PEAR STORIES OF RUSSIAN PRESCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN: CHARACTERISTICS OF MULTIMODAL COMMUNICATION

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The issue that the authors address is found at the junction of two avenues of research. The first concerns a study of the oral mode of communication in comparison with the written mode; the second is a study of language acquisition. The general idea underpinning the authors’ work is the conjecture that, for babies, toddlers and preschool-aged children, it is more appropriate to explore the acquisition of discourse as a whole (i.e., multimodal communication, which includes gestures, facial expressions, prosody, pauses and discursive markers), rather than the acquisition of language (Holie & Adger 1998; McNeill 2005; Fais et al. 2012).

The procedure of the research has been based on a “pear film” experimental line. “The Pear Film” is a six-minute movie made by Wallace Chafe in 1975 in order to explore how people of different languages and cultures conceptualize the same material. This movie has yielded a rich research tradition of so-called “pear stories” (Chafe 1980; Orero 2008; Matzur. Mickievicz 2012; Vilaró 2012; Chelliah 2013). Over recent years, “The Pear Film” has been also exploited for the purpose of analysing multimodal communication (Kibrik et al. 2015).

The experimental database of this research comprises 76 “pear stories” recorded in Moscow schools and kindergartens (50 of which were retold by children aged five to seven years, while the remaining 26 were retold by 15 to 17-year-old adolescents). The authors focus on three characteristics of the discourse: a logical structure and a coherence of the narrative; discourse words and pauses; and gestures and spontaneous movements without a communicative meaning. A few notable differences between the two target age groups were discovered. Firstly, in the retellings by the younger group, a narrative mostly breaks up into single episodes, with the narrators failing to represent a framework for the whole film; secondly, the ratios “total number of spontaneous movements/total number of gestures” and “total time of pauses/time length of narrative” are both much higher for the younger group than for the adolescent one; thirdly, the ratio “total number of discourse words/total number of words in the narrative” is higher for the adolescent group than for the younger one. These results provide clear evidence to support the claim that various parts of the discourse are consistently acquired.

References


