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Variations and Changes in Language Acqisition in Children

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Children acquire language spontaneously without being explicitly taught how. Their mastery of sounds passes through stages determined by a progression from unmarked to more marked sounds, unmarked ones also being those most commonly found in languages and least likely to erode over time, as discovered by founding linguist Roman Jakobson. Their mastery of other aspects of grammar proceeds along with their ability to master rules, rather than simply memorize.

It was once thought that children learned to speak simply by imitating adults: They hear adults saying words, and then they pick up words. However, modern linguists have found that it is something apparently innate to the species, and thus it proceeds according to basic aspects of linguistic structure.

Most children start producing words from a time between the age eight and twelve months. Many children have ten words in their vocabulary at the age of fifteen months. They gradually pick up speed from that point onwards. An eighteen month old child may learn only one or two new words a day; whereas a four year old will acquire a dozen. Children do not

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just master a basket of words and expressions. There's something more constrained and systematic going on. Words are just empty shells. There is no point in learning a new word if they don't learn its meaning. Children are remarkably good at this too. They are able to learn a word's meaning at the first time they hear it used. For instance; a child sees a cow running in a field and hear his/her mother say "cow" the child typically will figure out the right way that the word refers to the animal; not to its colour, or to its legs or to the fact that its running.

Meaningful words are the building blocks out of which we create sentences, our principal message carriers. Most children begin producing sentences between the ages of eighteen and twenty four months. Speaking ability merges without teaching, like fish swimming. Many cultures do not "teach" language, and much of language is not taught .In general, we only teach so much, and we cannot correct everything. Children often insist that what they are saying is right and eventually learn to speak correctly on their own. The first stage of language acquisition is spontaneous vocalizing. They try to utter the sounds they hear. The child vocalizes a number of distinct sounds. Children worldwide do this. Even deaf kids do it, and kids with throat blockages do it after their throats are unblocked. They learn to make sounds before learning to make words, and the order in which sounds are learned follows a pattern.

The first sign of speech-like sounds in children comes when they begin to babble, typically at around four to six months of age. Most early babbling consists of repeated syllables like dada, baba, mama and so on .Babbling increases its frequency and complexity until the age of about twelve months.

First word learning will be slow whereas new words show up at the rate of one every week or so. But things often speed up at about the time children reach fifty-word milestone. (usually at around eighteen months). At this point of time we can see the beginning of a "vocabulary spurt" during which children learn one or two new words a day. In some

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children, the spurt doesn't take place until the vocabulary contains well over hundred words. All children acquire words at a steady pace or in a series of small but with no sudden leap forward.

At later ages, word learning becomes even faster, averaging about ten words a day between the age two and six. By the age of six, children acquire fourteen thousand words and they go on to learn as many as twenty new words per day over the next several years. The average high school graduate knows at about sixty thousand words.

Some children are initially better than others at finding words. There appear two different styles of language learning. They are analytic style and the gestate style. The Analytic Style focuses on breaking speech into its smallest component part from the beginning. Children who use this style produce short, clearly articulated, one-word utterances in the early stages of language learning. They like to name people (daddy ,mommy) and objects (kitty, car) and they use simple words like hot, pot, hungry and so on to describe what they want and how they feel. Some children take a different approach in Gestate style of learning. They memorize and produce relatively large part of speech (which is poorly articulated) that correspond to entire sequences of words in adult language. For instance; whasdat?-what's that?, dunno- I don't know, donwanna- I don't want to.

At first, voiced stops and nasals predominate; fricatives is rare. That is, children learn the most *unmarked* sounds first. By age of two, a child will be so talkative that she/he will learn all consonants except /j/ and . Children's first renditions of sounds are unmarked substitutions.

1.Rendering fricatives as stops: like *sing* as *ting*, *zebra* as *dibra*. Then

2.Fronting, e.g., alveo palatal to alveolar: *shoes* becomes *sooz*, velar to alveolar: *goat* becomes *doat*.

3. Voicing, e.g., of stops before vowels (*pot* to *baht*).

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4. Dentalization (*jam* to *dab*, *room* to *woob*). (Note the effects piling on one another, which is what makes children hard to understand.)

Roman Jakobson and other scholars who developed the concept of markedness and are known as the *Prague School*. Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) was a Russian thinker who observed, during a series of exchanges with fellow linguist Nikolai Trubetskoy (1890–1938), that the order in which children learn sounds demonstrates that sounds are related to one another in a hierarchy based on markedness.

All children, learning all languages, acquire the vowel /a/ first, then stop consonants, and then nasal consonants before others. This implies that there is something developmentally primary about those sounds. Babies do not master them first because they are the easiest to make, given that during the initial babbling stage, children make all sounds. Rather, /a/ and stops and nasals are the easiest for the brain to *perceive* as distinct sounds**.** These sounds are the least marked. Bilabial fricatives like /ß/ or /p/. No child masters the latter sounds first.

That some sounds are especially unmarked is supported by the fact that while some languages have very small inventories of phonemes, even the ones with the fewest sounds have stops and/a/. No languages have, instead, only nasals and glides.

How children acquire morphology shows something else that is interesting.

A. First, children retain fossilized memorization of irregular forms: *came*, *men*.

B. Then children pass through a stage of processing that there are rules in the language but of overgeneralization, in which they produce forms like *feets* and *mouses*, which—ironically—shows that they are internalizing rules. Then the exceptions are "relearned."

The process of acquiring syntax is much more gradual than for morphology.

A. One-word stage (at one year old): At first, children use single words to refer to entire propositions: "dada" means *Here comes Daddy* or *This shoe is Daddy's*, etc.

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B. Two-word stage (at one year and eight months): children refer to an entity and a predicate ("dada chair," "hit doggie"), which is the heart of the configuration of the syntactic trees we encountered in earlier lectures.

C. Telegraphic stage (between two- and two-and-a-half years old): word order is accurate, but no grammatical items such as definite articles and the verb *to be*: "Daddy like this book," "I good boy."

They first understand the concrete, rather than the words that express abstract concepts. This correlates with how in our adult consciousness concrete words become grammatical ones "under the radar," such as *going to* in the literal sense of movement becoming a marker of futurity as in *I am going to think about that someday*.

How children acquire vocabulary also follows an orderly progression.

A. *Overextension* is very common—*fly* may refer to dirt, dust, small bugs, toes, crumbs; *quack* to birds, flies, even coins; *dog* to any animal. *Under extension* occurs as well, such as *kitty* referring only to the cat in the house.

B. By one year and eight months old, children typically know about50 words. By age five, children are learning about 15 or 20 words per day (about a word every two hours), and by age eight they know about 18,000 basic words.

C. It is often said that a child's basic acquisition of a language is largely complete at six or seven. (O' Grady, How Children Learn Language 34-39)

That certainly seems to be true of children mastering European languages such as English, French, and German. However, there are anecdotal reports that children do take a little bit longer to learn languages that are extremely complex. The Cree Native American language, which is spoken in Canada, is massively complex, and it has been said that children are not competent in even the basic language until they are about 10 years old.

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