Recasts, Clarifications, and Other Indirect Negative Evidence

The definition of negative evidence
From the moment of their birth, children live in a human environment that uses language. This environment provides the child with samples of correct language form and usage, known as positive evidence, but also with samples of incorrect form and usage, known as negative evidence. These positive or negative samples may involve phonology, morphology, syntax, and pragmatics. Positive evidence arises from child-directed speech or overheard speech (production directed at someone else, speakers heard on television, on the radio, etc.). Negative evidence appears in situations where the child produces an erroneous utterance that is immediately corrected by the adult. These corrections take place within daily conversation (at play, at bedtime, at meals, on walks, etc.) and not in the framework of “language lessons”. Explicit corrections expressed in the form of negative evidence such as “we don’t say ‘go’, we say ‘went’” are extremely rare and typically carry the consequence of disrupting the child-adult conversation. Adults correct children’s production in many different ways that can be considered indirect negative evidence, including recasts, partial repetitions, expansions, or requests for clarification. This indirect negative evidence maintains the thematic continuity of the conversation while at the same time providing a correction to the child’s utterance.

Examples of negative evidence
The following examples are provided by M.M. Chouinard and E.V. Clark, and E.V. Clark and J. Bernicot, from English-speaking children or French-speaking children.

(1) Recast with phonological correction
Elodie B (2;3): Du lli dedans
“Some rice inside”
Mother: Oui y’a du riz dedans
“Yes there’s rice inside”
By correcting the pronunciation of a word, the mother tells the child that she shares the child’s description of the world.

(2) Recast with syntactic correction
Camille (2;4): Font dodo/
“Are sleeping”
Mother: Ils font dodo / ouais / ben oui.
“They’re sleeping / yeah / yes indeed.”
Camille: Chut! [child raises her finger to her lips]
“Shh!”
By adding the necessary personal pronoun that was missing, the mother indicates to the child that she shares the child’s description of the world.

(3) Recast with syntactic correction
Abe (2;5.10): I want butter mine
Father: Ok give it here and I’ll put butter on it
Abe: I need butter on it
By replacing “mine” with the correct form “on it”, the father indicates to the child that he is going to carry out the child’s request.

(4) Recast with syntactic and lexical correction
Philippe (2;1.26): une petit de lait
“a little of milk”
**Mother: une petite boîte de lait**
“a little carton of milk”
Philippe: petite boîte de lait
“a little carton of milk”
By making the adjective “little” feminine (petit/petite) and by adding the word “carton”, the mother indicates to the child that she shares the child’s description of the world.

(5) Request for clarification
Abe (2;6.4): Milk. Milk.
**Father: You want milk?**
Abe: Uh-huh.
Father: Ok. Just a second and I’ll get you some.
By adding a verb and an interrogative intonation to the word “milk”, the father makes the child clarify his intention, unspecified at the outset.

(6) Request for clarification
Audric (3;5): J’aimais pas les enfants avec leurs masques.
“I didn’t like the children with the masks.”
**Mother: Ah! C’est les masques qui te f’saient peur?**
‘Ah! It’s the masks that scared you?’
By reusing the word “mask” in an utterance with an interrogative intonation, the mother attempts to clarify the child’s expression of an intention or a vague feeling.

The reality of the existence of negative evidence
Interest in negative evidence dates back to the early 1980s. At that time, researchers considered that either negative evidence didn’t exist or, if it did, it did not facilitate the production of grammatically correct utterances in children. This point of view was contradicted by a consistent set of research showing that adults correct the ill-formed utterances of children and that children are sensitive to adults’ responses to their erroneous utterances. Seventy percent of recasts or expansions by adults are made in response to a child’s error. Children imitate the recasts and expansions of their parents more than other utterances. The corrective adult input, over the long term, improves the grammatical level of children’s utterances, especially when negative evidence is provided. Adults have a greater tendency to recast the incorrect—rather than the correct—utterances of children according to a study of children between the ages of 2 and 4 who speak English or French. The percentage of recasts is the same in terms of error type: phonological, morphological, lexical, or syntactic. Children take these recasts into account by simply repeating them or by adding information to them, by ratifying them explicitly, or by rejecting them. In a study of French-speaking children aged 2;3 and 3;6, the adult’s recasts also came in response to pragmatic errors involving conversational rules that make the child’s intention unclear. By producing erroneous utterances, the children not only make language structure errors, they also violate the maxims of H.P. Grice. These maxims help to ensure that the Principle of Cooperation is respected in conversation and, therefore, that the intentions of each speaker are understood by
the other speaker. When children make errors of omission by leaving out a word or grammatical morpheme, they violate the maxim of quantity, “say as much as necessary”, as in (2). In the utterance of a child that omits the agent, it is impossible to determine “who is sleeping”. The mother’s repetition clarifies this (“they”). When the child makes an error by using the wrong word or morpheme to convey meaning, the child violates the maxim of manner, “be clear”, as in (6). By repeating, the mother “translates” the child’s intentions: By saying “I didn’t like” the child was trying to mean “I was scared”.

**The role of negative evidence in language acquisition**

Depending on the theory, the role played by negative evidence varies in the acquisition of oral language between ages 1 and 5.

Some researchers are of the opinion that negative evidence either does not exist or, if it does, does not facilitate language acquisition; they assume that grammar learning does not follow known rules and is therefore most likely the result of inborn programming.

For researchers that assume the existence of negative evidence, determining the process by which it facilitates language acquisition is crucial. The immediate contrast between a child’s ill-formed utterance and the adult’s recast signals that the child has made an error, shows the locus of the error, and presents the child the correct form. The child can compare the wrong and the right form of meaning the same thing, as in (1) lli/riz (rice) or (2) milk/you want milk ?. The child recognizes the adult’s expertise in expressing meaning using conventional forms. This process is illustrated in (2) and (5) when, in the third speaking turn, the child uses the adult’s correct form. The negative evidence helps to build common ground between the child and the adult, common ground which contains shared knowledge about language forms and conventions of use. The examples illustrate the importance of negative evidence in solidifying common ground at each step of the exchange. The adult offers information that is new to the child; the child takes it and, from that moment on, treats it as given information. This often results in the child repeating the information in question, in which case the exchange includes three speaking turns, cf. examples (3) and (4). The shift from “new” to “given” information with each speaking turn of an exchange adds continuity and consistency while the participants simultaneously increase their common ground. Negative evidence, integrated into the concepts of the Principle of Cooperation, helps to explain how the adult presents a child with a model of language form and usage. By means of the back-and-forth of interaction, children then take this model and thereby learn their mother tongue.

See Also: Child-directed speech (effects of variation in quality); Child-directed speech (features of); Conversational skills (development of); Lexical development; Morphological development; Parental responsiveness and scaffolding of language development; Phonological development; Pragmatic development; Semantic development; Social foundations of communicative development; Syntactic development: Construction grammar perspective; Syntactic development: Dependency grammar perspective; Syntactic development: Generative grammar perspective; Theory of mind and language development.

Further Readings


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