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An Observation of a Child's Early Words during Two Stages: A Case Study

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Abstract

The present study is a case study which aims to investigate the early vocabularies and gradual development of language acquisition that have been acquired by a child (Matin). This study is a developmental descriptive one that addressed one infant acquiring his first language. This infant was followed for a period of 6 months, from 18 months to 24 months. The study was carried out by recording the child utterances during these months and phonetic transcription has been used to record utterances. This paper provides a brief overview of the progress that has been made in the infant speech perception and production, syntax and semantic. It was found that he had acquired about 500 vocabularies by the time he was 24 months and could produce two and three utterance at this age. The whole study will be confined to two stages of language acquisition. Usually children do not reproduce their parents' language exactly but the social environment has a significant importance in the enhancement of language acquisition.

Keywords: First Language, Language Acquisition, Language Development, Early Words.

Introduction:

Research has shown that the child's earliest learning begins still in utero, when the fetus begins to recognize the sound and speech pattern of his mother's voice (Lust, 2006). Children are not born talking. They start to learn language immediately from birth. The way that infants learn language with remarkable ease and speed makes it an interesting case of study (Lust, 2006). Children need to learn various parts of language include phonology, vocabulary, grammar, pragmatics when they acquire a language. Language production begins as recall and imitation of simple words and sounds without the associated meaning, but as children mature cognitively, the connections between words and their meaning is formed (Kuhl et al., 1992).

According to Corder (1973:109), "Language acquisition takes place during the period when the infant is maturing physically and mentally". In acquiring the mother tongue, child is exposed to different types of data which are unsystematic and unrecognized. These are not "carefully planned or logically ordered set of data (Corder 1973:110).

The human language system is so complicated and Because of this complexity and richness of the system, it seems unbelievable that children could ever acquire its structure. The process of acquiring such a system is likely to be nearly as complex as the system itself, so it is not surprising that the mechanisms underlying language acquisition are a matter of long-standing research (Saffran, 2003). It is somehow difficult to believe that children are able to acquire the complex structure of language without being taught. What is most remarkable is that children develop the complex system of language in a matter of two to five years (Jackendoff 1994, 103).

Many studies of language development suggest that a child first word appears at the age of one year. Some other studies show that gifted children are advanced in speech, whereas retarded children are slow in developing it (Johnson & Medinnus, 1969).

When children learn a first language, they could build on preexisting notions of what to represent with language as well as prior notions of communication or they could start from nothing and discover what is (and isn't) represented in language and since languages differ, their acquisition might also be affected by the properties of each language and their acquisition could also be affected by social interaction and cognitive development. Factors like these could also determine whether language-learners follow the same path, detect and use the same patterns, and make the same inferences about meanings during acquisition (Clark, 2009). Language development is a long life process and it seems that the basic capacity to learn a language is innate, while the particular form connections of individual languages are acquired through prolonged exposure to a specific speech community.

Literature Review:

Juscyzk, P.W. (1997) developed a readable and thorough discussion of how infants begin to discover words from speech, with accessible descriptions of empirical methods and results. Dietrich, C., Swingley, D., & Werker, J.F. (2007) prepared an empirical paper describing how children from two different language environments interpret the same speech-sound variation in different ways, showing how phonological knowledge guides language comprehension during word learning. Soderstrom, M., White, K.S., Conwell, E., & Morgan, J.L. (2007) have done a research on receptive grammatical knowledge of familiar content words and inflection in 16-month-olds. Infancy, 12, 1–29. It is a good review of infants' grammatical knowledge, and four studies examining children's sensitivity to properties of English word order and grammatical inflections. The longitudinal studies began in the late 1950s and the investigators like Martin Braine (Wlater Reed Hospital in Bethesda, Mary Land), Susan Ervin and Wick Miller (University of Calrifonia) and Lois Bloom (Colombia University) developed their interests in theses studies. Braine investigated three children Andrew, Gregory and Steven for "two-word" utterance produced. In case of Steven, he also used tape-recorder for systematic collection of the data. Miller and Ervin (1964), Bloom (1970) and Brown (1973) all investigated their subjects on the basis of systematic visits-by visiting them on "a regular schedule at predetermined times for the predetermined amount of time".

