



LANGUAGE IN MAKING: TRACING THE CHILD LANGUAGE ACQUISITION SCHEDULE

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ABSTRACT



A child's speech and language development exhibits a standard pattern. The mastering of language skills follows natural progression. The domain of Psycholinguistic enquiry is concerned with discovering the psychological processes by which humans acquire and use language. There are varied milestones in the normal course of development of language in children from birth to adulthood. The child is an active participant in the language learning process. In all normally functioning infants, the language acquisition schedule corresponds roughly with age. The child's acquisition of language is a continuous process wherein the innate tendencies coupled with environmental stimulus help the child in assimilating the nuances of native language. The Language Acquisition in a child involves the progressive assimilation of the rules pertaining to vocabulary, phonology, morphology, Syntax, Semantics and pragmatics of the language to which the child is exposed. The development of language skills in the child reflects marvelous creativity, a child's language inventory increases manifold during the first year of birth.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Developmental Psycholinguistics traces the acquisition of the mother tongue. The capacity to successfully use the native language for efficient communication develops progressively with age. It requires the child to acquire multifaceted aspects of language including phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics and an elaborate vocabulary. The child's language repertoire hierarchically progresses from the initial stage of infant babbles to matured adult speech. Language acquisition requires attaining proficiency in four main areas:

- 1) Grasping phonological rules which specify how words, phrases and sentences are pronounced.
- 2) Internalizing morphological rules which specify how words are built up out of morphemes, i.e. grammatical units smaller than the word.
- 3) Adopting syntactic rules which specify how sentences are built up out of phrases and phrases out of words.
- 4) Achieving mastery over semantic rules which specify how words, phrases and sentences are interpreted, i.e. what their meaning is.

FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: STAGES

There are definite stages through which a child progresses during early language acquisition. The child exhibits creativity in acquiring language and a sea change takes place in the child's inventory of sound production between birth and 12 months of age. The progressive assimilation of language in a child can be traced as follows:

Stage 1

The earliest sounds produced by a baby in the first few weeks of life (birth-2 months) are the basic biological noises. The use of vocal chords by the baby to emit cries to reflect state of pain, hunger, sleep is called reflexive noises. The sounds produced by the baby in the course of bodily actions such as sucking, swallowing, coughing and burping are called vegetative noises.

Stage 2

This stage is characterized by the pre-linguistic sounds that a child produces. The first recognizable sound produced between 3-4 months is called 'Cooing'. The child now actively responds to the caretaker's smiles and speech with velar consonants such as /k/ and /g/ and high vowels like

/i/ and /u/. Cooing is a musical, low pitched, short combinatory consonant-vowel sound which develops alongside crying. It signals the onset of speech production as the baby starts to move the tongue and the lips and maneuver the vocal chords for speech production. Eventually, the cooing sounds become prolonged and at around the 5th month, sounds associated with laugh and chuckles emerge.

Stage 3

The sounds of this stage are called vocal play and consist of a varied quality of constants and vowels such as fricatives and nasals. Between 6-7 month, the child's speech consists of consonant-vowel sequences. The child now produces high pitch sounds and even glides.

Stage 4

Gradually the sound clusters combine into longer sequences and the child produces the first 'Babbling' sound by the 8th month. The speech inventory of the child now contains syllable-type sounds like /da/ and /ma/. Another characteristic feature of this stage is the repetitive use of the same consonant-vowel cluster. Sounds like /baba/ and /mama/ are termed reduplicated babbling. Babbled utterances lack meaning but they do resemble later speech.

Stage 5

The later babbling stage, around nine months, the child learns the use of intonation patterns. By the tenth and the eleventh month, the child starts using vocal sounds for emphasis and to display emotions. Towards the end of first year, melody, rhythm and tone become established in the child's sound system.

Stage 6

Between twelve and fifteenth months, the child produces 'proto-words', which are child's self-created words but they may lack meaning. However, they signal language development and the effort of the child to be part of social interaction.

The child gradually progresses to the 'one-word' stage by the eighteenth month and utters single unit utterances for objects of everyday use like 'milk', 'toy', 'cup'. This stage is also termed as Holophrastic as a single words functions as a phrase or a sentence. The adult tending to the child can



easily understand that 'milk' means that the child is hungry and needs to be fed.

Stage 7

This is the 'two-word' stage and spans from eighteen months to two years. The vocabulary of the child enlarges and by the age of two, the child produces 200-400 distinct words. The child now produces speech, acknowledges feedback and understands the dynamics of conversation.

