

A Brief Analysis of Caretaker Talk

Xiaoting Ye

Guangdong Polytechnic Normal University, Guangzhou, China

Abstract: *This paper summarizes and analyzes the origins of caretaker talk, how caretaker talk with unique linguistic features is defined, and the contributions that caretaker talk makes to children's early language acquisition. The results suggest that caretaker talk can make children adapt to their cognitive ability and mental state, which is helpful for children's understanding and generation of language.*

Keywords: Caretaker Talk, Language Acquisition.

1. Introduction

Whether the caretaker talk is useful in or facilitates the development of the acquisition of children or not has always been a controversial issue in the field of psycholinguistic as it performs as the primary input in the early stage of the acquisition of children. This essay will make a summary and analysis with the respect of the origin of infant-directed speech, how to define the caretaker talk with its distinctive linguistics characteristics and what contributions the caretaker talk made in the early stage of the acquisition of children.

2. The Origin of Child-Directed Speech

Infant-directed speech (IDS henceforth) is a simple speech dominated by infants' primary caregivers (usually refers to mothers). The earliest research on IDS can be traced back to the late 1960s. The study of IDS is closely related to the innateness hypothesis and some arguments of nativism. In the late 1960s, Chomsky, a great linguist, Chomsky put forward a hypothesis about how the children acquire language, in that hypothesis, he regarded language as somehow special knowledge, and every human being has a specific machine which called 'language acquisition device' (LAD henceforth) for acquiring this kind of special knowledge. The faculty includes a series of universal rules which can make the children acquire a perfect grammar under the exposure of 'degenerate' input from the social environment (Lust 2006: 110). However, Chomsky not only highly praised the role for universal grammar and LAD, but he also argued that there were so many 'degenerate sentences' such as ungrammatical sentences, incomplete sentences and some of those even may be accompanied by some slips of the tongue that existed in IDS (Chomsky 1965), which may influence infants' acquisition of language. So, Chomsky thought that the function of IDS could be neglected for positive evidence strongly needed by the acquisition of children (Lust 2006).

However, the argumentation of Chomsky and McNeil were immediately opposed by Labov. Labov (1970: 30-87) pointed out that 75% of the sentences in people's daily conversations are normative and grammatical through analyzing of the structure of sentences in adult-directed speech, and he also found out that only less than 2% of the sentences were ungrammatical which including the stuttering sentences or the sentences with slips of the tongue.

Furthermore, Infant-directed speech is generally regarded as a

simplified adult-directed speech, although the speech with many special features forms caregiver (mainly mothers) (Snow 1976). It is a unique speech to communicate with children who aged below three years old. Most of the language forms that children output before the age of one is simple mood words without any sentential meanings (Matthew 2017). After two or three years, their language system will quickly become complicated and gradually similar to the grammatical system of adults. During this period, infant-directed speech is the leading environmental language input and driving force of the rapid development of children's language (Jusczyk 1997). In the early 1960s, the infant-directed speech attracted the full attention of many linguists. However, because Chomsky put forward that children's language acquisition is innate, the role of environment in language learning is not further studied. In the 1970s, psycholinguists such as Snow (1976: 549-565) and Sachs (1976: 180-193) conducted a large number of comparative studies on the speech between infant-directed speech and adult-directed speech. Snow (1972) believed that infant-directed speech was short in length and only used limited grammatical types. For example, infant-directed speech seldom uses compound sentences or embedded sentences, and most of them are simple sentences and instructional sentences, which have high redundancy (Matthew 2017). Sachs (1976) believed that mothers would intentionally adjust their pronunciation, intonation, and rhythm in order to make their children understand their language better, which can also be called as 'Fine-tuning theory' (Snow 1995: 180-193). From the end of the 20th century to the beginning of the 21st century, the cognitive linguistics scholars represented by Goldberg and Jackendoff put forward that the development of human language is highly related to the development of its communicative and cognitive abilities.

To sum up, the innateness hypothesis by Chomsky and many loyalty scholars of nativism, they largely underestimated the function of input within the acquisition of children for language. Therefore, it has been criticized by many researchers like Labov. Since the 1970s, with the rise of cognitive theory, people have re-recognized the relationship between language environment and language acquisition, or between the nurture and nature. Since then, more and more researchers have reviewed the infant-directed speech from the perspective of language acquisition and made a more in-depth analysis of the infant-directed speech.

3. The Definition of the Caretaker Talk

The earliest study of infant-directed speech is to comparing what mothers say to their baby and to other adults, the latter speech that can be called as adult-directed speech (Matthew 2017: 91), and then describe or make a summary of the characteristics of IDS to determine whether caretaker talk exists or not. Ferguson (1977: 209-235) mentioned that there are some special ways of communication between adults and infants in almost all speech communities. To be specific, there are more or less systematic differences between these ways of the conversation between IDS and adult-directed speech. Lots of studies have found that the mothers generally tend to use short, simple sentences, simple and limited vocabulary or simple noun phrases to talk to their baby, and the intonation and pitch they used may be exaggerated and high (Ringler 1978). Besides, parents will often repeat their words to kids or imitate the children's words. (Snow 1972).

