

Acquisition and Change in First Language Acquisition

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Abstract

First language (L1) acquisition studies have evoked a significant deal of research in both linguistic and cognitive science. A relatively good number of studies have been conducted over the past decades to illuminate how L1 or child language acquisition mechanism takes place. Accordingly, the present review aimed at exploring the mechanisms children rely on as they acquire language, how they go through the developmental stages, and how continuity and change go hand in hand in L1 acquisition.

Keywords: First language acquisition; developmental stages; change.

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Introduction

It is a common observation that all children around the world learn the language of their environment with a relative ease (Brown, 2007).

Apart from so many tasks a young child is expected to learn such as walking and socializing, they also acquire the language spoken to them. What really distinguishes humans from other living animals on earth is language, and to think how effortlessly children acquire language with all its undertaking complexity is somehow baffling (Crystal, 2007). It takes only a few years for a young child to learn the building blocks of his own native language, that is, phonology, morphology, semantics and syntax (Carroll, 2006).

It has been a major dilemma for many scholars working in the field of Developmental Psycholinguistics who have worked on such questions as: “How does a child learn his/her language so well in such a short time?” or “what is the course of language learning in L1 acquisition?” (Kess, 1993). Years of scholarly research have provided us with invaluable insights into ‘why’ and ‘how’ L1 acquisition take place.

It is beyond doubt that although there is a good deal of individual variation in L1 acquisition, the manner and rate at which children acquire a language have universal characteristics (Fasold & Linton, 2006). These differences in language acquisition are mostly observed between one and three-year old children (e.g., when the first words are uttered or whether the child language learner is early or late talker,

etc.). The second year exhibits the most flagrant variability in the early lexical development (Harley, 2008).

As Stork and Widdowson (1974, cited in Rahimpour, 2004) argued, all human beings are able to acquire any language as their native language. Irrespective of a language a child is exposed to it, he/she can acquire it with a relative ease. No child fails to acquire his mother tongue and he is able to acquire largely his native language around age of five. It is still a mystery how all children handle the task of language in much the same way and finally end with the same general knowledge of language (Rahimpour, 2004).

Learning to talk plays a significant role in child's social communication and it becomes even more demanding when a child is exposed to all local conventions of use in his/her community Clark. This does not happen overnight. As children learn to talk, they proceed through a series of stages. Researchers have come up with the idea of *developmental sequences* for many aspects of first language acquisition (Lightbown & Spada, 2007). Many researchers agree that as child gradually discovers the language of his environment in his first three years, there are predictable patterns in the emergence and development of many features of language. It is argued that these developmental stages are cornerstone to children's cognitive development. For example, it has been proved that children do not use temporal adverbs such as 'yesterday' or 'next month' until they have grasped the notion of time (Clark, 2003).

These developmental stages appear to be uniquely similar and even principles governing each stage is believed to be universal (Denham & Lobeck, 2013). Based on this, Stork and Widdowson (1974, cited in Rahimpour, 2004, p. 59) concluded that:

- All human beings learn a language.
- All human languages are equally learnable.
- All human languages are different on the surface, but all have certain underlying features in common, which account for their being “learnable”.
- These features which are universal to all human beings are the key to what is innate.

According to Clark (2003), *continuity* and *change* go hand in hand and they are interconnected. This is mostly evident from the stages children go through it:

Many systems unfold with development, such that the roots of later forms can be traced to earlier ones. In their capacity to learn, children change enormously between six months and six years. This suggests there could be complex interactions between the learning mechanisms infants start out with and the stages of knowledge those mechanisms are applied to (p. 378).

In spite of the fact that in each community speakers share many common conventions on how to use language, still there is a good deal of individual differences. Therefore, there are many different routes to the same end point (Clark, 2003; Kess, 1993). Moreover, it is important to note that although almost all normal children go through

same developmental stages, the length of each stage appears to be different from one child to another (Radford, 2004a). Another equally important point to consider is that these stages often mix with each other and the last months of one stage are the beginning months of the next one. So, there is not a clear cut boundary in the time line for separating each stage (Ellis, 2008).

First Language Acquisition

First language acquisition can be defined as the process in which children learn (or acquire) their mother tongue (Brown, 2007). As Crystal (2003a) puts, “in the study of growth of the language in children, [acquisition is] a term referring to the process or result of learning (acquiring) a particular aspect of a language, and ultimately the language as a whole”. Child language acquisition refers to the fields of study scientifically exploring first language acquisition (Nunan, 2003). Linguists, psychologists and psycholinguists have studied first language acquisition from different perspectives (Richards, 2002). Up to now, three main theoretical approaches to child language acquisition have been suggested: the cognitive hypothesis by Jean Piaget, the operant conditioning hypothesis by Skinner, and the innateness hypothesis by Noam Chomsky (Ellis, 2008). Piaget believed that there is not any special aptitude or faculty for language acquisition in children. He argued that language acquisition is part of child’s intellectual development; therefore, he hypothesized that language acquisition goes hand in hand with child’s cognitive development (Brown, 2001). Skinner perceived that children

acquire a language by imitating and repeating what they hear; hence, there is no special cognitive feature in children for acquiring language (Johnson & Johnson, 2008).

