Children’s acquisition of the variable *like* as a discourse marker and discourse particle

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Recent research by D’Arcy (2005) shows that discourse *like* interacts with the syntactic structure of sentences in which it appears. Originally a clause-initial discourse marker (DM), D’Arcy shows that it developed, over apparent time, into a discourse particle able to attach to various structures inside the sentence. Comparatively little is known about how speakers acquire this variable. This study examines young children’s use of discourse *like* to better understand how it is incorporated into maturing grammars.

Data come from recorded conversations between pairs of children ages 3-6 and 10. Comparison data from conversations between pairs of college-aged adults are drawn from a previously existing corpus. Girls as young as four used discourse *like*, but it was not observed in boys younger than six.

The distribution of *like* tokens across syntactic contexts varied with speakers’ age. Across all age groups, *like* appeared most frequently as a DM, adjoined to nominal phrases (NP) and adjoined to verbal phrases (VP). In adults’ and 10-year-olds’ speech the relative frequencies of these contexts reflect the order in which D’Arcy (2005) found that they emerged in apparent time: the DM was most common (adults: 42% of tokens / 10-year-olds: 33%), followed by NP (31% / 27%) and VP (21% / 13%). In contrast, the majority of *like* tokens produced by speakers ages 3-6 were attached to NP (65%), only 14% DMs, and 9% attached to VP.

There is evidence for relatively early acquisition of *like* as a discourse particle (at least by girls). However, young children may not have acquired the variable grammatical rules that generate the patterns of variation observed in mature speakers. Rather than mirroring adults’ speech, in which the DM is predominant, it appears that young children first acquire *like* primarily as a discourse particle attached to syntactic constituents smaller than the sentence.

Reference