

“Why? Just because!”

How parents influence the acquisition of causal connectives

Research into parental input has shown that parents influence the linguistic development of their child (Brown, 1973; Clark, 2002; Diessel, 2004). But how do they influence the acquisition process of causal connectives such as *because*? A previous study (Van Veen, Evers-Vermeul, Sanders, & Van den Bergh, 2009) showed that the amount of parental *because*-clauses is stable throughout the acquisition period, suggesting that parents do not adapt their use of *because* to the capacities of their child. This paper therefore investigated an alternative way for parents to stimulate their child’s causal connective use, namely, asking *why*-questions.

Parental language use often involves ‘audience design’ (Clark & Murphy, 1982) or ‘scaffolding’ (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976); parents adapt their speech to the cognitive and linguistic capacities of their child. At the same time, parents will try – consciously or not – to help their child’s linguistics development by encouraging the use of more complex words and structures. McCabe & Peterson (1997) showed that the acquisition of English *because* involves such ‘scaffolding’. They found that English parents often used *why*-questions to stimulate their child to use causal connectives: the number of *why*-questions increased in the months before the child started to use *because*-clauses. Also, elicited *because*-clauses preceded children’s spontaneous *because*-clauses. The current study investigated whether these findings hold for a larger corpus, and whether they apply to Dutch parent-child interactions.

In order to trace potential differences between Dutch and English parents in their use of scaffolding techniques, we analyzed the data of five English and ten Dutch children (age range 1;3-5;6) and their parents from the CHILDES-database (MacWhinney, 2000). We analyzed:

- the frequency and type of parental *why*- cq. *waarom*-questions
- the way children responded to these questions (correct, ‘wrong’, or not at all)
- the way parents reacted to their child’s response (repeat the answer, repeat or reformulate the question, answer the question themselves, move on, etc.)
- the use of causal connectives in the utterances of children and parents

Results show that parents indeed adjust the type of scaffold to the cognitive and linguistic abilities of their child. However, parents prefer to focus on scaffolding causal responses rather than connective use, thus asking *why/waarom*-questions is not a necessary condition for acquiring connectives.

Cross-linguistic differences between Dutch and English children and their parents’ scaffolding behavior were mainly related to connective use: Dutch *omdat* was acquired later than English *because*. This meant that, overall, Dutch children were slower in their development than English children, and this was consequently reflected in their parents’ scaffolding behavior: English parents withdrew their scaffolds and Dutch parents continued to scaffold.

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