The term 'Motherese' was put forward by Rod Ellis (1986) in *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*. In that book, he referred that when mothers talked to their children, they usually would simplify their language and tried to continue the dialogue as long as possible. To be more specific, this kind of discourse and special features in the language of the speech mothers used to their kids are called 'motherese,' which Rod thought it could help children learn the language. Moreover, Rod (1994) made a similar discussion about 'motherese' in another book named *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*, in that book, instead of using the term 'motherese,' he used the term 'caretaker speech' to described these special language features. Also, the 'caretaker speech' is used in most related studies at present. However, although some researchers may put forward different views on this issue as well, like some scholars like Lukens prefer to use the term 'baby talk' (Matthew 2017, cited in Lukens 1894), the author of this essay advocate using the term 'caretaker talk.'

Firstly, we should first make it clear that the speaker's target audience of the speech is an infant. Besides, it is evident that the speakers may use a particular way to talk like it is a conventional rule while in the conversation of an infant. However, when some speakers talk to their intimate friends or their lovely pets in a happy or humorous circumstance, sometimes the language they use will show the same characteristics as the language they use to talk to infants (Ferguson 1977). According to the research purpose of infant-directed speech, the speech between friends or pets cannot be accounted into the scope of infant-directed speech because of the different target audience. So, the term 'infant-directed speech' cannot make a clear definition. Secondly, it is straightforward to make confusion if we use the term 'baby-talk register.' which may make many ambiguous meanings such as what the baby says or what it says to the baby according to its literal meaning.

Moreover, the root of the term 'Motherese' (Matthew 2017, cited in Newport 1975) is the 'mother,' which will be prone to be interpreted as 'mother's language' by its literal meaning as well. Although this term indicates the influence of mothers on children's language acquisition, it will lead people to think that the features of the child-directed speech are the language features only used by mothers of the speech when communicating with their children. Rod has said that while adults or older children talk to younger children, they usually

will modify the speech with special linguistics features. These language features are not only very formal, such as using higher pitches or simple noun phrases, but also interactive (Matthew 2017: 88-89). In Rod's opinion, it can be concluded that not only mothers but also other adults like fathers, grandparents or even elder children will use infant-directed speech when communicating with infants or younger children.

However, the term 'motherese' largely excludes other groups of speakers, thus narrowing the scope of speakers of infant-directed speech; likewise, infant-directed speech (Matthew 2017, cited in Warren-Leubecker & Bohannon 1984) is easy to be understood as 'any speech spoken to infant or children', which expands the scope of research on children-oriented speech. Therefore, the author of this essay thinks the term 'Caretaker talk' (Matthew 2017, cited in Schachter, Forsha, Stemp, Brotman & Ganger 1976) it is more appropriate to use. So, the author will use the term 'Caretaker Talk' henceforth.

4. The Characteristics of Caretaker Talk

Caretakers will modify their way of communication when talking to infants, and many distinctive linguistics traits will be used by caretakers subconsciously, naturally and automatically (Matthew 2017, cited in Fernald 1989). The features of caretaker talk can be divided into three main linguistics aspects. One is from the aspect of phonology. The most noticeable feature of caretaker talk is its phonological features, such as variable intonations, relatively high pitches, excessive stress and so on (Matthew 2017, cited in Fernald 1992). As referred before, it seems that caretakers prefer to use slower speed speech with an exaggerative and clear intonation when they want to emphasize something to infant (Matthew 2017, cited in Garnica 1977; Stem, Spieker, Barnett & McKain 1983; Fernald, Taeschner, Dunn, Papousek, Deboysson-Bardies & Fukui 1989; Werker & McLeod 1989) or to use pretty high pitch to catch babies' attention so that infants can engage in the conversation with a positive emotion (Matthew 2017, cited in Smith & Trainor 2008). However, caretakers tend to use short and simple sentences with children, and the length and complexity of those sentences tend to increase as the children grow more linguistically mature (Snow 1972). There is ample evidence to suggest that caretaker talk is functionally related to the child's conceptual and vocabulary development (Matthew 2017), but contradictory evidence has emerged in the area of caretaker talk effects on syntactic development.

The second part is the vocabulary; caretakers tend to choose simple and commonly understood words instead of big and tough words with abstract concepts like 'water, beautiful and wisdom' in the conversation of infants. Besides, the main topics of the caretaker talk are composed by kin, regions of the physical body or some necessities of life like food (Ferguson 1977). In syntax, there are some typical types of sentences like 'dependent clauses, relative clauses, sentential complements and negations in the caretaker talk.' (Matthew 2017: 124) What is more, it seems that caretaker prefers to use incomplete and rather simple sentences which will be parted by longer pauses within a slower speed speaking and the sentences of the caretaker talk include lots of repeated words

by comparing to adult-directed speech (Matthew 2017: 88-89).

