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LINGUISTIC STAGES IN FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Right after birth, babies start learning language, but it is evident that children do not acquire the completely structured language within one night. Undoubtedly, the process to master language successfully through various stages they go is amazingly complicated. Passing this process, an infant approaches the adults' complex grammar. Universally, the children tend to share the same style and rate in language development process in spite of individual variations. Having gleaned the related discussions from various references, this paper meticulously traces the linguistic stages in first language acquisition from the first sounds and words to the first adult-like sentences. Since children reach maturity at various rates and the age when they make new words and put them together varies, it is not sensible to consider the chronological age as an index to study language development in children. Psychologically and physiologically, children develop in the course of language learning to match the language ability of the adults. The remarking phenomenon through all the stages of language learning is that whatever children produce is intended to communicate a piece of thought.

Key words: Acquisition; Development; First Language Acquisition

Introduction

Linguists as well as developmental psychologists have been intrigued by the striking way in which babies acquire language. Despite the intricacy involved in the process, young children, by the age of three, have basically mastered the language skill with remarkable ease and speed. The present paper focuses on the scope of first language acquisition in young children, tracking the development of language from birth into the early years. Starting instantly from birth, babies learn language. Undoubtedly, sounds, words, constructions and meaning are indispensable parts of the language acquired (Lust 2006).

All over the world, children learn the immediate language they are exposed to. They learn many things they need in their life like the language for socializing. Despite its complexity, young children remarkably acquire the language in a very limited period. Within this short time, they are highly potential to acquire the fundamental elements of their native language such as phonology, morphology, semantics and syntax.

Universally, the children tend to share the same style and rate in language development process in spite of individual variations.

Studies in the field of first language acquisition is relatively young. Noam Chomsky, In the 1960's, presented the idea that all children possess an innate competence that governs their language development. "He argued persuasively that behaviorist learning principles could not account for the rapid acquisition of an infinitely productive language faculty" (Gleason and Ratner, 1993, p.36). Researchers have argued about first language acquisition since then while it has remained quite mysterious so far.

The central focus of the present paper is on linguistic stages in first language acquisition and its step-by-step development from the early stages.

Speech Production

It is believed that babies primarily produce some sounds that are not language related but noises, which are stimuli driven, to represent inconvenience and satisfaction. From this point of view, since there are no language-related sounds during this stage, researchers think of it as a pre-linguistic stage (Hamann, 2002). Some research in the field of psycholinguistics has demonstrated that children are highly sensitive to speech sounds during this stage. Although the existence of a prelinguistic stage is possible based on production view, there appears to be no such stage based on perception view (Hamann, 2002).

The vocal apparatus

Hamann (2002) believes that oral cavities in children are more similar to those in chimps during the first 4 months. Vocal apparatus of newborns has some especial characteristics, i.e. their larynx is higher, their throat is smaller, their vocal tract is shorter and their tongue shape is different. Noticeable changes occur at around 4 month, the larynx falls and the rib cage provides the infants with the ability to make longer periods of sound emission. The mentioned modifications have to be processed prior to the advent of vocal babbling.

Stages in First Language Acquisition

It is evident that children do not acquire the completely structured language within one night. Compared to the adult complex grammar, which they finally achieve, language acquisition process is quick, but not immediate. Going through the linguistics stages of language acquisition from the very first words to relative competence lasts about three or five years. Kids start with babbling first, then the first words are acquired, and they combine the learnt words to produce sentences in just a period of a few months (Hamann and Ruigendijk, 2015).

Based on the observation done in language acquisition, it has been found out that the stages in acquiring language are similar and, likely, universal. Diaries recorded by parents provide proper sources to conduct studies in the field of language acquisition in children. Some contemporary studies have applied videotapes, tape recordings, and directed experiments.

Conforming to the structural rules that the child has developed, he/she produces words and sentences at each stage of language acquisition. Despite sharing the same formal respects, child grammar and adult grammar varies in special properties.

