

Stages of Child language acquisition

Mahieddine Rachid

Département d'Anglais

Université Africaine D'Adrar

Algérie.

The Abstract

Children acquire their mother language within families' members, through passing into series of stages (Universal stages and Piaget's developmental stages), we demonstrate that all normal children pass through the same stages in all over the world. Moreover, they learn their first language smoothly.

Once more, we high light on the three major theories of language acquisition which corporate together to show how do children acquire their first language, because each independent theory can't answer the above question precisely. For instance, we can't take the cognitive maturation and neglect imitation, reinforcement and language acquisition device.

Further more, abnormal children face many difficulties to acquire their mother language because of some biological problems as well as social ones.

Le Résumé en français

L'acquisition d'une langue et les enfants anormaux

Les enfants acquièrent leur langue maternelle au sein de l'entourage familial, en passant par plusieurs étapes (étapes Universelles et étapes du développement mental de PIAGET), nous démontrons que tous les enfants normaux passent par les mêmes étapes partout dans le

monde. En outre, ils apprennent leur langue maternelle graduellement et sans à-coup.

Une fois de plus, nous projetons la lumière sur les trois (03) principales théories de l'acquisition d'une langue dont leur convergence montre comment les enfants acquièrent leur première langue, parce que séparées ces théories ne peuvent répondre et expliquer précisément la question ci-dessus. Par exemple, nous ne pouvons pas prendre en considération la maturation cognitive et négliger l'imitation, le renforcement et le dispositif d'acquisition du langage.

Plus loin encore, les enfants anormaux sont confrontés à plusieurs difficultés pour acquérir leur langue maternelle à cause de certains problèmes biologiques aussi bien que les problèmes sociaux.

Introduction:

Language is words, terms and concepts. It is used by human being in order to communicate with each other. They use language to speak about their past, present and future. The use of language also enables us to express our feeling and ideas.

We can distinguish between three acts of language: signing, writing and speaking. In this study we will deal with the latter act. Children are not born with the ability to talk; they acquire their mother language within their families and at early age children learn language because of the plasticity of their brain.

Child language acquisition is a complex process; children acquire their spoken language from the environment. They speak the language of their caregivers (especially their mothers). The fact that there are some

children who succeed in acquiring their language; while others fail in doing it, pushes us to look after the reasons behind this phenomenon. Hence, this leads us to look in the field of psycholinguistics.

Psycholinguistics studies the correlation between psychology and linguistics. It studies the way people process language and how do they use it to underline mental processes. Among the many studies developed by the branch of psycholinguistics is the process of language acquisition in little children. So, the field of psycholinguistics answers all the questions related to language acquisition (mother language, second language). Language disorder, aphasia and other language problems are also studied by this branch.

Before developing some functional skills (walking) the newborn starts to use words, utterances, then phrases which are characterized by being encoded it contains grammar. He can use grammar even before receiving his first lesson in it. So, in what way do little children acquire and develop their native (first) language?

Language Acquisition:

Child language acquisition means how a child acquires the language of his society. More precisely, how can he acquire his mother tongue? The child acquires his first language by imitation. That is, child learn to speak by imitating and copying what they have heard around them, and by having their responses strengthened by repetition, corrections, and reactions that adults provide as well as do imitate a great deal, especially in learning sounds and

vocabulary, but little of their grammatical ability can be explained in this way.

Two kinds of evidences are commonly used in support of this criticism one based on the kind of the language of children, the other on what they do not produce.¹

The first evidence is when the child makes grammatical mistakes. For example: in irregular part tense form as in /went-go/ the child replaces these forms based on the regular patterns of the language. He says: /wented-goed/.

The second evidence is based on the way child seem unable to imitate adult grammatical construction, exactly even when invited to do so. The following reported dialogue indicates that kids are unable to imitate grammatical rules even though they asked by their caregivers :(a mother and her 03 years kid Amine).

Mother: Don't play with your sister's copy-book!