5. The Contributions of Caretaker Talk

Because infants have limited perception ability, they do not respond positively to all the things around them, but selectively pay attention to things with apparent features (Matthew 2017). The distinctive characteristics of high pitch and stress in the caretaker talk are more attractive to infants. For example, Claudia and some other scholars did an experiment based on the method of Lewkowicz and Pons' (2013) in 2014. In that experiment, she intended to test whether fluent caretaker talk affected an infant's perception of language or not. Therefore, she set up two experiments. One group used adult-directed speech as input, and the other group used caretaker talk as input. Through these two experiments, it was found that caretaker talk can attract infants' attention more and promote their perception of the speech compared with adult-directed speech. However, the results showed that the infants tended to listen to caretaker talk when compared with the adult-directed language, and they would perform better when being exposed to the caretaker talk environment.

Moreover, caretaker talk plays a vital role in encouraging children's language behavior in the process of communication between parents and children especially in the initial stage of the acquisition of infant. Snow found that one of the main purposes of mothers' interaction with babies was to stimulate the babies to talk with themselves (Snow 1977). In the pre-childhood language stage, around seven months, newborns can segment words from a fluent speech stream (Jusczyk 1997). Thus, infants can participate in the dialogue through their eyes and other behaviors in the process of interaction with their parents, although most of the children cannot understand and produce language very well that time. Speech stimulations and communication from parents can arouse children's attention and stimulate their behaviour. To a certain extent, caretaker talk is useful to the development of children's perceptual-motor system and children's language acquisition. There was a case study from the corpus of Soderstrom.

Case (Soderstrom corpus).

'Target child 0;6.29'

'Mother: you wanna have some foodies?'

'Child: ubuh(babbling)'

'Mother: nguh(babbling)'

'Mother: let's see.'

'Mother: how (a) bout?'

'Mother: Oh, that looks yum.'

In that case, the target infant's age was six months and 29 days, and it was still in the pre-linguistic stage. In the conversation, the mother communicated with the baby with the features of caretaker talk in English. For example, 'foodies' and 'yum' these two simple words are the common words in that conversation. Mothers encouraged their baby to join the talking by asking and evaluating baby's expected response. In responding to the mother's inquiry, the target infant responded with the 'ubuh.' Then the mother then responded with the same non-verbal vocal response 'yum' It can be seen that caretaker talk plays an important role in stimulating an infant's

participation in that conversation.

Some researchers, like Gwen Dewar (2015), believed that caretaker talk was an essential part of the emotional dependence relation between parents and their baby, which could help infants learn a language. Other researchers also had confirmed that using basic caretaker talk can help babies distinguish words faster.

Also, there are many uses and benefits of caretaker talk, not only it has a tremendous positive impact on the early development of the language of infants but also helps to establish close ties between infants and their caretakers. Besides, the process of the acquisition and development of an infant's pronunciation and language ability starts with the interaction between infants and caretakers (Matthew 2017).

Infants are probably easier to parse the sentences or find the border between words in sentences if using caretaker talk as an input. (Thiessen 2005)

However, there are some opposition sounds of caretaker talks emerged. Some scholars do not believe that the caretaker talk is the inevitable result of human evolution, because they can still find out that some ethnic groups' caretakers do not use the caretaker talk toward children in the world (Lust 2006). Moreover, in some experiments, researchers have found that babies' ability to language acquisition is powerful, even if caretakers do not speak to their children with caretaker talk, children still can segment similar syllables in the fluent speech stream (Rowland 2014). Consequently, the opposition denies the positive link between caretaker talk and the acquisition of children's language as identified by the supporters (Hoff 2014).

Considering the particularity of the experimental population, the author of this essay thinks that no matter what views of the opposition or the supporters are on the function of caretaker talk, both groups have two apparent shortcomings. First, there were not sufficient samples for their experiments to get a completely powerful and solid result to demonstrate their arguments without any doubts; secondly, the researchers unable to control all the irrelevant factors in which may affect the results while in the experiment, especially for whom adopted observational methods.

6. Conclusions

All in all, the Interactive function of caretaker talk is helpful to infants' language acquisition development (Gwen 2015). In the process of the acquisition of children, most parents often use caretaker talk to communicate with their baby. Because of its characteristics, caretaker talk can make children adapt to their cognitive ability and mental state, which is helpful for children's understanding and generation of language. Although caretaker talk cannot be a causal reason to explain the acquisition of children, it can be said that caretaker talk plays an important role in stimulating children's speech behaviour and accelerating the process of children's language acquisition. Therefore, in the early stage of children's language acquisition, caretakers probably can use caretaker talk to communicate with children as much as possible in order to facilitate children's language development.

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