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A PSYCHOLINGUISTIC DESCRIPTION OF CHILD-LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: THE YORUBÁ EXAMPLE

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Abstract

One of the major biological differences between man and other higher animals is the linguistic evidence that shows that 'language' is specific to man. In other words, human language is radically different from all known forms of animal communication. Experience has also shown that a child has a stage-by-stage development of speech production systems; whereas it is naturally possible for the young ones of many animals to begin to perform physiological functions like walking, making peculiar sounds that are similar to those of adults, etc. after a few hours of coming into existence. It is this observed biological difference between man and other higher animals that calls for a critical appraisal of the uniqueness of human language, most especially as it relates to the developmental processes that are involved in normal child-language acquisition. Therefore, our aim in this paper is to present a psycholinguistic description of how the entire neuro-physiological maturation of a normal child determines the readiness of his organs of speech for speech production. In this attempt, the paper describes and exemplifies the stage-by-stage development of a normal child-language acquisition, with specific reference to Yorubá children learning English as a second language.

1. Introduction

Following Waterson (1976:93), research findings have shown that 'Child- Language Acquisition' is considered to be closely related to cognitive development and takes place through the child's social interaction with others in relation to the environment. Thus, the child is seen to play an active part in the process of learning to speak by creating his own language system, aided by the special relationship he has with his mother or other caretakers.

Considering the child as an active participant in the learning process, Bosco (1972: 384) expresses the view that such a child must be regarded as a center of consciousness and feeling, and not as a machine to be programmed. Therefore, the language system of a child is seen to be changing constantly as his cognitive development progresses and his experience of language increases. On this note, Chomsky (1972) makes the assumption that, "the growth of language is analogous to the development of a bodily organ".

The internet edition of "Wikipedia" (the online free encyclopedia, (2009)) makes the following distinction between the normal child-language acquisition and that of animal language:

The process of language acquisition is among the leading aspects that distinguishes humans from other organisms. While many forms of animal language exist, production is often fixed and does not vary much across cultural groups, though comprehension may be more flexible (primates may learn to pick up bird signals). The complexity and referential richness and social contextual variation of human language is not exhibited by any other species.

Psycholinguistics happens to be the field of study that brings together the theoretical and empirical tools of psychology and linguistics, in order to study the underlying structures and processes involved in the acquisition and use of human languages.

2. Defining Psycholinguistics

According to Crystal (1997:418), "psycholinguistics is the study of the relationship between linguistic behaviour and the psychological processes (e.g. memory, attention) thought to underlie it". In other words, psycholinguistics studies the interrelationship between psychology and linguistics and defines the extent to which language mediates or structures thinking. Thus, it describes how language interrelates with memory, perception, intelligence and many other psychological factors. Simply put, psycholinguistics is considered as a field of study in which the psychological context of language is examined.

The major sub-divisions or sub-fields of psycholinguistics include:

- (a) Experimental or Developmental Psycholinguistics
- (b) Language Pathology

'Experimental or Developmental Psycholinguistics' deals with the regularities within the components of language structure and use of language (i.e. psychological analysis of normal language development). On the other hand, 'Language Pathology' or 'Pathological Psycholinguistics' is concerned with the irregularities within the components of language structure (i.e., language disorder or 'Aphasia'). Language disorder occurs when the part of the brain that is used in processing language is damaged. This may occur as a result of head injuries sustained during accidents, falls or in certain violent acts. One who suffers from any form of 'aphasia' is called - 'aphasic' (Sanusi, 1996 and Crystal, 1997). The present paper will however focus on experimental or developmental aspect of psycholinguistics, as it relates to child-language acquisition.

3. Distinction between First Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning

The two concepts of 'Language Acquisition' and 'Language Learning' are usually differentiated in the literature to avoid possible confusion. While language acquisition is normally associated with the acquisition of first language or mother tongue (i.e. L1), language learning, on the other hand, presupposes a knowledge of L1 by a learner after which the learner attempts at learning or acquiring a second language or target language (i.e., L2). However, some scholars do not differentiate between the two terms, hence, both language acquisition and language learning are used interchangeably.

Language acquisition refers to a linguistic process whereby a child (who apparently has no language) acquires a language from his immediate environment, quite unconsciously and under no 'formal' condition. On the other hand, L2 learning takes place after the learner has acquired his/her mother tongue. In other words, while L1 is acquired in an informal situation, L2 is acquired under a formal situation. The formal condition under which the learning of L2 is assumed connotes a 'teaching environment', like classroom, in which both teaching and learning are taking place. It is also assumed that in such formal teaching environment, activities like pattern drill, oral and written tests, etc. will be put in place to assist the learners to achieve effective learning and attain a considerable and reasonable degree of competence in the target language. In such a learning situation, we

can claim that there is a formal and conscious learning on the part of the learner.

Given the assumption that every normal child is naturally endowed with a mechanism called - 'Language Acquisition Device' (LAD), a child is considered to possess the ability and capability to acquire any language, in his immediate environment, as his first language (or *L1*) *naturally without much efforts (see Chomsky (1976, 1988)). Thus, for every normal* child, language acquisition is considered to take place during the period when the child is growing physically and mentally.

4. On the Nature of Child-Language Acquisition

The study of child language became the object of serious study by linguists and psycholinguists because it is considered as a language in its own right rather than in terms of adult grammar.

Based on his idea of mentalist approach to language acquisition, Chomsky (1976: 4) considers language as a mirror of mind in a deep and significant sense, and he therefore makes the following assertion:

A normal child acquires knowledge of language on relatively slight exposure and without specific training. He can then quite effortlessly make use of an intricate structure of specific "rules and guiding principles to convey his thoughts and feelings to others, arousing in them novel ideas and subtle perceptions and judgements.

An average normal child can master most of the distinctive sounds of his first language before he is about three years old. Such a child can control most of the basic grammatical patterns before he is five or six. Complex grammatical patterns will however continue to develop through the school years and the child will continue to add new vocabulary items as he grows into adult life.

According to experts in psycholinguistics (see Tanner (1976)), up to the age of about eighteen months, "talk" tends to accompany action or actions rather than being a substitute for it. Within the child's limited sphere of activity, communicative needs seem to be satisfied by gesture and other extralinguistic vocalization like grunts and cries.

Perhaps the most widely held view is that a child learns a language by imitation (i.e., the behaviourist stimulus - response theory, (see Awoniyi (1982)). It is true that much of child's initial language learning can be attributed to his imitation of sounds and words around him, but many of his utterances are quite original and cannot be explained as imitation at all. In child-language acquisition process, the stimulus - response theory stipulates that the adult's role is to correct the child when he is making mistakes in his language use and reinforce him when he is producing the appropriate forms of the language.

Based on the assumption that child-language acquisition involves imitating the adult speech forms, Awoniyi (1982:38) offers the following advice:

Adults must give meaningful direction to the child. Children imitate all types of speech habits, good or bad, and so adults must be good models in every conversation with a child. If you set good rules the child will know what is socially acceptable and what is unacceptable.

5. Stages in Child-Language Acquisition

Characteristically, the child's communication and self-expression begin before the onset of speech. They take various vocal and non-vocal forms. Waterson (1976: 98) presents the sequential order of such activities as follows:

Firstly looking and crying, and then smiling; crying is necessary for his physical survival, smiling for the social. Then there is gurgling, cooing, laughing, babbling, gestures, pointing, grabbing, etc.

The major stages of the child's communication strategies have been discussed in the literature (see Fromkin & Rodman (1978)). The stages can be enumerated and described as follows:

- (a) The babbling stage.
- (b) The holophrasic stage.
- (c) The telegraphic stage.
- (d) The connective stage.

(a) The Babbling stage

This is the period during which the baby in the cradle utters some unintelligible sounds that are produced in syllable forms like "ba - ba, ma - ma, da - da, ta - ta, na - na, etc". These sounds are described as being semantically unintelligible because it is difficult for an adult speaker to interpret and derive any meaningful message from them. In other words, the actual message intended by the child cannot be interpreted.

(b) The Holophrasic Stage

At this stage, the child is about eight to nine months old: Unlike the syllabic sounds produced at the babbling stage, the child can at this stage produce complete words like: "mama, papa, dada, baba, tata, nana, etc". Such sounds are considered to be a little meaningful and they can be understood by any adult speaker. In line with Roman Jakobson's (1966) predictions, it could be observed that there is a natural sequence in which consonantal sounds occur in child's language acquisition process (see Lyons 2002:255). For example, labials precede dentals/alveolars and velars; stops precede fricatives; oral stops precede nasals.

