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Why Mama and Papa?
The Acquisition of the Parental Terms
in Two Unrelated Language Communities

Abstract

In order to meet their needs and perceptions, the children's early words have their origin first and foremost in their immediate environment (Anglin 1977; Ingram 1991; Marjanovic-Umek 2012, among many others). The most important among these children's words are the parental terms Mama and Papa. The aim of this study is to show for the first time how Iraqi-Arabic parental terms Mama and Papa are acquired by German-born preschool children, who are commuting between Iraq and Germany. Based on a contrastive analysis of the words Mama and Papa, this paper will mainly focus on the characteristics of these parental terms in two different language communities. Furthermore, light will also have to be shed on this less researched and discussed issue by touching upon the learning challenges and difficulties of the kinship terms in Iraqi-Arabic and how could they be overcome. The data come from the author's daily observation of his German-born children, a four-years-old daughter, and a boy, who is three years old. In order to supplement and enrich the study, I conducted interviews with parents and their children that I personally know.

Theoretical background and previous research

Although Roman Jakobson's outstanding paper ''Why Mama and Papa'' has been decisive for a large body of research on child language, there is so far very little research on the early language development of Iraqi-Arabic-speaking infants and toddlers. Such an absence of research would make it more difficult

to compare the process of acquiring the parental words Mama and Papa with the process of acquiring them in other languages.

On the contrary, studies on German child language, have recently been the focus of linguists far and wide. Among other things, many of these studies (Chan & Tomasello 2009, Stoll & Lieven 2009, among many others) were made in a comparative manner and they widened our empirical and theoretical understanding to different aspects of child language acquisition in various bilingual communities. In view of this obvious lack of valid data on the early language acquisition of Iraqi-Arabic-speaking children, the only thing one can do is to make use of several spontaneous and elicited dialogues involving the author's own children and their parents.

Participants

For reasons which have just been indicated, the study participants were the author's two toddlers in the age range three to five years, living in German-speaking family in Berlin. Although the author is of an Iraqi origin, the participants grow up monolingual, they speak German as their native language with no identified language difficulties. The family made then the decision to move to south Iraq. The four-years-old girl spent the first year of her kindergarten in Germany, the second year in a kindergarten in south Iraq. She used to go to the kindergarten from four to five days per week together with her Iraqi playmates.

The three-years-old boy, on the other side, visited the kindergarten in Germany for only one year. After the move of the family to south Iraq, the boy had not the opportunity to attend the kindergarten. The boy's everyday activities were restricted at home, but he was sometimes allowed to play outside with the children in the neighborhood, until he gradually chooses his playmates and in due course becomes a member of a play-group.

Procedure

In order to get a rich picture about the process of how do German-born children deal with the vocabulary of this new linguistic environment, it was necessary to invest plenty of time by the author in observing and recording his children's reactions to these different linguistic circumstances.

The children have been observed for more than one year. The fact that the girl used to go to the kindergarten almost every day has helped her to quickly cope with this totally different cultural environment.

In contrast, the boy's integration into this new linguistic environment started slowly, he was not so intensively exposed to the outdoor language since he was often at home with his German-speaking mother. However, his sister comes

home every day with lots of new words and expressions, and the boy then starts to speak and learn them comfortably. In conversations concerned needs and feelings, nevertheless, both toddlers often used German as the preferred indoor language.

Findings and discussion: Iraqi-Arabic

There are several interesting characteristic features of Iraqi-Arabic child language that have been observed during the study period. The most important characteristic is that Iraqi parents and their children mostly address each other by the parental terms Mama and Papa. According to this traditional custom, the Iraqi children are strictly not allowed to call their parents by personal names, however, they have to use the parental terms Mama and Papa.

Interestingly, Iraqi parents also often use the terms Papa and Mama in referring to their infants and toddlers. The use of these terms by the parents is understood only as a mean of expressing endearment. In contrast, in addressing the parents, the labels Mama and Papa will be interpreted solely as referential terms for mother and father, respectively.

