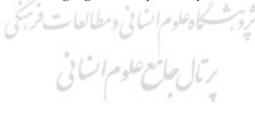# *Developmental Stages of Child Language**

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Abstract:
This paper is an attempt to investigate and analyze different categorizations proposed for the early syntactic development stages in L1 and also discuss the characteristics of early child syntax in first language acquisition. Data collected from L1 learners will be presented and discussed from both linguistic and psycholinguistic perspectives. Different approaches to understanding L1 acquisition and processes involved in child syntax will then be reviewed critically. Developmental stages and chronological succession of different stages in the acquisition of English as the first language will be presented.

Key Words: *Child language; Development; Syntax; Acquisition*

Introduction

There are many different approaches to study and analyze the developmental stages of child language. But before discussing these approaches it seems necessary to examine some introductory comments on the study of child language. During the last decades, **Developmental Psycholinguistics**, the study of child language, has attempted to answer the key questions such as: "How does a child learn his/her language so well in such a short time?" and "What is the course of language learning?", and has provided us with considerable insight into the **how** and **why** of first language acquisition (Kess, 1993: 301).

It is argued that all human beings acquire a language, but there are many different languages in the world, and it seems that any human being is capable of learning any of these as a native language with equal ease (Stork and Widdowson, 1974:131). According to Kess (1993:303) no child fails to learn a native language, and it is learned largely before the age of 5. It is also amazing that all children do it in much the same way and ends with the same general abilities. But children do not wake up one day with full language capacities. Kess (1993) then adds that language is acquired in stages, and each stage approximates adult language. Meanwhile these stages appear to be very similar across languages and the principles in all of these successive stages of different languages may be universal.

Stork and Widdowson (1974) point out that there are two major factors involved in language acquisition:

1. Firstly an innate human potential for the acquisition of a language
2. Secondly a linguistic environment.

Many linguists and researchers believe that the acquisition of a language depend upon the interaction of these two factors. Stork and Widdowson (1974) argue that according to the innateness hypothesis:

A. All human beings learn a language

B. All human languages are equally learnable

C. All human languages are different on the surface, but all have certain underlying features in common, which account for their being "learnable"

D. These features which are universal to all human beings are the key to what is innate

Environmental factors consider innateness a less potential role and argue that language development is a result of conditioning by the environment.

Children go through different stages in acquiring their first language. In the following section, these different developmental stages will be discussed in detail and appropriate examples and data will be presented.

Receptive and Expressive Language Skills

Two important skills in describing the development of language in children are: 1. Receptive skill and 2. Expressive Skill. The receptive language skill is always in advance of the expressive language skill.

The development of **receptive skill** begins at birth when the newly born infant is immediately exposed to all different kinds of noises. At first infant cannot distinguish between the sounds, but after approximately six to eight weeks, he/she is able to recognize the differences between a human voice and other noises. This voice is usually his/her mother's voice and the infant may show recognition by a facial expression such as a smile. By nine months he/she begins to respond to a few simple words: very often the names of toys or teddy bear. At this time he /she may respond by gesture or movement. By twelve months infant can usually respond commands (Stork and Widdowson ,1974)

As Stork and Widdowson (1974) propose the development of the **expressive language skill** is the beginning of active participation in speech and language. At this stage the infant can respond vocally to

pain, such as hunger, pleasure and satisfaction, but these are just reflexes. The development of speech indeed begins when infant can produce sounds at will by conscious effort. This kind of sound production is called **Babbling** which begins towards the end of the third month of life. At this stage child produces only a limited number of sounds. By about six months he/she is producing a wide range of sounds and is using them in his/her play. By nine months, he/she is capable of responding to simple words. At this stage he/she learns to repeat the same sound or sounds over and over again. The child usually produces a syllable consisting of consonant plus vowel which is often called **Reduplication** stage.

The child will begin to use his/her first words at about twelve months. The forms such as **mama** or **dada,** which occur very early during the reduplication stage, are not considered as words. Reduplicating syllables consisting of bilabial or alveolar consonants and low front vowels are used in many languages as children's names for parents. At about the same time child begins to use a few recognizable words which he/she invents for himself/herself which are called **Jargon**. The development of jargon is an important stage in the acquisition of language (Stork & Widdowson, 1974: 135).

