

Gaze aversion in 4-year-old children during speech disfluencies

Angela Grimminger

German and General Linguistics, Paderborn University, Paderborn, Germany

angela.grimminger@uni-paderborn.de

ABSTRACT

Gaze behavior provides meaningful information to interlocutors (Doherty-Sneddon et al., 2002; Kidwell, 2014). A special form of gaze behavior, namely gaze aversion has been observed in adults and children during demanding tasks and motivated the *cognitive load hypothesis of gaze aversion* according to which this behavior is used to free cognitive resources (Doherty-Sneddon et al., 2002; Glenberg et al., 1998). While this line of research has investigated gaze aversion mainly experimentally children older than 5 years of age, its use while speaking in more natural settings has not been studied in young children.

Therefore, 4-year-old children ($N=44$) with a caregiver were observed during different communicative tasks (see Kern et al., 2024). Prior to the interaction with the caregivers, the children experienced the events or played the game with an experimenter; caregivers were not present meanwhile. Based on the previous research, it was hypothesized that children avert their gaze from their caregiver more often during speech disfluencies than during fluent speaking, and that they would more likely overcome these word-finding difficulties after they averted their gaze compared to no gaze aversion.

The preliminary results with 14 of the 44 children partially support the hypotheses: post-hoc comparisons of a significant interaction effect revealed that during speech disfluencies, children averted their gaze marginally more often than maintained gaze. Further, they significantly more often maintained gaze together with fluent than with disfluent speech. The children were also more likely to overcome their disfluency following gaze aversion than following gaze.

These preliminary results extend previous research on gaze aversion in two ways: They show that already 4-year-old children spontaneously avert their gaze in verbally demanding situations. Second, gaze aversion also seems to be related to reducing cognitive demands in communicative situations.

In this talk, I will present and discuss the results of the larger sample.

References

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