Specifically mentionable in this connection is the fact that this custom does not only apply to addressing the so called nuclear family members, but it usually includes the extended family too. For this reason, all members of the extended family living nearby or in the same household should refer to the children either in their personal names or with a kinship name such as *'ammū* and/or *ḫālū* (uncle), *'amma* and/or *ḫāla* (aunt), and/or *ǧaddu/ǧadda* (grandfather/ grandmother).[1]

As is the case by Mama and Papa, the children, on the other side, are absolutely not permitted to refer to any of the extended family members in personal names. However, Iraqi children instead use the just mentioned kinship terms *'ammū* and/or *ḫālū* (uncle) or *'amma* and/or *ḫāla* (aunt), and/or *ǧaddu/ ǧadda* (grandfather/grandmother) to refer to any of the extended family members.

As a measure for stabilizing and emphasizing this custom, Iraqi husbands and wives more commonly call one another with kin terms such as 'father of' and 'mother of', but not with personal names. Furthermore, in speech addressed to children, Iraqi parents tend to speak in most cases in the third person, avoiding first person as much as possible, e.g. 'Mama is cooking' instead of 'I am cooking', or Papa is tired instead of 'I am tired'.

Some other noteworthy features of Iraqi-Arabic parental terms are relevant in this connection. It is often observed that Iraqi parents refer to someone else's children in using the terms of endearment Mama and Papa as well. In such

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[1] The transliteration system of Hans Wehr's Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic will be employed throughout this paper.

a case, the strange children will certainly not refer back to the addresser in Mama and Papa, but most likely in other kinship terms such as *'ammū* and/or *ḫālū* (uncle) or *'amma* and/or *ḫāla* (aunt).

In daily interaction with children, however, a new way of expressing endearment has been recently recognized. It has been observed that both Iraqi parents and toddlers almost add the possessive pronoun suffix *-ti* to the root words Mama or Papa in order to create the terms of endearment *Mamati* and *Papati*. So, instead of referring to each other in Papa and Mama, both parents and their children prefer to add the suffix *-ti* to these parental terms.

Moreover, diminutives are frequently used in addressing small children. Sadock (1997: 69) states that in Iraqi Arabic the diminutives can be used especially to express endearment in daily interactions with children. The most prevalent diminutive pattern is *fa'ūl* such as *'abūd, sa'ūd, qassūm, ḫab'ūb,* and *ayyūs* which stand for the proper names *'abd, sa'd, qassim, habīb, 'lyās,* respectively.

In this regard, I have to say that I do not agree with Sadock (1997: 74) who believes that diminution resulting from vowel change within the word and linear suffixation rarely occurs in Iraqi-Arabic. Indeed the contrary is true, since double diminution by vowel changing and affixation is very widespread across all Iraqi-Arabic dialects. Based on this, one can further derogate the just mentioned proper nouns by suffixing an *-ī* to the diminutive pattern *fa'ūl* to create then the double diminution *fa'ūli*. In this case, the diminutive nouns *'abūd, sa'ūd, qassūm, ḫab'ūb,* and *ayyūs* get the forms *'abūdi, sa'ūdi, qassūmi, ḫab'ūbi,* and *ayūsi*.

Findings and discussion: German

First of all I should like to stress that German and Iraqi-Arabic parental terms have nearly nothing in common except that in addressing the parents German and Iraqi children use these parental terms to refer to their parents. Furthermore, it has been observed that the German mother of my subjects tend to refer to her husband in Papa when she speaks in the name of her children. That is, in fact, the same way adopted by Iraqi-Arabic parents to avoid addressing the father in personal name in presence of the children.

Apart from Mama and Papa, in German and related dialects parents usually use a variety of terms of endearment for children. It has frequently been argued that diminution is the most available form of creating terms of endearment in German (Wittman & Fischer 1964; Januschek 2005; Grieger 2013 among many others). Diminutives in German can be simply created by means of attaching some hypocoristic endings (e.g. *-chen*, *-lein*) to nouns. The following are examples:

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Hase/Häschen (bunny/little bunny),
Maus/Mäuschen (mouse/little mouse),
Spatz/Spätzchen (sparrow/little sparrow),
Ente/Entlein (duck/little duck),
Bär/Bärchen (bear/little bear).

It is worth mentioning that creating terms of endearment by attaching the suffixes (*-chen*, *-lein*) is not restricted to the aforementioned animal names, but they can also be attached to children's names as for example to the following nouns, Hans/Hänschen, Karl/Karlchen, Marie/Marielein, or to names from the nature such as, Rose/Röschen (rose/little rose) or Blume/Blümchen (flower/ little flower).