When the child is about eighteen months he/she will be using perhaps about twenty meaningful words and a great number of jargons. At this stage his /her communication with others is limited to **single word utterance** which is called **Holophrastic** language. Steinberg (1992:149) also proposes that three early meaningful speech stages are: naming and holophrastic, telegraphic, and morphemic-transformational.

The development of words into sentences is indeed the true beginning of grammar. This occurs at about twenty four month old and at first it is limited to the juxtaposition of two words and then gradually develops into more complex sentences. A child usually acquires most of the grammatical forms of native language by five or

six years old (Kess, 1993). The different stages of language development are presented in the following chart:

Table. 1 Summarizing the milestones of language development (taken from Stork & Widdowson, 1974)

Month	Receptive skills	Expressive skills
0-3	Recognizes human voice	reflex sounds
3-6	Learn to distinguish affection from scolding	Babbling begins
6-9	Responds to simple word	increasing variety of sounds & reduplication
9-12	Responds to simple comments	uses first words
12-18	increasing responses to more complicated sentences	20 words + jargon concatenation

The single word utterances of the child may be used in context which would contain different grammatical constructions in the adult language. For example, according to the context and the speaker's intent the single word sentence "**teddy**" could mean**: I want my teddy, Here is my teddy, Where is my teddy** or **hello my teddy.**

Transformation-generative grammar is also used by some researchers to show the relationship between possible deep structure and surface structure. Naturally the rules for describing the child and adult languages are different, but the principles are the same as discussed earlier. For example we cannot ask a child to explain what he means by **"Mummy shoe"**. What we can do is to examine the non-linguistic context in order to arrive at a semantic interpretation. If the child gestures towards his mother's shoe when saying "mummy **shoe**", it suggests that- deep structure underlying the utterance is a possessive relationship which in the adult language might be expressed by **'s.** If, on the other hand, the child has one of his own shoes in his hand and he passes it to his mother, at the same time gesturing with his foot, we

have evidence that the words" Mummy shoe are to be given the meaning, **"put my shoe on, please"**.

Meanwhile there is a process of give and take, a linguistic cut and thrust in first language acquisition. The following chart shows how a parent often interprets and expands a child's **telegraphic utterances**:

Table. 2 Process of give and take (taken from Brown & Bellugi, 1964).

Child	Mother
Baby highchair	Baby is in the highchair
Eve lunch	Eve is having her lunch
Mommy sandwich	Mommy'll have a sandwich
Sat wall	He sat on the wall
Throw Daddy	Throw it to Daddy
Pick glove	Pick the glove up.

It is obvious that children learn a lot from these exchanges. For example, a child would learn in this way to differentiate between the surface structures. "Mummy's shoe" and" put my shoe on, Mummy".

Steinberg (1992:150) also argues that children do not only use single words to refer to object, they also use those same words to express complex thoughts which involve those objects. A young child who has lost his/her mother may cry "**mama**" meaning "**I want mama**". Or a child may point to a shoe and say "**mama**" meaning "**The shoe belongs to mama**" Research has shown that the young child expresses a variety of semantic functions by the single word. In such cases, the child uses a single word to express a thought for which adults usually use a whole sentence.

Early Syntax

Many different categorizations have been proposed for the syntactic development stages.

Kess (1993:318) divides early syntactic development typically into three stages: the holophrastic stage, the two-word stage and hierarchical stage. Ingram (1991:2) suggests the three traditional periods of acquisition as follows:

1. Prelinguistic development-birth to the end of first year;
2. Single-word utterances- from around 1 to one and half years of age'
3. The first word combination- from around one and half to 2 years of age;
4. Simple and complex sentences- the third year of age