Stage 8

The child begins producing a large number of multiple word utterances between two and three years of age. The child utters telegraphic speech, the sentence building capacity is evident but the grammatical inflection is yet to develop. Utterances like 'mummy want ball', 'this toy good' characterize this stage. Eventually, the child's vocabulary expands at a rapid speed to hundreds of words, grammatical patterns develop and there is clarity of pronunciation. The child speech now becomes nearly parallel to adult language.

THE ACQUISITION SCHEDULE

The language acquisition schedule of a child is linked both with the biological development and with the social factors in the child's environment. Child actively acquires the language and acquisition schedule corresponds roughly with age in all normally functioning infants. The child starts making sense of sounds and associating them with meaning by the time the child is one year old. The development of different aspects of language in a child can be traced as follows:

PHONOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

Generally, there is an order in the acquisition of types of sounds according to manner of articulation; firstly, the nasals are acquired, followed by glides, stops, liquids, fricatives and finally affricates.

Moreover, at the onset, a child might perceive the distinction but might not be able to differentiate between voiced and voiceless consonants. In the first year, the child tries to grasp the phonetic inventory of the target language. At the age of one, the child can recognize several vowel and consonant sounds. However, the pronunciation ability of the child is restricted. The child can at max produce two or three consonants and just a single

vowel sound. Generally, the child first acquires the correct use of consonant sounds at the beginning of the words and later the consonants are used word finally.

The child acquisition of the language is marked by certain trends in phonological adjustments:

- The fricative consonants are generally substituted by stops; for example, 'see' is pronounced as /ti/.
- Alveolar consonants are used in place of velar consonants; 'cup' is pronounced as /tup/.
- unstressed syllables are generally not uttered; for example, 'banana' is uttered as /nana/.
- word ending consonants are sometimes dropped; for example, 'hot' become /ho/.
- consonant clusters are avoided; therefore 'milk' becomes /mik/ and 'block' becomes /bok/.
- the /l/ and /r/ sound are generally replaced with /w/ and /j/ sounds; for example, the child finds it easier to say /wed/ instead of 'red', /jeg/ in place of 'leg', and /jajt/ in place of 'light'.
- The child shows a tendency to harmonize both consonant and vowel sounds. Consonant harmony is exhibited when the child repeats identical consonants. The child pronounces 'bat' as /tat/, 'dog' as /gog/.

The second year of Language learning is devoted to the acquisition of contrastive phonemes. The child begins to distinguish phonemic pairs like /t/ and /d/, /p/ and /b/, /s/ and /z/ and so on. It is commonly noted that children make peculiar errors when they first begin uttering sounds. Errors occur when a child tries to utter sounds beyond their productive level. The errors committed by child trying to learn language can be classified as follows (Bloom and Lahey, 1978):

Reduction errors- The child tends to delete or eliminate sounds. For example, saying 'urt' instead of 'hurt' or 'tink' in place of 'stink'.

Coalescence errors- The child contracts a word into a single syllable for the sake of simplification and



commits this error. For example, 'Republic' is pronounced as 'rep'.

Assimilative error- This error occurs when one phoneme influences other and the place of articulation of a later consonant influences an earlier consonant. For example, 'rabbit' becomes 'wabbit' and 'ring' is pronounced as 'wing'.

Reduplication errors- This error is a feature of the child's phonology wherein different syllables of the word are pronounced in the same manner as the child tries to master the pronunciation of longer and complicated words. The child repeats the same syllable in a multisyllabic word. The child first pronounces 'water' as /wowo/ before learning to pronounce the correct form. Similarly, 'sister' is pronounced as /sisi/ and 'basket' as /baba/.

MORPHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

The child's first words are influenced by both perceptual and functional attributes of objects. The first words acquired by the child refer to concrete aspects of environment. The child easily learns words referring to concrete objects and words denoting interesting events occurring with regularity. The child also quickly picks up words referring to important people in their lives.

Clark(1973) claimed that the child first learns the perceptual features of concrete objects. So, to begin with the concept of 'ball' is acquired as something round and bouncy. Nelson (1974) however, stressed that the early words of a child are based on functional meaning. Therefore, a child learns the concept of 'ball' by associating activities performed with the ball. The different kinds of acts done with a ball like throwing, bouncing and holding influence the acquisition of this concept by the child.