Child: No! It's not his, its Amine's.

Mother: No, say it's not hers.

Child: No! It's not his (04 times repeated).

At this point, the child in learning grammar has a problem of using genderlect. This example suggests that "language acquisition is more a matter of maturation than of imitation" according to the mentalist school. Language acquisition takes place during the period when the infant is maturing physically and mentally².

¹ David Crystal, The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language, second edition 1997, page 236 .

² David Crystal . op .cit.page 256 .

Accordingly, some psycholinguists like Noam Chomsky³ argued that child was born with an innate capacity for learning human language, and that child discover the grammar of his/her language based on their own inborn grammar. He also said that we are born with all the structures of language: Semantics, Morphology, and Syntax. And consequently we are born with the capacity to speak.

Chomsky originally believes that the child's language device is a series of syntactic universals. These syntactic structures are innate, and only the words are learned⁴.

How does a child acquire language?

While the child is acquiring language, he passes through a number of stages in order to develop his communication capacities, these are: pre – linguistic stage and linguistic stage.

1-Pre-Linguistic stage(the silent period)

At this stage, the newborn uses screaming, cooing-babbling, imitating and other pre-linguistic (behaviours) to attract his mother's attention in a way to communicate with her.

A-The first stage Basic Biological Noises (0-8weeks) or Screaming phase:

During the first few weeks of life, the vocal sounds of the baby reflect his biological states and activities. States of hunger, pain or discomfort that cause crying, these cries are known as “ reflexive noises “.However, breathing, eating

³ Averam Noam Chomsky (1928) an American linguists ,is the founder of transformationale grammar .

⁴ Pandora. Cii.wvu.edu/Child Language Acquisition.

and other bodily actions are concerned with a survival cause a wide range of “*vegetative noises*”⁵ such as :sucking, swallowing.

At this stage, cries have different functions, for example: hunger and pain cries tend to merge into a single distress cry, though pain, cries are often much shorter and occur in brief sequences. Crying helps the child to learn linguistic sounds⁶.

Since the child says /bowa/ he send a message to her mother, and since her mother receive the message, she understood that her child wants to say: «I want to drink some water» .we calls this ‘cooing’ a language.

B-Cooing and Babbling phase:

The first cooing sounds are produced between six and eight weeks. The sounds that the child produces are different from those of crying because they are more frequent and are quiter, lower pitched and more musical than those which made crying usually consisting of a short vowel like sound preceded by a consonant as the sound made towards the back of the mouth. After a period, cooing sounds are strung together about ten or more at a time. During the cooing stage, babies are seen to be performing the first activities required for the production of speech. The tongue begins to move vertically and horizontally, and the vocal cords begin to be used in coordination with it, also there is a great deal of lip movement⁷.

⁵ David Crystal, page 431

⁶ David Crystal, op.cit, page 238

⁷ Ibid.

At the age of 06 months, the sound production is described as babbling. At this stage the child uses a smaller set of sounds with greater frequency, to produce /bababa/ these sequences are known as « reduplicated babbling »because of the repeated use of the same syllable. Then this develops into « variegated babbling », which changes from one syllable to the next one.

Babble utterances are seen to have no meaning. In addition, children at this stage vocalize a sum of consonants in the first six months like back velar consonants.

In his sixth month, the child can differentiate between the sounds, and later between his sixth and ninth month alveolar sounds become dominants⁸. By this age the infant becomes able to store some words which are used by his parents, for example; when he/she needs water, he/she says /bowa/ and /toto/ for a car.

After these stages, the ability of child develops, and after one year old, the child makes use of one or two syllables sounds in order to form several words. For example:/ba/ is used for both baby and cup. By the fifteenth month the infant will be able to understand some simple sentences for example: saying ‘give me.....’, and without forgetting to show the object. At the age of eighteen months, the child can show you his mouth, eyes, hand if you asked her/him to show it. He can understand almost all the speech of adults, but he can not answer them yet.