Children go through various linguistic stages to acquire their first language. What follows briefly explain the stages that are involved in mysteries process of fist language acquisition.

Hamann (2002) considers the following stages for language acquisition:

Prelinguistic stage: from birth to about 6 months

Babbling (involves first phonology manifestation): at around 6-8 months

Fist words: at around 10-12

Two-word stage (involves first syntax manifestation): at around 20-24 months

Telegraphic speech: till about 36-40 months

Passing the process of language acquisition, an infant approaches the adults' complex grammar

Speech Sounds Perception and Production as the Pre-Talking Stage

A lot of evidence rejects the idea that a baby's mind is like a blank slate in that babies are respondent to some obvious differences around them, but not to others. It is due to the fact that the mind tends to be reflexive to special kinds of information (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2010).

Newborns respond to various language properties. The results of some experiments illustrate that newborn enhance their intake of milk when different stimuli are represented to them, but they reduce their intake of milk when the same stimuli are represented frequently (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2010). In the early stage of language acquisition, with the help of a preferential listening technique, babies move their heads and listen to the familiar sounds, stress patterns, and words longer. The innate reactions like these can be considered to evaluate a baby's susceptibility to distinguish and identify diverse linguistic stimuli.

According to Oller (1980) and Stark (1980) infants' first vocalizations go through various stages. As infants are approaching their third month, they do a lot of cooing. Bolinger (2002) believes that at this stage, cooing, infants are reflexive to human sounds by making vowel-like sounds, turning their heads to catch the speaker, and laughing.

Babies, in some languages, seem to have the ability to discriminate just the phonemic sounds, so they are probably capable of learning any exposed language. A newborn figures out the sounds of the immediate language during the first year. When he/she is about 6 months, the discrimination ability to distinguish the sounds that are not phonemic in his/her language is going to be lost. The kid's incipient perceptions are formed within the linguistic environment (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2010).

Babbling stage

The ability to produce speech manifests itself at around the age of 6 months. Cries, single vowel sound, sporadic consonants, and vegetative sounds are the first sounds produced by human beings. With the inception of babbling at around 6 months, a crucial landmark in linguistic development is met. First, they form reduplicated babbling in a way that they repeat consonant-vowels continuums in different languages (Oller, 1980; Stark, 1980). Based on the fact that the sequences of syllables made up of repeated consonant-vowel continuums like *dadada*, *bababa*, and *mamama* are made within this stage, babbling can be recognized as the forerunner in language development. More various babbles are produced later which seem to sound more like words in spite of carrying no particular meaning. Steinberg (2003) points out that consonant-vowel combinations produced by infants are babbling and the speech sounds they produce, but not all sounds, are universally the same in all of the languages.

According to Hamann (2002) there has been debate on the occurrence of babbling prior to a definite maturation in speech organs that elucidates the reason of the delay in speech production regarding perception. Nonetheless, babbling emergence cannot be identified through merely a change in organs' anatomical schedule. This makes sense if we assume that hearing babies go through vocal babbling while the deaf ones experience manual babbling. Due to the fact that manual babbling has nothing to do with the oral apparatus maturation, it has been discussed that babbling is because of the development in neural substrate supporting language. So, the similarity between vocal and manual babbling insinuates that children are born with a specific delicacy not only to sounds but also to special units and structures present in any natural language apart from modality of expression (Hamann 2002). Therefore, as a linguistic ability, babbling is related to the sort of received language input by the infants. Nakazima (1975) proposes that children babble more frequently when their parents are around than when they are not.

Hearing newborns exposed to language orally make limited series of phonetic forms; while, deaf newborns exposed to sign language make limited series of signs (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2010). It can be concluded that the series of feasible sounds or feasible gestures in spoken and signed languages produce these forms in each case. Babbling demonstrates the susceptibility of human mind, from a very early stage, to linguistic input. The manual gestures made by the hearing or deaf infants are very different (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2010).

