

LINGUISTICS

FOURTH YEAR

LECTURE (4): FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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KEY CONCEPTS

❑ **First language acquisition**

- **The Characteristics of First Language Acquisition**
- **Input and Caregiver**

❑ **The acquisition schedule**

- **Pre-linguistic stage: Crying, Cooing, and Babbling**
- **The one-word stage**
- **The two-word stage**
- **Telegraphic speech**

❑ **The acquisition process**

- **Developing morphology**
- **Developing syntax: Forming questions and Forming negatives**
- **Developing semantics**

FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

CHILD: Want other one spoon, Daddy.

FATHER: You mean, you want the other spoon.

CHILD: Yes, I want other one spoon, please Daddy.

FATHER: Can you say “the other spoon”?

CHILD: Other ... one ... spoon.

FATHER: Say “other.”

CHILD: Other.

FATHER: “Spoon.”

CHILD: Spoon.

FATHER: “Other spoon.”

CHILD: Other ... spoon. Now give me other one spoon?

Braine (1971)

FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

The main **characteristics** of first language acquisition:

- 1. Innate Capacity (Universality):** Humans have a **biological predisposition** for language. All normal children acquire language **naturally** and follow similar **developmental stages**.
- 2. Interaction-based:** inborn **language capacity is not enough**. The particular language a child learns is acquired in **a particular language-using environment**, i.e., exposure triggers language. A child who **does not hear language will learn no language**.
- 3. Natural and Subconscious Process:** Children acquire their first language **effortlessly**, without **overt instruction**. It is an **implicit learning process**.
- 4. Rapid Development:** First language acquisition is remarkable **for the speed**. It progresses **quickly**, especially between ages 2–5, with explosive growth in vocabulary and syntax.
- 5. Critical Period:** There is an optimal or **"critical" time**, primarily in early **childhood before puberty**, during which language acquisition occurs most easily and naturally. Learning a first language after this period is significantly **more challenging**.

INPUT

Input is the language that children are **exposed to**, and its quality and quantity significantly influence the pace and **outcome of language development** (output).

Caregiver speech (also called '**motherese**' or '**child-directed speech**') is the characteristically **simplified speech style** adopted by someone (**the older children and adults**) who spends a lot of time **interacting with a young child**.

□ Characteristics of Caregiver Speech

1. **Phonological Features:** extra **loudness**, exaggerated **intonation** (e.g., **Looooook! A baaaaall!**), and low rhythm with **long pauses** (e.g., **We are... going... for a walk**).
2. **Syntactic Features:** **The frequent use of questions** (e.g., **Where's teddy?**), **simple sentences and grammar** (e.g., **Mommy eat.**), and **a lot or of repetition and rephrasing** (e.g., The child says "**Car.**" The caregiver responds: "**Car? Yes, a fast car! The car goes fast.**")
3. **Babytalk forms:** **simplified words** (e.g., **milk, ball**, etc.), **diminutive forms** (e.g., **doggy**), **reduplication** (e.g., **nanna, nono, pee-pee, poo-poo, dada, haw-haw, cocococo, choo-choo**), and **onomatopoeia** (e.g., **meow**)

THE ACQUISITION SCHEDULE

- All normal children develop language **at roughly the same** schedule.
 - The same thing for **sitting up, crawling, standing, walking, using the hands** and many other **physical activities**, it would seem that the language acquisition schedule has the same basis as the biologically determined development of motor skills.
 - This is a **universal biological timeline** tied to **brain development**.
- ❑ **Children go at different stages during the early years of life.**



1. **Pre-linguistic Stage** (0–12 months): **Before children utter their first words**, they communicate through **sounds** and **gestures**.
 - a. **Crying** (Birth to - 2 months): is the infant's primary mode of communication to express basic needs like **hunger** or **discomfort**. The child develops a range of **crying styles**, with different patterns for different needs.
 - b. **Cooing** (2 to 5 months): is the **earliest use of speech-like sounds**.
 - **The first 2 months**: the child gradually becomes capable of producing **sequences of vowel-like sounds** (particularly high vowels **[i]** and **[u]**), often in response to pleasurable interactions with caregivers.
 - **4 months**: the ability to bring **the back of the tongue** into regular contact with **the back of the palate** – producing sounds similar to **velar consonants [k] & [g]**
 - **5 months**: an infant differentiates between the vowels **[a]** and **[i]**.
 - c. **Babbling** (5 to 12 months): is the stage in which the child produces **a number of sounds and syllables**.
 - **6-8 months**: is characterized by the production of consonant-vowel combinations, such as **ba-ba-ba** and **ga-ga-ga**.
 - **9-10 months**: is characterized by recognizable **intonation patterns** to the consonant and vowel combinations being produced, variation in the combinations (**ba-ba-da-da**), **nasal sounds** become common (**ma-ma-ma**).
 - **10-11 months**: the children become capable of using **more complex syllable combination** (**ma-da-ga-ba**).

2. **The One-Word (Holophrastic) Stage (12 to 18 months):** children begin to produce a variety of meaningful, recognizable **single-unit words**. This stage is characterized as:
 - **Single words convey whole ideas:** Children may use a single word to express **holophrastic** or a **complete idea** (such as “**milk**” might mean “**I want milk**” or “**That is milk**”), “**cookie**”, “**cat**”, “**cup**”, and “**spoon**”.
 - **Vocabulary expansion:** Vocabulary grows slowly at first, typically reaching about **50 words**.
 - **Overextension:** Children may **too broadly overextend** the meaning of a word on the basis of **similarities of shape, sound and size** (e.g., **ball** is extended to all kinds of round objects, including **an apple, an egg, a grape, and the moon**). This is followed by a gradual process of **narrowing down**.
 - **Underextension:** Children may use **a word too narrowly**, applying it to only a specific item or limited context instead of the entire category (e.g., calling only their dog “**dog**,” **not other dogs**).