⁸ David Crystal, op. cit,page 239

At this period, he adds other sounds to his repertoire such as:/m/,/p/. This helps the child to distinguish a much larger number of words. He also begins to use some of these consonants and vowels at the beginning or at the end of some words as in:/m ak/ instead of 'go with you'. The words that he child produces at this stage are formed from what surrounds him⁹.

C-Imitating phase:

At this stage, the child starts to simulate the sounds around him, especially human sounds and he begins to produce words which he can use to communicate with adults. So, adults begin to simplify words in order to encourage the infant to pronounce these simplified words. At the age of one year and half, the child starts to imitate and he becomes able to repeat the words which he hears from adults.

At the age of one year and seven months, the child is still repeating the words which he grasp, it means that ;he wants to store it in her/his mind. The child uses one word instead of a whole sentence. For example: He/she says /toto/ instead of 'take me with you in the car'. Here the child is not able to put the forms together to produce a coherent sentence. So, this language is abbreviated or it is shortened.

2-Linguistic stage:

When the child passes through the pre-linguistic stage, he moves to the linguistic stage. These two stages are interrelated, each one completes the other.

⁹ David Crystal, op. cit, page 24

A-The two-word sentences:

The first thing that the child acquires is names, especially names of persons around him and of things more than any thing else, approximately 50 words, for example: When he/she says: /loto baba/ instead of 'this car is for my father', at this example we can notice that the child starts to use two words together instead of one full sentence (subject, verb and object). There is a semantic-syntactic relations between concepts and their means, it develops into two words utterances¹⁰. In addition to this, the child says "***baby chair***", ***this utterances may have different interpretation, it depends on the context, for example: the phrase "baby chair" can be used as an expression (this is baby's chair), or as a request (put the baby in chair), or as a statement (baby is in the chair)***"¹¹. After a period, the child starts to use some action verbs as go, eat, play...., for example: when he/she cry and says /t&am/ for "eat", he/she shows you that he/she is hunger, he needs for food, he/she wants to say : "I am hunger, I want to eat". But names of things are still used more than the verbs which have no abstract nature. For example: When he/she says /mama t&am/ instead of the sentence /mam I want to eat/, heir we find that the child use only names. So at this period, child needs to know names of things more than the verbs. Child at this phase goes through various procedures including syllable, simplification, substitution and assimilation.

¹⁰-Ronald Wardlough and H.Douglas Brown, A Survey of Applied Linguistics, University of Michigan press 1976, page 16

¹¹ -George Yule, The Study of Language, Low Price Edition, Cambridge University Press 1985, page 141.

At this stage, the child simplifies and reduces consonants by deleting one or more syllables. For example, /potabl/ instead of /portable/ for a “mobile” and /nebrik/ instead of /nebghik/ for “I love you”.

In addition to this, child starts to use two-words together instead of one sentence, for example: he/she says /loto baba/ instead of “this car is for my father”. When the child starts to use verbs, he/she uses in a wrong way (grammatical mistakes) as /baba imchi/, here the child use the present for the past. The correct tense is /baba mcha/. At the age of 20 month, the child starts using some words as: More, less.....

B-Telegraphic Stage:

Starting from the second half of the year two, the child starts to utter simple sentences composed of two to three words, however, these simple sentences are characterize by the absence of grammar (all the grammatical rules are omitted) for example: he/she says /mama rah ladar/ (mum be at home). At the age of two and half, the child’s semantic reservoir expands very fast and it grows to hundreds of words, it seems more like adult language¹². This feature begins to disappear by the end of the third year.

C-Full sentences phase:

Child at this stage can not produce a coherent sentence only after acquiring a number of words and when he produces a sentence, we should look for the long answer.

