Abstract:

Demonstrative words (‘this’ and ‘that’ in English) are among the first utterances of infants. In combination with deictic pointing, they function to establish joint attention [1]. However, very little is known about their acquisition [2]. We present two studies, on the spontaneous production of demonstratives, and on comprehension.

Demonstrative choice is mediated by the distance between object and speaker (i.e., ‘this’ for objects in the near space and ‘that’ for objects further away) but is also affected by other properties of the object such as object ownership [3]. The aim of our first study is to determine at which age children produce demonstratives in the same way as adults. Two experiments investigated the demonstrative choice in seven-year-old children, eleven-year-old children and adults. Participants had to refer to objects on a table using ‘this’ or ‘that’. Object distance and ownership was manipulated. Use of demonstratives to discriminate near and far locations was minimal in younger children and strongly increased with age. There was also an overall tendency to refer to owned objects using ‘this’.

Despite minimal distinctions in demonstrative use in seven-year-olds, even five-year-olds show adult-like comprehension. In an object search task [4], five-year-old children were able to find the object using verbal cues including ‘this’, ‘that’, ‘here’ and ‘there’. Ongoing research examines younger children’s demonstrative comprehension in relation to their theory of mind ability, as well as language and spatial skills. Preliminary data indicates that the acquisition age could be around the fourth year.

Our findings show that the development of the use of spatial demonstratives is strikingly slow: The first demonstrative words appear in the second year, comprehension is achieved at the age of four or five, and spontaneous adult-like production starts developing around the age of seven and continues beyond the age of eleven. Implications for the development of joint attention and theory of mind will be discussed.

References:

