
A first cross-linguistic foray into children's feedback signals

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Feedback occupies a central position in the field of language acquisition, where it is understood to facilitate language learning. One strand of literature has focused on how adult language users, particularly mothers, orient to and “correct” problems in the speech of children (Clark 2020). But feedback signals have many other functions. Adult listeners are understood to be active participants in conversation who co-construct talk through their response tokens (Gardner 2001). How children learn to engage in feedback-giving practices, thereby signalling their active participation, is an open question for developmental pragmatics.

As an inroad into this topic, this paper investigates children's use of multimodal feedback signals in video corpora representing three very different languages and lingua-cultures: Datooga (Tanzania); Qaqet (Papua New Guinea); and English (UK, CHILDES talkbank). We know from studies of adult language that feedback signalling comprehension might come in the form of verbal continuers (‘mm’), agreement tokens (‘yes’), nods, gestures, eye gaze, body posture, facial expression, laughter, or even blinks (Hömke et al 2017), while feedback that signals trouble can include frowns, head movements, gaze shifts, as well as verbal repair initiators (see Kendrick 2015 for English). Which of these formats do children make use of, and for what purposes? And how do they compare to nonspeaking adult addressees in interaction?

Across our sample, we observe that young children have a relatively high tolerance for non-progressivity and break-downs in communication. Young children may make fewer explicit attempts to achieve shared understanding or to indicate that they are monitoring their interlocutor's speech. Nevertheless, children in all the corpora do provide feedback: they help with word searches, use minimal repair initiators as well as longer repair formats, they employ continuers, and they sometimes orient to other children's non-target-like forms, thus providing metalinguistic feedback. Based on our preliminary survey, we identify aspects of children's feedback signals to focus on in future work.

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