As a commonly respected thought, babies are born with the discovering capacity of the units through which they communicate linguistic meaning and they start producing these units, such as sounds or gestures, according to the language input they receive. This claim clarifies that as the first stage of language acquisition, babbling contrasts with the earliest claim that it was pre-linguistic and solely neuromuscular in origin.

First Words

Around the age of one, infants frequently produce the same units of sound to refer to the same thing and in this way they find out that sounds carry meaning. The age when the newborns produce their first words varies and it does not depend on their intelligence. (It is believed that, for instance, Einstein did not begin to talk until he was three or four.)

Within the next linguistic stage, holophrastic, children's utterances include just one word that seem to convey more complicated meaning. For example, when an infant says "up" it can be probably a kind of request to be hugged or referring to an object on the wall. When he/she says "out", he/she may be making a request to be taken out. It can be proposed that infants possess a more intricate mental representation than what they can convey via their language.

To sum it up, the infants' first individual word which demonstrates a sentence is called holophrastic stage (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2010) Holophrase is a single-word utterance produced by an infants to convey more than what the word conveys when used by adults (Rodgon, 1976).

In fact, based on the results of some research, children are able to comprehend more complicated language than they are able to produce during this one-word stage (for example, Shipley, Smith, & Gleitman, 1969).

It is believed that the first signs are developed in deaf infants earlier than in hearing infants which leads to Baby Sign development. Baby Sign is a kind of technique in which hearing infants' parents learn different signs for their babies and model them (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2010). Through Baby Sign, an infant can manually interact his/her needs prior to the time when he/she can produce spoken words. Baby Sign supporters as well as may parents believe that it results in less crying and vexation. The assertion that signs manifest prior to words is disputable. Some linguists discuss that what happens in not only the deaf babies but also in hearing ones are pre-linguistic gestures that contains no systematic meaning of true signs.

The Acquisition of Phonology

Commonly, acquisition of sounds, in the case of sequence and class, initiates with vowels and then affected by manner of articulation moves toward consonants (nasals are acquired first, then glides, stops, liquids, fricatives, and affricates). Affected by place of articulation, the same sequence continues with labials, velars, alveolars, and palatals. Therefore it is not astonishing that as an early word many infants produce the word *mama* (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2010).

In fact, it is not unpredictable that segments acquisition in a special language can be touched by frequency of sounds; accordingly, those sounds that are commonly acquired late may emerge before the usual time due to occurrence frequency. If it is believed that kids deal with the sounds of their language in the first year, they struggle to find out the manner through which the sounds are applied in language phonology in the second year. The results of some controlled experiment demonstrate that more phonological contrasts are comprehended than produced at this age and they prove the disparity between the infant's perception and production (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2010).

Although the children make many phonological rules, they will not use all rules necessarily. Natural phonological processes, as arise in adult language, are usually mirrored by primitive phonological rules. Infants do not produce odd or weird rules; the rules they make suit the feasibilities made accessible by universal grammar.

Infants, about the age of 11 to 12, tend to add statement-like international contours to the utterances they make, and their vowels seem to be identical to those they produce in their mother tongue (Boysson-Bardies, Halle, Sagart, & Durand, 1989).

Acquisition of word meaning

Early vocabulary in kids not only informs us of phonological sequences, but also makes us aware of the way the kids use words and build their meanings. Sometimes, children tend to extend a word's meaning from a special referent to cover a bigger class. They first use the words that are present in the form of objects and they say the words while pointing to them, but later they point to the pictures of the words, too. Some kids, around 17 month, produce words in specific situations like having accidents. For example, they say "uhoo" when they pour their juice on the carpet. Using words in similar situations prove their language

development for social purposes. When parents prevent the kids from doing something that they like to do, they make some other words like "ahh" to show that they want to continue doing the same thing (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2010).