The child exhibits a tendency called 'Overextension' while forming words. This is the error committed when the child includes too many items in their word classes. For example, the child might refer to all four-legged animals as *Dog* and all round objects as *Ball*. The language use by the child is characterized by 'Holophrases' which is a tendency to use telegraphic speech, a single word is used to express broader meaning. For example, a child might use a single-word utterance 'water' to express diverse meanings like 'I want water', 'there is water', 'someone is drinking water'. The child soon starts

forming two-word sentences like 'papa come' and 'I sleep' with increasing frequency. Around 2 years of age, once the child begins to speak in word combinations, the grasping of grammar of the native language progresses at fast pace. The child now moves beyond the telegraphic speech and incorporates inflectional morphemes in his speech. The acquisition of the morphological forms generally follows a pattern. The child first learns the use of '-ing' form as in 'sitting', 'reading', 'sleeping'. Further on, the use of regular plural '-s' suffix is incorporated in the child's speech as in 'boys', 'cats' and 'sits'. A peculiar error occurs during the learning of this plural morphemes when the child begins to overgeneralize the use of plural '-s'. The child applies the rule of adding '-s' to forms plurals indiscriminately, as in 'foots' and 'mans'. This error is attributed to the limited learning of the language patterns by the child who has not yet mastered the use of irregular plural forms.

However, contrastingly the child first acquires the use of irregular past tense morphemes rather than the regular '-ed' form. The child successfully uses such irregular forms like went, was and came before forming regular '-ed' patterns as in 'walked' and 'played'. Interestingly, once the regular past tense morpheme starts appearing in the child's speech, the irregular forms disappear for some time and are substituted by overgeneralized versions like 'goed' and 'comed'. Eventually, the child masters the use of regular and irregular patterns.

SYNTACTIC DEVELOPMENT

The development of morphology is accompanied with acquisition of sentence structure. The child at the age of 2 starts uttering three-four word utterances and learns the tact of forming grammatical constructions. Sentence constructions like 'She play ball', 'I want big chocolate' and 'where mummy going?' become a part of child's language inventory.

The child eventually displays a major grammatical advance and there will be appearance of sentences containing two or more clauses. Moreover, the clause structure extends to four- five elements by the time the child is four years old as in 'you give me my new toy now'. The child mainly produces sentences which are coordinate clauses linked by the



coordinate conjunction 'and' as in '*I throw toy and it broken and mummy scold*'.

The child employs the use of subordination in sentences by using words like so, if, after, because as in '*I eat food because me hungry*'.

However, while producing their early multi-word utterances, the child shows inconsistency in the use of verbal inflection, function words such as 'to' and 'the' and auxiliary verbs like 'can' and 'is'. The child's utterances basically comprise of only content words while some or all of the function words, auxiliaries and verbal inflection might be omitted by the child.

In a bid to utter longer and complicated sentences, the child tends to commit errors and there are fluency issues. The syntactic learning continues throughout the early school years. The level of sophistication of language construction accelerates and by the age of seven the child starts acquiring the finer intricacies of native language. A variety of new constructions are uttered and several compound and complex sentences are formed by using connectors like really, though, for instance etc. The researchers deploy the concept of child's mean length of utterance (MLU) to assess child's language development. The child's progress is measured in terms of average length of the utterance which the child produces at a particular point in time.

The children exhibit three clearly identifiable stages in the acquisition of questions and in the use of negatives. A general pattern shows that Stage one occurs when the child is between 18 and 26 months, Stage two between 22 and 30 months and Stage three is between 24 to 40 months.

The child forms Questions in the *First Stage* by simply uttering simple sentences with a rising intonation towards the end or by suffixing wh- form to the beginning of the utterance as in '*Where mummy?*', '*Who come?*'. The child continues the use of rising intonation and learns to form more complex and longer wh-utterances in the *Second Stage* as in '*Why you sleep?*', '*You want cake?*' In the *Third Stage*, the child acquires the correct placement of subject and verb in English questions as in '*Will you help me?*', '*What can you do?*'. However, the child has not yet mastered the formation of Questions and might commit error in the formation of wh- negative

questions as in the child forms the question -'*Why mummy can't wake up?*' instead of the correct form '*Why can't mummy wake up?*'

Negatives are formed in the First Stage by a simple strategy of beginning every utterance with 'no' or 'not' as in '*no milk*', '*not sleep*'. The child adds additional negative forms like 'don't' and 'can't' in his language inventory in the Second Stage of acquisition of Negatives. Here, the child continues the use of 'no' and 'not' for formation of negative utterances but with an alteration. These two negative morphemes are now placed in front of the verb rather than at the beginning of the sentence as in '*I no eat food*', '*You not sleep now*'.

As the child progresses to the Third Stage, more negative forms like 'didn't' and 'wont' are incorporated while the negative 'no' and 'not' which were used during the first stage disappear. '*I won't eat food*', '*You didn't catch it*'. The child eventually learns the use of the negative form 'isn't' as in '*Mummy isn't sleeping*'. The children exhibit peculiar error in the acquisition of Negatives. The child repeatedly shows a tendency to use double negatives even after parental correction as in '*Nobody don't love me*'.

