

Edited by:
Jan Heegård
Peter Juel Henriksen

Speech in Action

Proceedings of the 1st SJUSK Conference on Contemporary Speech Habits

42

Copenhagen Studies in Language

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Introduction

In naturally spoken language vowels and consonants assimilate, consonants may become syllabic, segments, syllables and inflectional endings may be dropped, and separate words may be contracted to new phonetic and pragmatic units. These phenomena are regarded by many people as bad language, termed "sjusk" in Danish, and in the public opinion this is a sign of an unfortunate language development to be counteracted. Indistinct speech is not good and should be avoided.

One can, however, choose to explain reduction phenomena the other way round, as a sign of the fact that spoken language is constantly attuning itself to become functional. The reductions we observe are – from the perspectives of language use and language function – rational and they come into effect where speech is semantically and pragmatically redundant. From this perspective indistinct speech is set in a sympathetic light, as a sign of intelligence rather than self-destruction.

The symposium, SJUSK 2011, Nordic Symposium on Natural Speech, held at Copenhagen Business School, November 23-24 2011, had as its main topic natural speech habits in Danish and other Nordic languages. The papers at the symposium discussed issues on spoken language from perspectives such as language learning, phonological theory, information structure, language planning, contrastive linguistics and speech technology. This publication presents a selection of these papers and it is our hope that they may contribute to a broader understanding of conversational speech habits and the reduction phenomena of spoken language.

The articles by Ditte Boeg Thomsen, Jan Heegård, Anja Schüppert, Nanna Haug Hilton, Charlotte Gooskens & Vincent J. van Heuven, and Hans Basbøll, Laila Kjærbæk, Claus Lambertsen & Ditte Boeg Thomsen have also been published in a Danish version in *Danske Talesprog* 12, 2012.

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Phonetic reduction and morphosyntactic opacity: Challenges for preliterate children

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Abstract

In spoken Danish, matrix clauses with jeg tror ('I believe/think') follow a crosslinguistic pattern where matrix clauses indicating speaker belief are recurrently phonetically reduced to signal their background status. In such cases, speakers may diachronically stop recognizing the internal structure of the clauses which may then end up as unanalysed monomorphemic expressions. Research on English acquisition of matrix clauses with I think suggests that phonetic reduction in the ambient language conspires with deviant distribution to lead to morphosyntactic opacity for children. This paper presents an examination of all matrix clauses with jeg tror produced by 48 Danish children aged 1;9-6;7 in a 104-hour group-conversation corpus. Though the corpus counts at group level seem to confirm the suspicion that the youngest children do not recognize the morphemic structure of the matrix clause, analysis at the level of the individual invalidates this oft-repeated claim. Further, comparing children and adults reveals that the oldest preschoolers reduce the expression far less than adults do, indicating active segmentation and not blind copying of sound strings.

1. Introduction

Within usage-based linguistics, it is the tenet that concrete language use influences the language system. As evidence for this, a line of analyses of diachronic changes has been adduced, and these often involve an important interaction between phonetics and grammar. This is especially the case in situations where polymorphemic expressions are gradually reanalysed by a language community over historical time, and such diachronic reanalysis with pronunciation playing a special role is what Bybee (2006) describes as the development of autonomous expressions:

Autonomy refers to the fact that morphologically complex forms (or strings of words) of high frequency can lose their internal structure as they become autonomous from etymologically related forms (Bybee 2006: 715).

An uncontroversial example of this process is the development of *gonna* from *going to* (Bybee 2006 and below), and the Afrikaans adverb *glo* ('allegedly') is also often adduced as a monomorphemic expression which has diachronically detached itself from its source: the compositional matrix clause *glo ek* ('I believe') (e.g. Thompson & Mulac 1991). The independence of *glo* in relation to *glo ek* is manifest in its new deviant meaning ('I believe' > 'allegedly'), pronunciation (*ek* is lost) and distribution (> adverbial distribution). The grammaticalization literature teems with aspirations to demonstrate similar processes of reanalysis in other languages. For English it has been suggested that *I think* has also stopped behaving like a subject and a verb and – like *glo* – has been reanalysed as an adverbial unit. Again, evidence is sought in semantics, syntax and phonetics (Diessel & Tomasello 2001, Thompson 2002, Thompson & Mulac 1991).

This diachronically inspired interpretation of *I think* and other matrix clauses as adverbial entities has been exceedingly influential in child language research: It is widely held that English children's use of *I think* does not help them to acquire the complement-clause construction (as in *he thought it was an airplane*) because of the allegedly monomorphemic status of the expression (Diessel & Tomasello 2001)

However, in the analysis of English, neither the syntactic nor the semantic arguments for reanalysis are indisputable (Boeg Thomsen 2009), and the allusions to phonetic reduction in adult as well as child language remain suggestions, unsupported by pronunciation analyses. Therefore, it is difficult to judge whether *I think* really has been reanalysed as an autonomous expression, and if so, whether this reanalysis would have consequences for children's acquisition of the expression.

Danish matrix clauses with *jeg tror* or *tror jeg* ('I believe/think') resemble the English *I think*-clauses in having the same potentials of clause initial, medial and final position (and a couple of other syntactic special features, see Boye & Harder 2007). As for acquisition, Danish children's matrix clauses with *tro* manifest syntactic, semantic and pragmatic characteristics that both support and challenge treatment of *jeg tror/tror jeg* as