

A Case for Language Acquirelearning

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1. INTRODUCTION

While generative theories of language acquisition have viewed the development of language in children as an interplay of nature and nurture, the latter's significance has been more popular in the form of a triggering mechanism for the former to manifest. Sufficient attention, as also acknowledged by Yang et al (2017, p. 8) has not been paid to the role of the input until recently.

This reluctance to consider the input, and how it is constructed and delivered to the child, is however only empirical, and not theoretical. Within Generativism, it is well understood that an 'ideal native-speaker hearer' is only envisaged to identify the principles that characterize the innate Language Acquisition Device (LAD). In other words,

“...To study actual linguistic performance, we must consider the interaction of a variety of factors, of which the underlying competence of the speaker-hearer is only one...The problem for the linguist, as well as for the child learning the language, is to determine from the data of performance the underlying system he puts to use in actual performance.” (Chomsky, 1965, p. 3f)

2. PROPOSAL

We propose a conceptual framework that we believe creates points of interface between research in language acquisition and that in early childhood education (ECE) in preschools and schools.

A child's acquisition of language is both a biological and a social process.

Experience must be interpreted in two senses to capture the fullness of what acquiring a language entails:

- It is experience of the primary linguistic data (PLD) that enables the child to set the parameters of Universal Grammar relevant to her language, e.g., to determine whether the language is SVO or SOV.
- Experience also involves the learning of those aspects of language that do not fall out from the principles and parameters of Universal Grammar, such as learning of phonological, lexical, information structure and other regularities of language that do not fall out from Universal Grammar principles.

Preschools and schools are the perfect field to observe both types of experience in motion.

3. EVIDENCE

Presented here are data from two acquisition studies, one on production of oblique and overt case in Hindi, and the other on polite pronoun production in Bangla. The Hindi data reveals that children's language approximates adults' linguistic competence at even the earliest stages of language acquisition. The Bangla data reveals the opposite.

HINDI LANGUAGE ACQUISITION DATA

The use of Oblique Case and Concord in Hindi Child Language

The presence of overt case morphology or postpositions on a Hindi NP obligatorily requires a declension class of nouns to assume OBLIQUE form (Butt & King 2004, Spencer 2005, Kachru 2006, a.o.)

Morphological inflections on nouns:

-aa ending M.SG

Plural nouns: M/F

Suppletive morphology on functional categories:

Pronouns (demonstrative, relative & personal)

wh- words

Morphological inflections on modifying categories:

Vowel ending Adjectives

Particles denoting modification by noun

Non-finite participles

Summary of errors in oblique case and oblique concord				
Total overt arguments NP / CNP: 14637				
Obligatory oblique case/concord contexts (Form of NP/CNP + overt case/Layer II)				
Pronouns	Total	Cor rect	Omis sions	Omis sions %
wh-word	1924	2	2	0.10
A: *on (Hindi) head noun only	13	13	0	0.00
B: *on mod only & a non-inflecting (English/Hindi) head noun (only OBL concord)	232	197	35	15.09
C: *on mod & *on inflecting (Hindi) head noun (*OBL case + *OBL concord)	266	230	36	13.53
D: *on mod & *on inflecting (Hindi) head noun (*OBL case + *OBL concord)	86	75	6	6.98
E: /on mod & *on inflecting (Hindi) head noun (*OBL case + *OBL concord)	243	-	0	-
F: /on mod & *on inflecting (Hindi) head noun (*OBL case + *OBL concord)	243	-	5	5.81
Total	2521	7	84	3.33

The appearance of -ko and -se marked objects in Hindi child language data

The use of sociative marker on the theme/patient argument instead of accusative:

(1) jaadugar -ne parii-se gale lagaayaa (CT-HSS:5;3)

magician -ERG fairy-se neck.put.PERF

'The magician hugged with the fairy'

The use of the theme/patient role in place of the sociative argument:

(2) raajaa handshake karrahaa hE ek laRki-ko (CT-ST2:3;7)

king handshake do PROG.M.SG AUX.PRS.3P one girl -ko

'The king is shaking hands to a girl'

Nominal in the clause	Target form	Total instances of overt argument	Correct used	form	Form omitted	Incorrect form used
Object of V _i	-ko	560	519	92.7%	0.7%	6.6%
Object of V _i	-se	65	42	64.6%	3.1%	32.3%
Indirect object of V _{di}	-ko	404	379	93.8%	0	6.2%

21 Hindi speaking children (41 to 71 months)

Use of the correct case marker is affected by created individual lexical entries for the predicates, and given that children know both the sociative and polyfunctional -ko, a pedagogical approach that variegates the input of predicate types will enable the child to arrive at the correct generalizations.