There are in fact a number of other favourite forms of endearment in German such as those with the hypocoristic ending *-i* in Spatzi (little sparrow), Hasi (little bunny), Mausi (little mouse). Furthermore, the *-i* ending can also be attached to children's personal names such as Anni (Anna), (Kathi) Katharina, (Michi) Michael.

As in Iraqi-Arabic, one often hears of double diminutives used as terms of endearment by German parents. Double diminutives in German can be created by the double suffixing of two hypocoristic endings such as *-i* and *-lein* to the root word. The following are examples:

Hase/Hasi/Hasilein,
Spatz/Spatzi/Spatzilein,
Schatz/Schatzi/Schatzilein.

To sum up, there are some alternative ways of expressing endearment in German than the use of the paternal terms Mama and Papa. In this regard, I would like to emphasize that all these German forms of endearment can only be used by the family members to address the children, however, the children are not allowed to use these terms in referring to any of the family members.

Results and summary

Table (1) illustrates the considerably wider use of the Iraqi-Arabic parental terms and their alternatives by both the nuclear and the extended family members. As shown by the top two lines in Table (1), parents and any of the extended family members can refer to the toddlers in personal name and/or in a any term of endearment, e.g. Mama, Papa, aunt, uncle, grandfather, and/or grandmother.

Line three in Table (1), however, extends the scope of the use of the parental terms and their alternatives to include also those who are not members

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of the family. As evident from lines one, two, and three, the use of personal names and terms of endearment seems to be equal in the daily interaction with the own or someone else's children.

In contrast, the first two lines of Table (2) reveal that in addressing the parents and any member of the extended family the children are not allowed to use the personal names of any of the family members; they have, however, no other choice but to use the parental terms Mama and Papa and other kinship terms in a referential sense. On the other side, line three shows that all other someone else's children should refer to strange parents solely in a term of endearment. It should be noted, that in this last case the choice of the term of endearment basically depends on the gender and age of the addresser.

Table 1. Addressing the own or someone else's children

Degree of kinship	Personal name	Term of endearment
1. Parents → child	*	*
2. Extend. Fam. → child	*	*
3. Parents → others	*	*

Table 2. Addressing parents and others

Degree of kinship	Personal name	Term of endearment
1. Child → parents		*
2. Child → Extend Fam.		*
3. Others → parents		*

Overcoming the learning challenges of the parental terms

It is an interesting task in itself to trace how the German-born children would deal with the learning difficulties of the aforementioned Iraqi-Arabic kinship terms. In the case studied, the principal difficulties were mainly connected with the preestablished limited conceptual knowledge of my German-born subjects concerning the parental terms.

That is because in their first years of life my subjects have only a primitive concept of the parental terms Mama and Papa as well as of all other kinship terms. In their first linguistic environment the parental terms were merely limited to a referential use for mother and father. This fact led then to a situation in which their early experience of the words Mama and Papa have usually been underextended to solely be descriptive referential terms for parents.

After moving from this first environment to the second one in south Iraq, the subjects were faced with several learning challenges. Continuing the tradition

of the father's cultural practices, the subjects now need to make an overextension of Mama and Papa based on the new instances of these terms in the second linguistic environment.

All the problems associated with this successive process of acquiring the kinship terms tend to disappear with age, but it largely depends on the frequent exposure of the children to the new cultural environment. In fact, there were times in which my subjects rejected to deal with the new uses of the aforementioned kinship terms, and they preferred to use these terms according to their experience in the first environment.

After a period of suffering from moving from the first linguistic and cultural environment to the second one, my subjects stopped using the previous addressing customs since all family members did not accept this manner of addressing. With a gradual exposure to the new cultural environment the children's concept of all kinship terms have been extended to include other members of the nuclear family, the extended family, and sometimes people outside the family.

Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to see how the parental terms Mama and Papa can be acquired by prekindergarten children from two different language communities. I have focused on the characteristics of the parental terms in Iraqi-Arabic as these are less researched compared with the German ones. As have been discussed above, the use of German kinship terms is likely to be very different to that of Iraqi-Arabic. In contrast to the German parental terms, the words Mama and Papa have in Iraqi-Arabic a wider scope of use and may include members of the extended family and even people outside the family. This fact greatly complicate the learning process of the parental terms particularly for children with a limited knowledge of the parental terms.

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