3. **The Two-Word Stage (18 to 20 months):** is the period that the child’s vocabulary moves beyond **fifty words**. Children begin **combining two words** into **simple phrases** or “**mini-sentences**”, similar to **baby chair, mommy eat, cat bad**.
 - **Basic syntax:** Utterances follow **basic word order rules** of their native language (e.g., “**want cookie**,” “**Daddy go**”).
 - **Contextual use:** The adult interpretation of such combinations is very much tied to **the context of their utterance**. For example, the phrase **baby chair** may be taken **as an expression of possession** (= this is baby’s chair), or **as a request** (= put baby in chair), **or as a statement** (= baby is in the chair), depending on different **circumstances**.

4. **Telegraphic speech (two and two-and-a-half years old):** the child begins producing a large number of utterances that could be classified as “**multiple-word**” speech. Utterances become longer and **more sentence-like**, using primarily **content words** while omitting grammatical elements (like **articles**, **prepositions**, and **inflections**), such as **this shoe all wet**, **cat drink milk** and **daddy go bye-bye**.

➤ **By the age of three**, the vocabulary has **grown to hundreds** of words, and pronunciation has become closer to the form of adult language.



THE ACQUISITION PROCESS

1. Developing Morphology:

- **At the age of two-and-a-half years old**, a child begins to incorporate some of **the inflectional morphemes** to indicate the grammatical function of the **nouns** and **verbs** used.
- The first morphological markers tend to be used are **the present progressive "-ing"** (e.g., **cat sitting** and **mommy reading book**), the marking of regular plurals with the **-s form** (e.g., boys and cats), **possessive -'s** (e.g., **girl's dog** and **Mummy's book**), using forms of verb **to be** (e.g., **is, are, was**), **irregular verbs** (e.g., **went, came**), the appearance of **-ed for past tense** (e.g., **played, walked**), and finally, the use of **-s marker for 3rd person singular present tense verbs** with full verbs first (e.g., **comes, looks**) then with auxiliaries (e.g., **does, has**)

➤ **Overgeneralization:** is the process which occurs when a child **overgeneralizes the rule** of adding **-s or -ed** to form **plurals** or **past form** when they talk about **irregular nouns** (e.g., **foots** and **mans**) or verbs (e.g., **goed, comed**). Some children also begin using **irregular plurals (men) or verbs (went)** appropriately for a while, but then **overgeneralize again** and producing expressions (like **some mens** and **two feets**, or even **two feetses**), or verbs (like **walkeded** and **wented**).

➤ Even when the **correction is attempted**, the child will continue to use overgeneralization, despite the adult's repetition of what the correct form should be. In the following dialog the child is neither imitating the adult's speech nor accepting the adult's correction.

❖ **CHILD:** My teacher **holded** the baby rabbits and we patted them.

❖ **MOTHER:** Did you say your teacher **held** the baby rabbits?

❖ **CHILD:** Yes.

❖ **MOTHER:** What did you say she did?

❖ **CHILD:** She **holded** the baby rabbits and we patted them.

❖ **MOTHER:** Did you say she **held** them tightly?

❖ **CHILD:** No, she **holded** them loosely.

2. **Developing Syntax:** children gradually developing different syntactic structure

a. **Forming questions**

The first stage

- Simply add a **Wh-form** (**Where, Who**) to the beginning of the expression (e.g., **Where kitty? Where Doggie? Where horse go?**).
- Utter the expression with **a rise in intonation** towards the end (e.g., **Sit chair?**).

The second stage

More complex expressions can be formed:

- **The rising intonation strategy** continues to be used.
- More **Wh-forms** come into use (e.g., **What book name? You want eat? Why you smiling? See my doggie?**)

The third stage

- The required **inversion** of **subject** and **verb** in English questions appears (e.g., **I can go → Can I go?**)
- The 3rd stage questions are generally quite **close to the adult model** (e.g., **Can I have a piece? Did I caught it? Will you help me? How that opened? What did you do? Why kitty can't stand up?**)

a. Forming negative

The first stage

- Involves a simple strategy of putting **no** or **not at the beginning** (e.g., **not a teddy bear, no sit here, no fall**).

The second stage

- The additional negative forms **don't** and **can't** appear (e.g., **I don't want it, You can't dance**)
- **no** and **not** are increasingly used **in front of the verb** rather than at the beginning of the sentence (e.g., **He no bite you**)

The third stage

- The incorporation of **other auxiliary forms** such as **didn't** and **won't** (e.g., **I didn't caught it, She won't let go**)
- The typical **stage 1 forms disappear**.
- A very late acquisition is the negative form **isn't**, with the result that some stage 2 forms (with not instead of isn't) continue to be used for quite a long time (e.g., **He not taking it, This not ice cream**)

3. Developing Semantics

- During **the two-word stage children** use their limited vocabulary to refer to a large number of **unrelated objects** through the processes of overextension and underextension.
- **Antonymous relations** are acquired late (After the age of 5)
- The distinction between **more/less, before/after** seems to be later acquisition.



Thanks