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Frequency of verb use in young children who stutter

Stacy A. Wagovich^{a,*}, Nan Bernstein Ratner^b

^a *University of Missouri-Columbia, Columbia, MO, United States*

^b *University of Maryland at College Park, College Park, MD, United States*

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Abstract

Several recent studies have suggested that young children who stutter (CWS) tend to show depressed lexical performance relative to peers. Given the developmental literature as well as several studies of verb processing in individuals who stutter, verbs may pose a particular challenge for this group. The purpose of the present study was to examine verb use in CWS. In theory, if young CWS differ in their production of verbs, this finding would partially explain the findings of studies that probed conversational vocabulary skills more generally. Fifteen CWS and 15 children who do not stutter (CWNS) participated in a play-based conversational sample with a parent. Samples were analyzed for the total number of verbs, the number of different verbs, and the proportion of general all-purpose (GAP) verbs within the samples. CWS produced significantly fewer different verbs and total verbs than the CWNS. However, previously reported near-significant differences in utterance length between groups would appear to temper the robustness of this finding. The groups did not differ in the proportion of GAP verbs used, suggesting that the CWS did not over-rely on GAP verbs in conversational language production but rather used these verbs to the same extent as their peers.

Educational objectives: As a result of this activity, the participant will be able to: (1) relate the purpose and rationale for examining verb use in children who stutter (CWS); (2) summarize the procedures used to assess verb use and GAP verb use in the present study; (3) explain the findings of the present study; (4) relate findings to the extant literature on lexical diversity in CWS.

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* Corresponding author at: Department of Communication Science and Disorders, 303 Lewis Hall, University of Missouri-Columbia, Columbia, MO 65211, United States. Tel.: +1 573 882 4278; fax: +573 884 8686.

E-mail address: wagovichs@health.missouri.edu (S.A. Wagovich).

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1. Introduction

There is a longstanding literature that has examined whether the language abilities of children who stutter (CWS) are equivalent to those of children who do not stutter (CWNS; e.g., see Bernstein Ratner, 1997, for a review). The need to more closely examine lexical features of language produced by CWS is motivated by several recent findings suggesting depressed lexical performance of CWS relative to peers (Anderson & Conture, 2000; Bernstein Ratner & Silverman, 2000; Pellowski & Conture, 2005; Silverman & Bernstein Ratner, 2002; see Hall, 2004, for a discussion).

For example, Bernstein Ratner and Silverman (2000) assessed 15 CWS, each of whom was within 4 months post-onset of stuttering, and 15 normally fluent peers. A variety of language skills, including lexical skills, were examined through formal testing and language sample analysis. The results indicated that the CWS did not differ significantly from peers in their one-word receptive vocabulary scores, but they had significantly lower expressive vocabulary scores than the CWNS. Later inspection of the children's conversational vocabulary, using *vocd* (Malvern & Richards, 1997; Malvern, Richards, Chipere, & Duran, 2004), a measure of lexical diversity that takes into account differences in sample size across participants, revealed that the samples of CWS yielded significantly lower *vocd* values than those of CWNS (Silverman & Bernstein Ratner, 2002).

More recently, Pellowski and Conture (2005) administered a lexical priming task to children, aged 3;0–5;11 years. They found that, though CWNS benefited from a semantically related prime, demonstrating faster speech reaction times when a prime was presented, CWS did not display the same advantage under the prime condition. The authors interpreted these findings as suggestive of lexical encoding difficulties for CWS.

Young children who have *recently* begun to stutter are a particularly relevant population with respect to questions of the relationship between language and stuttering, because these children are in the early stages of their language development; the interaction between language learning and stuttering is most likely to be seen during this crucial time in development. Although there is a sizable and growing body of studies examining vocabulary performance of CWS on standardized measures (e.g., Anderson & Conture, 2000; Anderson, Pellowski, & Conture, 2005; Bernstein Ratner & Silverman, 2000; Murray & Reed, 1977; Ryan, 1992, 2001; Westby, 1974) and conversational language samples (e.g., Silverman & Bernstein Ratner, 2002; Watkins & Yairi, 1997; Watkins, Yairi, & Ambrose, 1999; Westby, 1974), to our knowledge, none have explored the underlying qualities of the words that comprise the lexicon of CWS.

1.1. Acquisition and use of verbs

Verbs, or action words, are a particularly interesting class for exploration of observed lexical differences. The developmental literature suggests that verbs are more difficult than nouns for young children developing language (e.g., Camarata & Leonard, 1986; Gentner, 1978, 1982; Gleitman, Cassidy, Nappa, Papafragou, & Trueswell, 2005; Lidz & Gleitman, 2004). For example, Camarata and Leonard (1986) examined young, typically developing children between the ages of 1;8 and 2;1 years in the production of emerging consonants within each child's phonological repertoire. For each child, 10 nonword objects and 10 nonword actions were designed such that their phonological makeup consisted of emerging sounds within the child's repertoire. Object and action nonwords were matched for consonant and syllable structure. Following eight sessions involving exposure to the nonwords, children responded to post-test production probes of the target object or action. Results were that children produced emerging consonants less accurately

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