SEMANTIC DEVELOPMENT

The semantic development can be traced from the child's 'first word' to a progressive lexical growth, both in terms of production and comprehension. By 18 months, most children can speak 50 words and understand about 250 words. By the age of 2, spoken vocabulary exceeds approximately 200 words.

The content of early vocabulary of a child centres around the immediate surroundings. The young child's vocabulary consists of following words:

- People—mainly relatives like *daddy, baba, mom*
- Words describing toys like *ball, doll, brick*
- Early adjectives like *big, hot, little*
- lexical units denoting body parts like *nose, mouth, feet*
- Social words like *hello, bye*
- Response words like *no, yes*
- Action words related to child's activities like *eat, sleep, drink, jump*



- Words for food products like *milk, apple, juice*
- Words for clothing like *shoes, cap*
- Animals, both seen in reality or on tv like *doggie, cat, horse, lion*
- Words for vehicles and the related noises- *car, brrm, train, chuk-chuk*
- Routine household objects like *cup, clock, light, fan*
- Deictic expressions like *that, mine, there*

The child also displays a tendency of using the lexical relation of Hyponymy. The child will generally use the middle level term in a hyponymous set of lexical units. For example, the child first uses the word '*flower*' to refer to the broader concept of '*plants*' or even to a narrow concept of '*tulips*', before acquiring the distinction between the use of individual words. The antonym relations are acquired fairly late by the child, generally after the age of five.

However, the acquisition of semantics is a gradual process as the child does not learn a word with its meaning ready-made. Rather, the child arrives at this meaning and in the process, makes strange use of words. It is difficult to determine precisely the meaning that children attach to the words they use. This accounts to certain errors that a child commits in meaning making during the second and third year:

Over extension- The propensity of the child to use the same word for different objects and concepts. The child extends the meaning of the word and applies it to several objects on the basis of similarities in shape, size, sound and colour. For example, a child often extends the sound '*bow-wow*' to refer not only to a dog but also to a cat, cow or even a horse. Similarly, the word '*ball*' is identified with all round objects that a child encounters, be it a door knob, a lampshade or even the moon. Therefore, a limited vocabulary is used to refer to a large number of unrelated objects. The semantic development begins with overextension in the use of words initially, gradually the vocabulary of the child widens and there is narrowing in the application of a word only to the actual object or concept.

Under extension - Contrastingly, the scope of the words might be narrowed by the child only to denote the objects which the child possesses. For example,

the word '*shoes*' might be used to refer only to the child's own shoes. Similarly, the word '*dog*' only for the child's pet dog.

Mismatch- At times, there are no apparent basis for the wrong use of word by the child. For example, a child may call a telephone as a car. Here, no clear explanation can be given for this association of ideas. Semantic development continues throughout the school years and in this way, it is quite unlike phonology and grammar. The child continues learning new vocabulary and indeed there are new words and meaning to explore in the adult life.

PRAGMATIC DEVELOPMENT

Pragmatic development in a child signals that the language acquisition is learning much more than just patterns of sound, grammar and vocabulary. Language acquisition implies learning how to use the acquired linguistic patterns appropriately in social situations.

The Child displays remarkable development in the conversational skills between the ages of 2 and 4. The Pragmatic awareness of a child gradually develops and by the age of 3, the child has learned many aspects of conversation strategy. The child is now able to respond appropriately and can hold the listener's attention. The child also acquires the ability of initiating a dialogue and adheres to the conventions of taking turns while conversing.

The child becomes conscious of conversation implicature and develops the ability to cope with situations which require adjustment. The child aims at successful communication and learns the correct use of forms of address and markers of politeness like '*please*' and '*sorry*'. Thus, the conversational ability becomes extremely sophisticated by the fifth year and the child is pragmatically aware.

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN SCHOOL

The introduction of the children to the educational setting exposes them to a variety of linguistic skills like reading, writing and spelling. Moreover, the child mingles with children from different regional and social backgrounds and now the learning continues in a varied linguistic environment. The process of language acquisition continues unabated in the school setting as the child



now encounters a social situation where formal and informal speech is clearly distinguished.

CONCLUSION

The development of infant's language repertoire can be segregated into progressive stages. This process of child language acquisition is gradual and developmental. The child continues acquiring the varied aspects of the native language through the later years of childhood. The child continually works out how to use the linguistic system by actively using it for communication.

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