The intuitive idea about learning the meaning of the new words in kids is that the kid looks at an object while the mother names it as the result the kid relates the sound with the object. So, to learn a word, kids need to find out exactly what the mentioned word refers to. Even if an infant does well in connecting a word with the related object, no one gives distinct information about extending that word to other objects within the same class, but kids frequently overextend the meaning of a word. After acquiring the first words, overextension of the words' meaning vaguely reduces. Rescorla (1980) has done some research about kids' overextensions and presented that perceptual similarities between things cause overextensions.

On the other hand, underextension happens in language acquisition process and the words are used in a confined way. Through similar principles, the kids are able to acquire the words as fast as possible. Based on some experimental evidence that infants are able to acquire the meaning of a particular class of words, such as verbs with the help of the syntactic domain in which they appear. The syntactic-based learning of word meaning is called syntactic bootstrapping (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2010). As children grow, their knowledge of vocabulary develops. Carey (1978) mentions that children typically possess a number of 14,000 words when they are 6 years old.

The Acquisition of Morphology

The most brilliant record of rule learning lies in the heart of infants' acquisition of morphology. Infants' morphological errors prove the acquisition of regular grammatical rules that are overgeneralized later. Overgeneralization happens when infants use irregular verbs and nouns in the same way they use regular ones. Many of us have likely heard infants say *goed*, *drinked* and *taked* or *foots* and *mans* (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2010).

Such mistakes inform us about the way through which kids learn language owing to the fact that these forms do not emerge via imitation; kids make them in families with parents who never speak English badly.

In the case of acquisition of irregular forms, kids commonly experience three phases as follow:

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
went	goed	went
drank	drinked	drank

In the first phase kids use the accurate form like *went* or *drank*, but they cannot grammatically relate the form *went* to *go*, or *drank* to *drink*. As disconnected lexical entries, the words are considered. The second phase is considered essential in that the infants ground a rule by attaching the regular past-tense morpheme to every verb in order to make the past tense. They tend to look for patterns which are general, but they are not aware of the exceptions. Compared to adult language, their language is more general in this phase. It is within phase 3 that they understand that rules are not met by exceptions; therefore they use *went* and *drank* once again.

The Acquisition of Syntax

In holophrastic stage children make one-word utterances that seem to carry more complicated message. Some techniques have been used to prove that kids possess knowledge about syntactic rules. Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams (2010) mention that through these techniques, such as watching two different actions being displayed on TV, it can be concluded that infants at 17 months distinguish different sentences from each other. Sentences contain the same words like "Peter is tickling Jack" and "Jack is tickling Peter" are told apart through this technique. It is not just the words that equip them to recognize the meanings; they must also recognize the orders between the words and the grammatical relations of subject and object. When they are 18 months, they are able to distinguish the subjects as well as the objects in *-wh* questions. Accordingly, infants' syntax acquisition is ahead of their productive abilities.

When the children approach their second birthday, they start putting words together. Utterances of this kind seem to be the combinations of two of their first holophrastic utterances. Shortly, they appear successful in producing real two-word utterances which are both syntactically and semantically related. The

intonation contour is not divided by a pause made between the words anymore; instead it covers all of the utterances.

They represent various kinds of syntactic and semantic relations via their early utterances. Some of their noun + noun utterances like *mummy juice* can represent a subject + object relation as the mother is giving him/her the juice. A subject-locative relation can also be expressed by two-noun utterances as in *juice refrigerator* to mean "The mother is placing the juice in the refrigerator."

Since children reach maturity at various rates and the age when they make new words and put them together varies, it is not sensible to consider the chronological age as an index to study language development in children. In lieu, investigator measure language development in kids through Mean Length of Utterances (MLU), the utterances' average length an infant construct at a specific point. It can be measured in terms of morphemes or words (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2010).

When they produce their first multiword utterances, they show inconsistency in using functional words such as articles (like *a* and *the*), auxiliary verbs (like *can* and *is*), subject pronouns, and verbal inflection. This stage is more like an e-message sending or an old-fashioned telegram reading stage that includes just the necessary words for fundamental understanding. That is why these utterances are referred to as telegraphic speech (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2010).