(c) The Telegraphic Stage

Following Lyons (2002:256), the telegraphic stage can be described as period initiated by the production of two-word or two-unit utterances. The term 'telegraphic' derives from the observation that the child's speech throughout this period lacks inflections and what are often referred to as function words (e.g. prepositions, determiners and conjunctions). Instead, the speech appears like the language of telegrams. The child is about two years old at this stage. He is capable of producing a combination of meaningful words, in a form that resembles a 'telegram'. In other words, at this stage, the child only produces the most essential words that can communicate his needs.

Slobin (1973) reports that there is a high degree of uniformity across languages in the kinds of meanings that are expressed in children's early two-word utterances. As a native speaker of the language under investigation (Yorùbá), this writer has made a careful observation of the patterns of utterances produced by his subjects for this study (i.e.

Kamaldeen – two years and three months old (male); and Taofiqat – two years and four months old (female). Our observation confirmed the view expressed by Slobin (1973).

6. The Yorùbá Example

The subjects for this study speak Yorùbá* as a native language, but had early exposure to English as a second language. A proper understanding and accurate interpretations of the children's utterances in English require an adult's understanding of the semantic relations involved in such utterances as exemplified below:

Samples of Children's Semantic Relations: Possible Interpretations: Utterances:

i.	"Sit chair"	-Request-location	- 'I want you to sit on the chair.'
ii.	"My sweet"	-Possession	- 'It is my sweet.'
iii.	"Where ball"	-Question	- 'Where is my ball?'
iv.	"Cup there"	-Location	- 'The cup is over there.'
v.	"Cut knife"	-Action-Instrument	- 'Cut it with this/a knife.'
vi.	"Mómì, daddy car"	-Question	- 'Mummy, is this daddy's car?'
vii.	"Mómì, daddy car"	-Statement	- 'Mummy, this is daddy's car.'
viii.	"Mómì, daddy car!"	-Exclamation	- 'Mummy, this is daddy's car! (of course).' etc.

It should be noted that other characteristic features that are associated with children's early two – word utterances, like the examples given in (i-viii) above, include the use of 'intonation' 'practical demonstration', and other paralinguistic features to convey the appropriate intended message.

(d) The Connective Stage

This is the stage at which children are capable of producing sentences that approximate adult speech. However, in spite of the maturity attained at this level of speech production, children may still produce some deviant utterances. In most cases such erroneous utterances result from a kind of oversimplification of the language acquisition process (e.g., overgeneralization of grammatical rules). In each of such deviant sentences, the only thing that an adult speaker can derive or infer is the major idea that the child intends to express.

7. Conclusion

As evident from the existing literature on child-language acquisition (Chomsky 1976, Tanner 1976, Fromkin and Rodman 1978 and Lyons 2002), out of several researches that have been carried out in the field of child-language acquisition, the only viewpoint that has rapidly and popularly gained ground is the claim that child-language acquisition is closely related to cognitive development and takes place through the child's social interaction with others in relation to the environment. In other words, there is a correlation between language development and maturational development in children. This follows from the fact that the neuro-physiological maturation of the child appears to be crucial in production and perception of speech. Thus, a child does not begin to speak the whole language at birth, simply because certain organs of speech are yet to develop. Therefore, language develops as the child grows and the physical, physiological, and cognitive aspects of development are ready for the various stages of language development.

In this paper, efforts have been made to reiterate the uniqueness of human language, in terms of the distinction between child-language acquisition and the way and manner in which the young ones of higher animals like cow, goat, sheep, etc., acquire their communication system. While the process of language acquisition in man is gradual and systematic, that of higher animals is holistic and "immediate". This biological distinction further confirms the uniqueness of human language among all other forms of communication.

Note

* Yorùbá refers to the language and its speakers. According to Atanda (1980:1),

The Yorùbá constitute one of the major ethnic groups in modern Nigeria and they effectively occupy the whole of Ogun, Ondo, Oyo and Lagos States and a substantial part of Kwara State. A considerable number of Yorùbá people also inhabit the south-eastern part of the Republic of Benin (former Dahomey). All these areas referred to, formed what was known as the Yoruba country, before the European partition of Africa. The Yorùbá country lies roughly between latitudes 6° and 9° North and longitudes 2° 30' and 6° 30' East, with an estimated area of about 181,300 square kilometers. Pockets of the Yorùbá are found in other parts of Nigeria, in some West African countries and even in the West Indies and South America, but the area defined above is regarded as the traditional homeland of the Yorùbá people.

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