Cattell (2002) states that it isn't until real two-word utterances begin that we can say that syntactic (grammatical) constructions have started to form. He adds that until you have two words to rub together, then, there isn't any syntax, because syntax is about the relationship between words in a sentence. Some linguists have challenged this notion by claiming that single-word utterances are really 'holophrastic sentences; in other words, the single word stands for a sentence. Bloom (1970: 61) opposes this notion and does not agree that one-word sentences are really sentences. Bloom argues that "Single-word utterances are not sentences. Children in the first half of the second year do not use phrases and sentences-they only say one word at a time." So the grammar of a child's sentences seems to be a tough nut to crack. But what is surprising is that the child progresses and keeps producing sentences which become more and more complex, in their grammar, without having a great deal of difficulties. It is claimed that by the age of 4, most children acquiring English have mastered the central utterances of English syntax. Of course, they have not finished acquiring English, and more complex structures take them longer to acquire (may be up to 10). But by age 4, or soon after, many children can handle passive constructions like "**Daddy was stopped by a police**" as well as quite complex question like" **Who was Daddy with?" "What are you doing that for?"** and "**What did you tell me to do?**". The question is how they come to be able to do this at such a young age.

Motherese Language:

Research from the **' motherese'** or **' caretaker '** speech literature has long established that communication at the earliest stages of development depends critically on the immediate setting, both temporal and physical. Caretaker speech is language used by adults for children, and has been an important source of evidence for understanding early language development (Snow & Ferguson, 1977). Indeed, the shift from being able to talk only about things in the present and also the ability to be able to talk and refer to things not present, either in a physical or temporal sense is a major developmental stage in language acquisition by the children.

One distinctive characteristics of caretaker speech is the use of language in the ' Here-and-Now (Krashen, 1985). Language addressed to the child is limited to reference to objects that are in the immediate discourse context, and which are highly supported by that context. Studies on child L1 (Sachs, 1983) and adult L2 (Meisel, 1987) development shows the ability to perform a context-supported present tense reference (Here-and-Now) task emerges earlier, and such tasks are easier to perform than context-unsupported past tense reference task (There-and-Then). One of the striking characteristics about children's speech is its close relationship to a supporting non linguistic context. The fact that children talk about what they are seeing and doing makes it possible for caregiver to understand many utterances that should otherwise be uninterruptable

The Here-and-Now principle derives, in part, from the fact that a limited set of topics are of mutual interest to both the caretaker and the young child. Brown and Bellugi (1964) and Brown (1970) argue that adults also talk about Here-and-Now when they interact with young children. Sachs, in a review of related studies, noted that in conversations between adults and children under 3 years of age, most of the child speech refers to the immediate context. However early attempts by children to talk about events that occurred in the past have

been documented, though they are limited (e.g. Halliday, 2003; Scahs, 1977, McLaughlin, 1993, Hatch, 1983). But in order to communicate about events and objects outside the immediate context, a variety of cognitive, linguistic and conversational skills are required. These skills increasingly involve topics that are not in the current context.

The L2 analogues of caretaker speech are foreigner talk and teacher talk, in which the native speaker/teacher makes modifications in the input to the L2 speakers (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1992). These simplified codes have been shown to play the same role for the L2 learner as caretaker speech does for the child (krashen, 1985). Just as the caretaker provides extra-linguistic context by limiting the speech of the child to the 'Here-and-Now', the beginning-language teacher provides context via visual aids (picture and objects) and discussion of familiar topics in a manner that allows the learner to comprehend the input.

Discourse is easier to understand when the environment supports it with concrete referents, that is, subjects and events that can be seen, heard, or felt while language is being used (Dulay et al. 1982: 26). Caretaker speech is rich in such referents. A caretaker will describe what the child is doing or what has just happened: *Oh, you spilled your milk; That is a nice sandcastle*; or tell the child what to do at a given moment: *Drink your juice; Stop that*; or ask questions about ongoing activities involving the child: *"Is that a doggie"; Where is your sock*? Caretakers do not typically talk about activities that are displaced in time and space, nor do they discuss what will happen next week, next year, what is going on down the block, or events in other countries (Dulay et al. 1982).

Developing Past-time reference in the L1:

Past reference is a complex part of language learning. The ability to refer to objects or events not in the current context is widely recognized as one of the most important features setting language apart from other form of language communication (Sachs, 1983). This

characteristic is called "decontextualisation" or "displacement", and may involve the spatial and temporal domains.

