Hebrew-speaking mothers’ use of ‘baby talk’

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In order to contribute to a discussion of ‘baby talk’ (BT) on the info-CHILDES network originated by Alan Rumsey, I have done the following small study of Hebrew-speaking mothers’ use of ‘baby talk’. Using a previously constructed corpus, the goal was to estimate the extent to which Hebrew-speaking mothers use a ‘baby-talk’ vocabulary, both the proportion of such types in their overall lexicon and as proportion of word tokens in their speech to young children.

The corpus consists of the speech of 48 Hebrew-speaking mothers of 10-28 months olds videotaped for 30 minutes in home observations of free dyadic interaction. The construction of the corpus is described in detail in Ninio (1992). For the present analysis the transcripts of 6 mothers of 10 months olds were used. These are the youngest children covered by the corpus, and the maternal speech addressed to them is the most likely to contain ‘baby talk’-type words. The corpus is already transcribed and utterances are classified for communicative intents, words are classified for form-class, and are identified as identical when discounting grammatical clitics such as the definite article *ha,* the conjunction *ve*, subordinators *she* and *kshe,* prepositions *be*, *le*, and *me*, and comparison marker *ke*.

The 6-strong maternal sample produced in a total of three hours of interaction a total of 4,302 tokens of words. These were the tokens of 705 different word types (ignoring clitics). There was a great deal of overlap between different mothers, and their data was pooled to represent the typical maternal talk addressed at 10-months olds.

To classify lexemes as BT, the following were included: euphemism for body parts or body functions (like the English *poop*); conventionalized noises made by animals (*miauw*) or machines (*tick-tock*); onomatopoeic naming of animals etc after the noises they make (e.g. using *miauw* for *cat*; actually this type did not occur in the corpus); and diminutives of object names (*birdie*). These are lexemes not usually used in adult-adult discourse and can be considered part of a special BT register.

The following type of utterances were not included: endearments (*honey*), pet names (*Johnny*), and interjections (*oy*), as they’re not specific to addressing young children and cannot be considered part of a special BT register.

The result are: there were 12 different BT-classified words in the mothers’ lexicon. That is 1.70% percent BT in the lexicon of 705 words, namely, the percent of word types is less than 2%.

The words are presented in Table 1, together with a translation to English and an explanation:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Hebrew | English | meaning | comment |
| aoh | aoh | injury | used as a noun as in “You got an injury?” |
| oha | oha | injury | used as a noun |
| awa | awa | injury | used as a noun |
| api | nosie | nose | diminutive |
| hau-hau-hau | hau-hau-hau | barking of dog | used only for the noise |
| moo-moo-moo | moo-moo-moo | noise cows make | used only for the noise |
| miauw | miauw | noise cats make | used only for the noise |
| pipi | pee | urine | noun |
| tzif-tzif-tzif | tzif-tzif-tzif | noise birds make | used only for the noise |
| kaki | kaki | stool | noun |
| tusik | bottom | bottom | noun |
| tuk-tuk | tuk-tuk | noise of clock | used only for the noise |

As for tokens, these BT items accounted for 25 maternal tokens, which is 0.58% of all maternal tokens out of the total of 4,302.

In summary, Hebrew-speaking mothers apparently use BT on a rather marginal scale, both as proportion of their lexicon and as tokens of their speech

It is possible of course to use a more inclusive definition for what are exemplars of BT than the definition employed in this study. Possible candidates are pet names and endearments, of which there were many exemplars in the corpus.

References

Ninio, A. (1992). The relation of children's single word utterances to single word utterances in the input. *Journal of Child Language*, *19*, 87-110.