

Exclusive focus marking in spontaneous production by Mandarin preschoolers: a multi-level analysis

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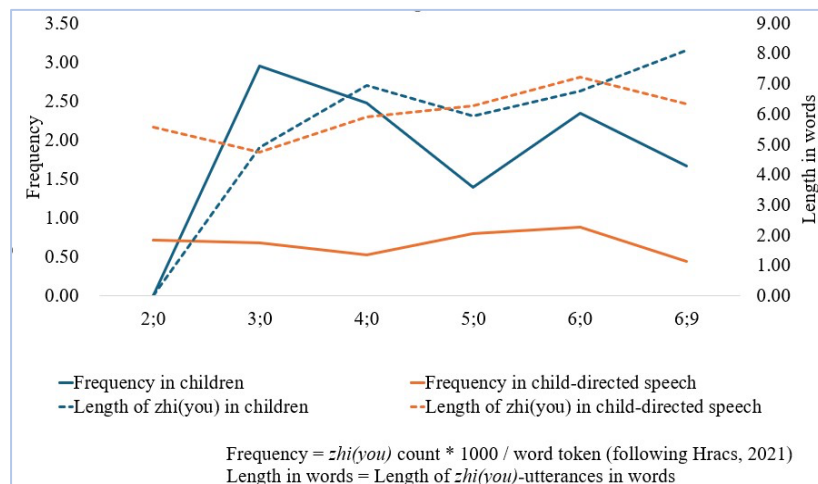
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Abstract

Structures requiring integration of multi-level linguistic knowledge can cause delays in language development (Rothman & Guijarro-Fuentes, 2012). *Zhi(you)* in Mandarin expresses exclusive focus by identifying the focus within its c-commanding domain and negating the alternatives to the focus, roughly an equivalent of *only* in English (e.g., wo ZHI mai shui_F “I-ONLY-buy water (but nothing else)”). To realize focus, Mandarin shows high dependence on word ordering, resorting to prosodic prominence as a compensatory device (Xu, 2004). Experimental studies have observed children’s non-adult-like understanding of the focus domain (Notley et al., 2009), and insensitivity to prosody stress as a cue to indicate focus (Gualmini et al., 2003). English-speaking children (0;3-9;7) produce *only*-focus rather infrequently (0.37%, Hracs 2021). However, how Mandarin children produce *only*-type focus in naturalistic settings is less clear.

This study extracted 188 *zhi(you)*-utterances from naturalistic child-adult interactions in Tong Corpus (1;7-3;4, Deng & Yip, 2018) and a cross-sectional Beijing Child Mandarin Corpus (n = 50, 3;0 to 6;9, Mai et al., in prep), and coded them for syntactic position and semantic association of the FP, syntactic environment of the foci and their pitch values relative to the rest of the utterance.

Results showed frequency of *zhi(you)*-utterances increases from 2;0 to 3;0. After 3;0, children consistently produce *zhi(you)*-utterance more frequently than the adults in the recording. Length of FP-utterance also



increases with age, suggesting growing complexity. Syntactic positioning of the FP is adult-like, with *zhi* and *zhiyou* preceding verbal and non-verbal elements respectively. The children displayed a strong tendency to associate the FP with the VP or part of it ($M = 77.25\%$), which is the default focus position in the language (Xu, 2004). Acoustic analysis shows that the children did not mark the intended foci with higher mean pitch, suggesting focus-prosody mapping has not been well established before 7;0. The differential developmental trajectories among different properties attached to the FP in this study correspond to the results in experimental studies and lead to further investigation on how adult-like knowledge of focus-marking becomes fully available in later development.