¹² -George Yule, op. cit, page 141

At the age of five, he/she can produce compound/complex sentence of three or four words composed of subject, verb and object. During this period, the child is able to differentiate between sex, gender, number and time. For example: He/she can differentiate between (boy and girl) and between (past, present and future). In addition to this, the child needs to develop her/his language skills according to the adults experiences, he masters most of the rules of his/her mother tongue *“regardless of intelligence, social class, or any of those environmental factors thought to play a role in other aspects of development”*¹³.

Piaget’s stages of development:

Jean Piaget (1896) a Swiss psychologist, who contributed in the way thinking takes place in children. He proposed a theory of childhood cognitive development in 1969, he believes that the mental growth does not differ from child to child, it is the same. Growth is not different in the same place; children develop in the same way and manner mentally and physically from infancy to adolescence.

Piaget divides cognitive development in to four stages; he believes that all children pass through these stages, which he thinks that they are universal.

***1-The Sensory motor stage* : (from birth to two years)**

¹³ Larson-Freeman Diane and H.Long Michael, An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research, Applied Linguistics and Language Study Series, sixth edition 1991, page114.

At this stage, infant learns by touching things. In this period, there is no thinking but senses (hearing, touching, smelling...) as an example: When he/she sees something, he/she tries to grasp it, and put it in her/his mouth. This scene shows that the child tries to realize whether that thing is soft, hard, hot or sweet. At first, the infant does not have the ability to differentiate between his/her body organs and the real object, but later on, he/she starts to know that his/her arm is a part of his/her body. During this stage, the infant is very selfish, he/she thinks that he/she is the king of the world; every thing is created to serve and please him/her.

At the end of this stage, child acquires the idea of 'object permanence' and he/she starts to acquire language.

Piaget calls this experience of being unable to see that the environment looks different to some one else 'Egocentrism'.

We can summaries this stage in to:

- Progress of Egocentrism.
- Developing the idea of object permanence.
- Acquiring language starts.

2-Preoperational stage (2-7years):'the play age'

At this period, the child is becoming able to represent the out-side world, the external one in his mind. The faculty of thinking starts to work, words and numbers come to stand for things, the brain starts to give a meaning for words, he has the images, symbols, and numbers in his mind. "***The child is preoccupied with verbal skills, at this point the child can names objects and reason intuitively***"¹⁴. He does

¹⁴ -Encarta98

not stop playing; he can store the information which is given to him/her.

However, during this period there are some phases of reality which the child is not ready to grasp. For example: child generalizes the concept of 'dog' on all animals which have four legs; dogs, cats...etc. That is why Piaget calls this experience 'pre-concept', because the concept of child differs from the concept of adult.

3-Concrete Operations stage (7-12 years): Middle childhood, also is called the school age

At this age, the infant is obliged to learn, to go to school which is the new world of order, master, work and discipline. It is not a free choice, it is by force.

Concrete operations is the matter of building the cognitive mind, the child takes all things, he/she needs inside school and a lot of cognitive efforts. This period is a critical period of learning, when the brain starts working, the child starts thinking in the right way, and the brain is ready to process a set of relationships and concepts of space. Child begins to think logically ***“he begins to deal with abstract concepts such as numbers and relationships”***¹⁵.

We notice at this stage that, the child keeps asking questions in order to find the logical answers to the different actions in front of him. For example: In case, the parents order their child to go to sleep or to take a bath, he/she may ask 'why should I do this?' why not you? ...etc.

¹⁵ -Encarta 98

Conclusion:

As I have written before, Children acquire their mother language within families' members, through passing into series of stages (Universal stages and Piaget's developmental stages), we demonstrate that all normal children pass through the same stages in all over the world. Moreover, they learn their first language smoothly.

Once more, we high light on the three major theories of language acquisition which corporate together to show how do children acquire their first language, because each independent theory can't answer the above question precisely. For instance, we can't take the cognitive maturation and neglect imitation, reinforcement and language acquisition device.

Further more, abnormal children face many difficulties to acquire their mother language because of some biological problems as well as social ones.

Finally, we hope in the future that there will be a scientific research work which really can identify the child's problem language, and to find out solutions for them.

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