The emergence of displaced reference is much later in L1 acquisition than Here-and-Now reference (Brown and Bellugi, 1964; Sachs, 1983; Eisenberg, 1985). This delay is due to the number of additional cognitive operations, conversational abilities, and linguistic resources required to talk about objects and events that are visible while the conversation is taking place (Eisenberg, 1985).

The development of displaced reference in the child is discussed in Sachs (1983). At the outset, the child's language was limited to the Here-and-now. One of the first form to emerge when learning to talk about objects that were not present were utterances of the form *Where's*, in which the child's understanding of *where* changed from a search for X, where the presence of x in the immediate is assumed, to specifying the location or activity of x. Spontaneous comments about something in the context appeared after this, at approximately 16 months. By 3 years, reference to absent objects occurred fairly frequently, mainly in pretend play or in talking about past events. When displaced reference first appeared it was limited to a few, highly constrained topics. Two strategies evident in early interactions seemed to make it easier for the child to process displaced reference. The first strategy is the creation of conversational routines. These conversational routines provided an opportunity for the use of displaced reference in a fairly 'frozen' way, paving for productive conversation. Reference to unique objects was the second strategy that made displaced reference easier during this early period in the child's development. By the end of the period studied, when the subject was 3, most of the talk still focused on the Here-and-now, but she could engage in conversations about nonpresent objects with no support from the immediate environmental context. These interactions were short, but seemed like real conversations (Sachs, 1983).

A fundamental way in which English speech marks displaced is through the use of past tense marking in the verb. The child's earliest

use of the past markers in English (-ed and irregular past) occurs in descriptions of events in the immediate situation. The child's comprehension and usage of the form changes gradually over a long period (Brown, 1973). During this period of development, confusions in the use of present and past tense marking can persist for some time. Irregular past tense forms are often regularized, e.g., **falled**, **caughed, keeped, comed, taked**, even in 5-year old speech e.g., **flied creeped** (Bybee & Slobin, 1982). Children occasionally add a present-tense suffix to a past-tense stem e.g., **cames, gots**; and a few omit the –s suffix and use an unmarked stem form with a 3rd –person singular subject, e.g., **He cry,** and **It fall down**, **The owl come**. Another common omission is that of the tense-marking auxiliary is or are with progressive verbs, as in **He going or They eating** (Berman and Slobin, 1994:130-131).

Cognitive Development

It is claimed that language is one of many analytic activities which all depend on cognitive development. Language acquisition is seen as having certain cognitive prerequisites or co-requisites. That is, the child will not develop linguistic forms before acquiring the cognitive bases for those forms. For example, the child is expected to learn where question/location answer prior to the when-question/time answer because the concept of place is acquired prior to the concept of time, and this order is cognitively determined. Kess (1993:305) also discuss that a form which is linguistically simple may be conceptually difficult. Like Kess, Slobin (1973) also suggests that conceptual development proceeds grammatical development and determines the acquisition of order of some grammatical forms. Kess then points out that:

> *The mastery of a specific linguistic form is seen as a result of the cognitive complexity of the concept the form conveys, as well as its formal linguistic complexity in a structural sense. But it is cognitive development that leads the way and precedes linguistic*

development. Children cannot speak of isosceles triangles if they cannot conceive of them. This is the reason young children ask questions with who, where, what, before they ask successful questions with when, how, why. Questions about people, place, and things are not as abstract as the concepts required for time, manner, and causality (Kess, 1993: 305).

Therefore cognition is considered as underlying language skills. As discussed above the order in which particular structures are acquired by child learners reflect their cognitive growth. (Hatch, 1983: 219-220).

Conclusion

In sum there is as yet no definite answer as to how language development takes place but we are able to investigate through the application of various linguistic and psycholinguistic theories some of the complexities of child language development. It is also interesting to refer to Halliday (2003: vii) who believes that the language of children has much to tell us about what language is and the role it plays in our development as human beings.

Finally, this study has been limited mainly to one language and examples and data are collected from English language; yet I believe that cross-language studies are of great importance for research in child language acquisition.

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