b/, /t/, or /d/.

DISCUSSION
• Different mispronunciations are not equal: not all feature changes yield equally strong effects (See also [4]).
• Voice: The Dutch voicing contrast is between unaspirated voiceless and prevoiced voice stops. The realization of voiceless stops, but not of voiceless stops, can sometimes vary in spoken Dutch [5]. If children know this, it can cause them to ignore voiceless mispronunciations of voiced stops.
• Production data from Dutch children show that Dutch voiceless stops are acquired before voiced stops [2]. This contrast is acquired late (not yet by 2:6). The perception data show this same asymmetry.
• Place: Research on child language production studies has argued that Dutch children underspecify coronal place of articulation in early lexical representations [1]. This predicts stronger effects for mispronunciations of place on labials then on coronals.
• This asymmetry is also reflected in confusion matrices for Dutch, [8] shows that coronals are more often perceived as labials, then the other way around.

CONCLUSIONS
• Subjects were able to detect mispronunciations of features in well-known words - but not of all changed features in all MP conditions.
• The attested asymmetries between labials and coronals and between voice and voiceless stops cannot be accounted for by assuming that children merely perceive changes in the phonetic realizations of the target words.
• These data suggest a tight link between perception and production.

REFERENCES

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