Methodology:

This case study addressed one infant, Matin, acquiring his first language in Iran (Bushehr). The infant was chosen as a typical example of other infants to be a representative sample of Iranian infants and was followed for a period of 6 months. The data collected for this infant was analyzed. This case study is a developmental descriptive one and the data consisted of interviews, observations, audio and video recordings, notes and reports.

Language development in first language acquisition by an Iranian infant (18-24 months)

The Holophrastic Stage or the One-Word Stage

At the age of 18 months the child has been started to produce one-word utterances. A basic property of these one-word utterances is that they can be used to express the type of meaning that is associated with an entire sentence in adult speech. Such utterances are called holophrases which is defined as "When a single word stands for a phrase in a sentence (Janda and Hamel 1982:170).

For example, in this case, the child uttered the word */Ab/ 'water'*. This word served a communicative function and was used in holophrastic sense. i.e., 'I want water' or 'give me water'. His mother used to produce this word */a:b/*, 'waterr' when the child showed signs of being thirsty. The expressions like */a:b mi:kha:y/* or */teshne hasti/* (Do you want water? Or Are you thirsty?) were used by his mother while talking to him. During this period, the socialization of the child started the moment he uttered */a:b/* meaningfully. Some other words were uttered by him with meaning in appropriate situations were: */mama/ 'mother', /mimi/ 'milk', /noon/ 'bread', /jojo/ 'chick', /baba/ 'father', /piza/ 'pizza', /taee/ 'tea', /U:fa/ 'food', /i:van/ 'glass'.*

When his production of words with his comprehension skill compared, it was found that he comprehended more than he produced.

Early vocabularies were mostly nouns include; names of things: people, food, fruits, animals, body parts, etc. Some of them are as follow:

/mahi/, 'fish' (food)
/ma:st/, 'yogurt' (food)
/felfel/, 'pepper' (food)
/li:mo/, 'Lemon' (fruit)

/mahsa/, 'Mahsa' (proper noun)
/a:sh/, 'pottage' (food)

/matin/, 'Matin' (proper noun)
/di:na/, 'Dina' (proper noun) /peper/
'Sepehr' (proper

noun) /gobe/, 'cat' (animal)
/masma/, 'Asma; proper noun'
/na:ser/,'Naser' (proper noun)
/khi:yār/, 'cucumber' (fruit) /a:riya/,
'Ariya' (proper noun) /si:b/, 'apple'
(fruit)

/mokh/, 'chicken' (food) /mi:na/,
'Mina' (proper noun) /shalam/, 'hello'
(noun) /sa:ina/, 'Sarina' (proper
noun) /zore/, 'Zohreh' (proper noun)
/goje/, 'tomato' (vegetable) /chi:sb/,
'chips' (food) /gorosh/, 'stew' (food)

/da:ee/, 'uncle' (peaple)
/motor/, 'motor' (things)
/nu:n/, 'bread' (food)

/a:semun/, 'sky' (proper noun)
/afi:/, 'Afsaneh' (proper noun)
/mokhomokh/, 'egg' (food)

/elna:z/, 'Elnaz' (proper noun)
/kola:/, 'hat' (things)

/gu:sh/, 'ear' (body parts)
/das/, 'hand' (body parts)
/pa:/, 'foot' (body parts)

/abu:/, 'eyebrow' (body parts)
/bi:ni:/, 'nose' (body parts)

The child can say 40 words others can understand and has vocabulary of about 70 words, mostly nouns. He usually repeats words heard in conversation. The first words the child has learned was nouns: */mama/,'mother', /baba/, 'father', /a:b/ 'water'* , */tu:p/, 'ball', /jojo/, 'bird' /na'/, 'no' /ame/, 'aunt', /o:fa/, 'food', /ax/, 'picture'* etc. After that, simple verbs are added, for example, */bede/, 'give', /boro/, 'go', /baz/ ,' open', /oftad/, 'fall'*.

