

Contrastive Focus Marking in Brazilian Children under Typical and Atypical Phonological Development

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Abstract : Some aspects of prosody acquisition remain still unclear, especially regarding atypical speech development processes. This work deals with prosody acquisition and its implications for clinical purposes. Therefore, we analyze speech samples produced by adult speakers, children in typical language development, and children with phonological disorders. Phonological disorder comprises deviating manifestations characterized by inconsistencies in the phonological representation of a linguistic system under acquisition. The clinical assessment is performed mostly based on contrasts whose manifestations occur in the segmental level of a phonological system. Prosodic organization of spoken utterances is not included in the standard assessment. However, assuming that prosody is part of the phonological system, it was hypothesized that children with Phonological Disorders could present inconsistencies that also occur at a prosodic level. Based on this hypothesis, the paper aims to analyze contrastive focus marking in the speech of children with Phonological Disorders in comparison with the speech of children under Typical Language Development and adults. The participants of all groups were native speakers of Brazilian Portuguese. The investigation was designed in such a way as to identify differences and similarities among the groups that could be interpreted as clues of normal or deviant processes of prosody acquisition. Contrastive focus in Brazilian Portuguese is marked by increasing duration, f0, and intensity on the focused element as well as by a particular type of pitch accent (L*+H). Thirty-nine subjects participated, thirteen from each group. Acoustic analysis was performed, considering duration, intensity, and intonation as parameters. Children with PD were recruited in sessions from a service provided by Speech-Language Pathology Therapy; children in TD, paired in age and sex with the first group, were recruited in a regular school; and 20-24 years old adults were recruited from a University class. In a game prepared to elicit focused sentences, all of them produced the sentence "Girls love red dress," marking focus on different syntactic positions: subject, verb, and object. Results showed that adults, children in typical language development, and children with Phonological Disorders marked contrastive focus differently: typical children used all parameters like adults do; however, in comparison with them, they exaggerated duration and, in the opposite direction, they did not increase f0 in a sufficient magnitude as adults; children with Phonological Disorder presented inconsistencies in duration, not increasing it in some syntactic positions, and also in intonation, not producing the representative pitch accent of contrastive focus. The results suggest prosody is also affected by phonological disorder and give clues of developmental processes of prosody acquisition.

Keywords : Brazilian Portuguese, contrastive focus, phonological disorder, prosody acquisition

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