

The Syntax Spurt and the Onset of Stuttering in Young Children: Evidence from a Japanese Child Who Temporarily Stuttered

Purpose: Bloodstein (2001, 2006) proposed a syntax-based hypothesis that incipient stuttering is closely related to the acquisition of syntax. It is well known that syntax develops rapidly around 2 years of age. This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as the syntax spurt. If there is a close relationship between the acquisition of syntax and the onset of stuttering, it is expected that the syntax spurt would be a critical factor in the onset of stuttering. However, there have not been many case studies which have examined the relationship between the syntax spurt and the onset of stuttering. The purpose of this study was to provide evidence for the close relationship between the syntax spurt and the onset of stuttering from a Japanese child who temporarily stuttered.

Method: The participant was a Japanese monolingual child. She had no problems in intelligence, language ability, communication skills, or psychological difficulties. She was selected as a typical child of our

longitudinal study of the acquisition of syntax. Her utterances in conversations with her mother and/or the first author were recorded with an IC-recorder once a week at her home. The participant was 1 year and six months old (henceforth, 1;6) at the beginning of this study. The recording time was two or three hours per session. On the day she turned 1;11 and two weeks, she began to stutter. Her mother and the first author did not find any environmental factors which affected the onset of her stuttering. Her stuttering persisted until she was 2;11, namely, for about one year.

Results: She was in the two-word stage of language development from the age of 1;6 to 1;9. For example, on a particular day, when she was 1;9 and one week, she produced only one type of two-word utterance ('Noun+ Noun') , without any verb-predicate structure or grammatical case-marker. In contrast, at 1;10, she produced utterances with more than three words (including those with two arguments and predicates), and those with grammatical case-markers. Moreover, when she was at the age of 1;11, sentences with two predicates were observed.

Discussion: Our results showed that the period when she began to stutter closely corresponded with the period when her syntax rapidly developed.

Thus we could say that the period of the syntax spurt is a critical factor in the onset of stuttering. It has been suggested that the acquisition of syntax affects the nature or system of sentence production, and as a result, speech disfluency and/or stuttering may occur (Wijnen, 1990; Ito, 1994; Bernstein Ratner, 1997; Rispoli, 2003). Ito (1994) proposed the hypothesis that a change in sentence production occurs between the period of the two-word and the multiple-word stage, and that these stages correspond with the period before and after the use of grammatical case-markers in Japanese. The results of this study thus provide further evidence for Ito (1994)'s hypothesis.

References

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