The findings show a considerable increase in the vocabulary from the age of 19 months. These findings also show that there is not only comprehension precedes production but also substantial difference between production and comprehension. This completely supports the assumption that children comprehend their language before they actually produce it.

THE TWO-WORD STAGE

A typical 2 years old child can construct sentences of two or three words, often without a verb. When he reached 24 months, he was able to produce about 500 words and comprehend about 200 words. In this stage, he has been started to join items into two-word phrases and there is also an increase in communicative behavior and interest in language.

For example, he says, /baba kha:b/ for "daddy is sleeping". He is also able to speak in fuller sentences and sometimes his sentences may already resemble adult speech. For example, he says, /maman ghaza bokhor/ for "asks his mami to eat lunch". Sometimes he has used time and place markers, like *now*, *later*, *first*, *here*, and *there* which, along with his advanced vocabulary and more complete sentences that allow him to have full conversations with adults.

Janda and Hamel (1982:170) agree that "although the child's first word sentences are quite simple, they are novel and creative and not merely a copy of the speech the child hears". The following are some of two-word and three-word utterances produced by *Matin*:

/matin kha:b/, 'Matin wants to sleep'
/beri:m pa:rk/, 'he requests his parents to bring him to the park'
/fati: ghaza bokhor/, 'he asks his mom to eat lunch' /livan shekast/, 'the glass fall down and broke' /shir tamam/, 'the milk is finished'
/kafsh ofta:d/' 'his shoes fall down'
/bastame/, 'it's enough'
/a:riya kojast/, 'where is Ariya?' /baba dava/, 'his father shout at him/
/matin dadar motor/, 'he asks his father to bring him out with motorcycle' /dota:sh/, *'both of them'*
/bache khis avaz/, 'baby's clothes are wet and he asks child's mother to change his cloths'
/si:yavash mashin/, 'refers to Siyavash's car'

He has been started combining three or more words in a single utterance, without being aware of the sentence construction. He had also the habit of imitating adults, especially, his parents and grandmother.

Language-specific syntax becomes increasingly evident. He can discriminate between first & third person easily and used their signs in his utterances. Examples are as follow:

/amir raft/, 'Amir went out'
/baba bekhab/, 'he asks his father to sleep'
/fati: berim park/, 'he requests his mother to bring him to the park' /kafsh oftad/' 'his shoes fall down'
/da:ee dastesh shekast/ 'his uncle hand has injured'

/fati: ghaza bokhor/, 'he wants his mother to eat lunch' /mama bi:ya/, 'he asks his mom to come near him' /Saghar keta:b dareh/, 'his aunt has a book'

Findings and Conclusion

The present study, which covers two stages of Persian language acquisition by the child Matin during six months, has revealed that at the age 18 months he could produce about 40 words others can understand and has vocabulary of about 70 words. Most of the words are for objects: food, body parts, clothing, vehicles, household items, animals, and people. There are also some words for motions, actions, and routines, like */bala/, 'up', /ba:z/, 'open', /bokhor/, 'eat',* and

/boro/, 'go', and modifiers, like */garm/, 'hot'*, */kasif/, 'dirty'*, and */sard/, 'cold'*. In this stage words are used holophrastically. By 24 months he has an expressive vocabulary between 350 to 400 words. He can also produce two words utterances. His language-specific syntax becomes increasingly evident. He lives in a crowded family and the social environment had helped him a lot in acquiring the different language utterances more rapidly. It shows the extreme importance of the social environment in the enhancement of language acquisition. Syntax became more complex with various forms of embedding and transformations and it becomes evident as early sentences grow in length..

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