

Antonymy in Childhood: a corpus-based approach to acquisition

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Antonyms are pairs of words that express semantic opposition (*hate/love, short/tall, over/under, etc.*) and many studies have made use of corpora to shed light on how antonyms are learnt, stored and used (eg. Fellbaum 1995, Jones 2002). These studies update, and occasionally challenge, traditional research into antonymy (Lyons 1977, Cruse 1986) which has tended towards an intuitive analysis of the phenomenon.

Antonymy is widespread in adult language, with as many as one corpus sentence in 50 being found to contain both members of an antonymous pair (Jones 2002). Antonymy is also a familiar concept to children. For example, Kreezer & Dallenbach (1929) found that 90% of children aged 7;6 are familiar with the notion of lexical opposition, and those who are not familiar with it easily learn it. Still, little research has been undertaken to determine whether adults and children use antonyms in the same way. We don't know which 'opposites' are favoured by children, at what age they are learnt, and how they are used in context.

This paper uses corpora from CHILDES (Child Language Data Exchange System) to address how children make use of antonyms. The corpus consists of data from longitudinal studies of American English-speaking children recorded in family situations at regular intervals between two and five years of age. This data is suitable for antonym analysis, as shown by Murphy (1998). In that case, the corpus data demonstrated that the children used a wide range of antonyms, and were often leaders, rather than followers, in antonym use in conversation with adults.

In this paper we turn our attention to the discourse functions of antonyms in child speech. Jones (2002) demonstrated that antonyms in context could be categorised according to their discourse function (e.g. Negated Antonymy: *it's public money, not private*; or Coordinated Antonymy: *she couldn't confirm or deny the rumours*). But this classificatory system was based on a corpus of written, adult language. Would these categories be appropriate to a corpus of spoken, children's language? And, if so, how would the distribution of data among these categories compare?

Because the CHILDES corpus contains child-directed language as well as child-produced language, it is possible to identify which antonymous pairs and functions are experienced most frequently by children and whether this affects the ways in which they use antonyms in their own speech. Other issues that this paper seeks to address include whether children creatively produce their own 'opposites' using frameworks understood by them to signal contrast, and whether adults use antonyms differently when speaking to children than when speaking to other adults.

Hypotheses of antonym acquisition (e.g. Charles and Miller 1989, Justeson and Katz 1991) have used evidence from adult written corpora to argue that 'opposites' are learnt through repeated exposure within particular frameworks. However, it is only by examining the antonymous output of children (and the antonymous input they receive) that an accurate assessment of this key childhood learning process can emerge.

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