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## Prosody

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# THE PERIOD OF THE FIRST FIFTY WORDS

## PROSODY

Under prosody, we include melody of speech, stress and quantity

### Melody of speech

It is often noted in observations on the linguistic development of the child<sup>1</sup> that melody plays an important role in the process of language learning and is one of the earliest linguistic features acquired by a child. This fact, no doubt, made L. Kaczmarek<sup>2</sup> call the first developmental stage "okres melodii". Many findings of investigators in this field bear evidence of this phenomenon. Thus the experiment of W. Preyer<sup>3</sup> shows that it is the sentence melody, stress and timbre whose changes draw the attention of the child and awake his reaction, rather than the meaning of the word. This example and the similar experience of V. Příhoda<sup>4</sup> bears out Seemann's theory of the global perception of the phonic image of the child<sup>5</sup>. Even data illustrating the situation where the child perceives only the sentence melody while the meaning is irrelevant, are not rare. Let us mention here at least a few: the child has the same reaction to Tappolet's question asked with the same intonation once in German and once in French. Similarly Phanhauser's boy makes no difference between two terms pronounced in identical intonation, namely "okno" (*window*) and "oko" (*eye*)<sup>6</sup>. Ohnesorg's child shows the *window* to answer the two questions *Where is "světýlko"* (*light*) and *where is "bidýlko"* (*a little perch*)<sup>7</sup>.

In our observations the priority of melody in language acquisition is once again confirmed. The child reproduced easily the intonation contours given to him for imitation. Furthermore, the pitch variation performed a certain function from the very beginning. In the developmental stage where the vocabulary contained but a few words, most of them moreover mono- or disyllabic and very often homonymous, the pitches concentrated on various syllables were the main means of the child's expressing approval, protest, demand, astonishment, surprise, regret etc.

Roughly speaking, there were three pitch levels in the period of the first fifty

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. K. Ohnesorg, *Fonet. studie I*, p. 61 and *Fonet. studie II*, p. 69, where the author presents a detailed bibliography of the investigators who contributed to this question. — See also the study of R. Burling, *Language Development*, p. 56 and the monograph of R. Hirsch Weir, *Language in the Crib*, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. L. Kaczmarek, *Kształtowanie się mowy u dziecka*, Poznań 1953.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. W. Preyer, *Die Seele des Kindes*, p. 252.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. V. Příhoda, *Ontogeneze*, p. 136.

<sup>5</sup> See M. Seemann, *Poruchy*, p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. S. Phanhauser, *Rozwój*, p. 317.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. K. Ohnesorg, *Mluvní vývoj*, p. 53.

words: the *falling* one, the *rising* one and the third, higher than the others, which might be called *expressive*. While the former two performed the configurative function, the expressive pitch level communicated, in contrast with neutral pitch levels, emotional attitudes and reactions of the child toward the given reality.

In terms of contours, the most frequent is the rising one, which is easy to explain. The stimulus word or sentence is given to the child mostly with the rising intonation in questions and he repeats it with just that intonation even when he is not asking but answering. Not exceptional were, however, the sentences with falling contour while the contrastive function was expressed by means of pitch variations in the particles *ne* (*no*) or *ano* (*yes*), used postpositionally<sup>8</sup>. Such intonational glides were easily observable especially over long vowels and one-syllabic vowel-chains, but they occurred elsewhere as well.

Generalization of the degree of pitch level differences—in terms of sound frequencies or musical tones—which are phonemically significant, would have to be based on an experimental investigation of a representative number of Czech children. The result of such an analysis would no doubt throw light on the question of whether and to what degree the code of the language system affects the child's adoption of the intonational contours.

### Stress

The child investigated used stress in accordance with Standard Czech consistently and correctly from the very beginning of his linguistic development<sup>9</sup>. Only in emphatic speech, his stress was rather overloud, was placed on an additional syllable to the first bearing stress, and in urgent request even every syllable was stressed<sup>10</sup>. His receptivity for correct stressing was remarkable, especially in those words where some other than the first syllable is expected to be stressed, e.g. [kikili'ki:] *kykyryký*, [kɔkɔkɔ'da:k] *kokokodák*, [bum'ba:c] *bumbác*, [kutulu'lu:] *kutululú*. Even then his imitations were correct.

In connection with placing the stress on the last syllable a qualitative reduction was realized cf. [tətətə'da:k] *kokokodák*. In all other cases, however, the boy duly preserved the usage characteristic for Czech, namely, the identical quality of the vowels in stressed and unstressed syllables<sup>11</sup>.

To simplify the phonetic transcription we mark with ['] only those stressed syllables where the stress is placed on any syllable but the first. In all other cases the stress remains unmarked, being quite regular on the first syllable of the word. As the distinction between overloud and weak stress is not relevant we did not think it necessary to introduce special marks for them.

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<sup>8</sup> On the question of using the particles in postposition see most lately the monograph of Ružek Dravina, *Zur Sprachenentwicklung, I. Syntax*, p. 148.

<sup>9</sup> This is consistent with most of the findings on child languages. See e.g. K. Ohnesorg, *Fonet. studie I*, p. 68, *Fonet. studie II*, p. 67, R. Weir, *Language in the Crib*, p. 30, R. Burling, *Language Development*, p. 56, S. Phanhauser, *Rozwój*, p. 316 etc.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. B. Hála, *Úvod* p. 143 and B. Hála—M. Sovák, *Hlas, řeč, sluch*, p. 173.

<sup>11</sup> On the question of the quality of stressed and unstressed vowels see V. Mathesius, *La Structure Phonologique*, p. 69.

## Quantity

In view of the fact that quantity is phonemically significant in Czech, its early stabilization with the Czech-speaking child might be expected. Though the vocabulary of the first fifty words does contain both the short and long vowels, their quantity does not reach the given norm (where long vowels are roughly twice as long as corresponding short vowels). While the short vowels are more or less stable, the duration of the long ones varies from the semi-long to long and extra-long and none of these long variants is used contrastively to the corresponding short vowel. Another argument betraying the instability of the feature of length is shown in the fact that the geminated vowel occurs in the place of a proper long one.

In the fluctuation in length—as the representative of the marked feature—in the first developmental stage, the priority of the unmarked features, i.e. the shortness of the vowel, is illustrated.

The marked features, on the other hand, are learned by the child considerably later even if they are contained in his mother tongue. We shall deal with this question in detail in the chapter on vowels and the in conclusions of the present study.