BANGLA LANGUAGE ACQUISITION DATA

Bangla manifests the social relationship between speakers and addressees/referents in 2nd & 3rd person pronoun morphology

In the 2nd person, there are three pronouns, which we christen L(evel) 1, L(evel) 2 (L2) and L(evel) 3 pronouns – L1 is the least polite while L3 the most. In the 3rd person there are two pronouns, L2 and L3.

3 Structured elicitation tasks designed to test pronoun knowledge

19 Children (2;5 to 6;11) and with 10 adult controls)

Amongst the adult controls, only 9 (n=130) i.e. 6.9% were instances of an informal pronoun produced when the target was a formal one. Among the children this was the predominant error type [102 instances (n= 241) i.e. 42.3%.

In T1 the target was never met. No formal pronoun was produced.

In T2, of the 19 target responses (25.7%) only 1 was the formal pronoun, produced by one child(bcho9) aged 5;9, as given in example (1). However, this child also produced informal pronouns in place of formal ones [see (2)].

(1) o ... onar-i
his (formal') (bcho9: 5;9)

(2) #o dadu-Ta pa wash korchhe
o grandpa-CLF 3P.SG.1.2-GEN foot wash doing.3P (bcho9: 5;9)

The grandpa, is washing his, foot.
In T3, out of the 16 (15.5%) target responses met, 6 had the target formal pronoun in them. Five of these were produced by a child aged 6;10 and one by a child aged 5;9.

	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3
Target response rate	0.0%	25.7%	15.5%

Child Bangla: Target response = formal pronoun (L3)

	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3
Target response rate	40.0%	70.3%	82.2%

Child Bangla: Target response = non-formal pronoun (L2)

Impoliteness galore!

no fe-set pronouns, only as utterance starter (6;2)

Context: A doctor massaging his own head

fe ... oi daktar ta o-r mat'a'r mod'd'e
he ... that doctor-CLF 3SG.1.2-GEN head-GEN middle.1OC
o-r nidye-r hat ta dij't'e
3SG.1.2-GEN RHFL-GEN hand-CLF give.PRF.PRS.3.1.2
He ... the doctor has put his own hand on his head

Demonstratives as personal pronouns (3;6)

Context: A girl tickling her mother

[tʃʊtʃʊ diŋʈe
tickles give.PROG.PRS.1.3
Tickling?
RE: kake
Whom?
CH: eta-ke
this-ACC
This one

Proximal personal pronouns replacing distal ones (3;2)

Context: A boy giving a kiss to his own hand

RE: kake diŋʈ'e
whom give.PROG.PRS.3.1.2
Whom is he giving the kiss/to
CH: hat'ke
hand-DAT
To the hand
RE: kar hat'ke
whose hand-GEN
CH: er hat'ke
3SG.1.2-PROXIM hand-DAT
(He, is giving a kiss) to this one's hand

4. DISCUSSION

The acquisition of language is an "acquisition + learning" process:

- Some features, like case marking, are acquired. The grammatical "errors" in the Hindi acquisition data reveals that children master some rules with high accuracy despite an impoverished input provided by limited experience at an incredibly early age.
- Other features, like politeness, are almost 'learnt'. They are dependent on the frequency of their use in a child's environment, which may further depend upon unambiguous communicative needs and socio-cultural norms of expression.

Early Childhood Education (ECE) as a societal institution that mediates the cultural transmission of language is the locus to study both the acquisition and the learning aspects of language development. This is where the acquisition component proceeds simultaneously with the learning component.

ECE is 'the field' for investigating the robustness of theoretical formulations of both domain-specific as well as domain-general properties of acquirelearning.

ECE is also the institution that can ease acquirelearning, especially perhaps if the language being learnt is not the child's home language. Language games and activities rooted in acquirelearning research can be built to address children's struggles, particularly with the learning component of acquirelearning.

Even though children do not necessarily imitate adult language, we propose that input in the early educational environment would benefit from an accessible understanding of the child's innate grammatical knowledge.

5. References

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