Using all grammatical morphemes and learning the auxiliary verbs last many months and leaving out the functional words in their utterances does not occur deliberately, but it stands as an evidence of their language development capacity at that special point. In their production of the first multiword utterances, they miss out certain morphemes while following the same word order and syntactic rules as the adults do. In languages, like English, that the word order is fixed they never violate this rule and follow the required order of SVO from the first stage (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2010).

As good evidence, telegraphic speech rejects the hypothesis of learning sentences through imitation in kids. Adults never leave out the function words when they talk to infants even speaking motherese.

Once the infant identifies the syntactic categories of the words in his/her language, they are able to use morphological and syntactic rules. The question raised here is how infants recognize that some words are verbs while others are nouns. It is suggested that applying the word meaning triggers them to find out the word category. In other words, in order to learn syntactic relations, they use their knowledge of semantic relations. This process is called semantic bootstrapping (Bowerman, 1973; Pinker, 1987). Bowerman (1973) mentions it as follows:

Children launch their syntactic careers by learning simple order rules for combining words which in their understanding perform semantic functions such as agent, action, and object acted upon, or perhaps other even less abstract semantic functions. Through additional linguistic experience a child may begin to recognize similarities in the way different semantic concepts are formally dealt with and to gradually reorganize his knowledge according to the more abstract grammatical relationships which are functional in the particular language he is learning. (p. 213)

Within the ages of 30 months and 42 months, sometimes, language explosion happens and it is not easy to clarify separate stages at this point since language development quickly happens. Many infants apply function morphemes consistently by the time they are 36 months. Additionally, they have started understanding and making complex structures, such as different types of coordinated and embedded structures as in the following examples:

I like juice because it's delicious.

I think you're sad.

I want to play with the ball.

I help mummy to cook lunch.

Applying true auxiliary inversion, children are able to produce *-wh* questions (like *What can you do tonight?*) around the age of 42 months. They are also able to form and understand relative clauses(like *This is the picture that you liked*) and embedded ones (like *I know that you like this picture*) at this point. They are skillful

enough to apply the reflexive pronouns accurately (like *I see myself in the mirror*). When they are around 48 months, they have acquired much of the adult grammar. These stages of language development do not fit every kid everywhere since individual differences influence this process.

The Acquisition of Pragmatics

Besides acquiring the grammatical rules, infants must acquire the use of language in context properly. Acquiring the facets of pragmatics involved in realizing the function morphemes' reference may take a period of several months or years. Acquiring the rest of the aspects of pragmatics happens at early stages. For example, children use their utterances with various illocutionary force in holophrastic stage. The utterance *water* might be a simple statement (like *There is a glass of water on the table*) or a request (like *Give me water*).

In language development studies the use of single words by kids has been discussed: "When a very young child says *water*, he is not using the word merely as the name of the object so designated by us, but with the value of an assertion something like *I want water, or there is water*" (Stevenson, 1893, p. 120, cited in Barrett, 1982).

Conclusion

It can be concluded that there is something in children's mind that guides them in speaking even in early stages when they can say no more than a word. According to Chomsky this ability is innate and abstract. Psychologically and physiologically, children develop in the course of language learning to match the language ability of the adults. The remarking phenomenon, through all the stages of language learning from cooing to pragmatic learning, is that whatever children produce is meaningful, as well as grammatical, intended to communicate a piece of thought. The striking point is the length of the children's speech production in all stages of language acquisition. Children start from cooing and develop their words to sentences; however, the one- word production (holophrastic) communicates the same meaning as that of a complex sentence. To complex the situation, adults are able to understand the thought the children communicate let that be a single word or a sentence. Therefore, the only conjecture that could be proposed here is that the children have the syntax and meaning in their mind, but lack cognitive apparatus to produce complicated aspects of syntax such as inflection. That is, their mind uses the least at its disposal to achieve the most it needs to communicate, since it is not developed enough to analyze the full range of complexities of the grammar of the adult speaker.

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