Chomsky believes that children do not learn words and sentences haphazardly or simply by imitating what they are exposed to; rather, they acquire a language based on some rules which form a child's language competence. Chomsky conceived that children are born with an underlying knowledge of language which is common to all people and hence is universal. Furthermore, children do not need to learn these basic structures; they merely pick up aspects of language specific to their community (Meshkato Dini, 2008).

Prior to Birth

Prelinguistic stage of human development is a prerequisite for the subsequent linguistic development. It is commonly observed that any blockage or delay in child's pre-linguistic stage would point to developmental disorders (Zahradenikova, 2011). Anecdotal evidence has shown that a child in uterus hear the mother's speech and even may respond to it (e.g., by kicking) (Carroll, 2008). In an innovative research undertaken by DeCasper and Spence (1986, cited in Bavin, 2009), data has shown that newborns "exhibit changes in sucking behavior depending on whether the infants hear stories that were read by their mothers during the last few weeks of pregnancy or whether they hear novel stories" (p. 108).

Pre-linguistic Stage and Cooing

The very first moment a child comes to this world, he is exposed to language of his community and starts to experience a unique world, “a world of touch, sound, and affect, a world of communication” (Clark, 2009, p. 21), and starts to grow as a social being. A newborn baby tends to favor mother’s voices to those of strangers (Carroll, 2008). A two months old baby is able to recognize the intonation patterns of his native language. Other studies have revealed that babies are able to distinguish human language sound from other sounds (Denham & Lebeck, 2013). A newborn baby heavily relies on non-verbal options in order to convey his message. Likewise, adults resort to similar means to communicate with infants (Zahradenikova, 2011).

Hayes and Clark (1970, cited in Clark, 2003) hypothesize that segmentation through recognition is vital for early beginning. They identified three recognition mechanisms:

- a. *Bracketing*: to identify sequences in terms of preceding and following markers
- b. *Reference*: to identify patterns of sound segment (d-o-g) strongly correlated with some external reference object (a dog)
- c. *Clustering*: to detect recurring patterns as units without the aid of either markers or meanings.

Clustering would assist an infant to observe regular patterns in the speech addressed to them which is preceded to acquisition of meaning and form (Clark, 2003). In contrast to commonly held belief that infants are not able to generate speech, they exhibit an amazing ability to detect patterns in prosodic features of speech, which helps

them to segment the stream of speech into smaller units. Therefore, it seems that clustering is a formidable learning tool young infants generally rely to (Zahradenikova, 2011).

Children, no matter what language they are exposed to, need to have interaction with other people in order to learn the language (Yule, 2006). Having interaction with other people in the child's environment is not enough to ensure child's language development, as child should be exposed to another kind of speech, called caregiver speech. It goes without denial that children need help from parents and other caretakers to develop the language (Crystal, 2003b). After birth, caregivers speak to children in a distinctive manner which is fundamentally different from that of adults and it is called *child-directed speech* (Lightbown & Spada, 2007). According to Mshkato Dini (2008, p. 12), this kind of speech has a number of characteristics:

1. Its sentences are pronounced slowly and precisely.
2. Its sentences are grammatical.
3. It lacks complex sentences.
4. It has limited variation of verb tenses.
5. It contains short sentences.
6. It contains simple vocabulary.
7. It is related to present time.
8. In it, there is repetition of words or sentences.

In child-directed speech the phonological differences are significant (e.g., higher pitch, exaggerated intonation, and so on). During early vocalization phase, crying and cooing are paramount

(Clark, 2009). Caregivers encourage infants to participate in conversation through interpreting the infants' vocalizations and form it as a conversational turn (Carroll, 2008). Consider the following exchanges between a mother and her 3-month-old daughter (Snow, 1977, cited in Carroll, 2008, p. 253):

Ann: (smiles)

Mom: Oh, what a nice little smile! Yes, isn't that nice? There's a nice little smile.

Ann: (burps)

Mom: What a nice wind as well! Yes, that's better, isn't it? Yes.

Ann: Vocalizes

Mom: Yes! There's a nice noise!

During pre-linguistic stage, a normal child undergoes drastic perceptual and conceptual development which in turn enables a child to point and gesture (Zahradenikova, 2011). At this time, child is able to identify faces, objects and actions. He is able to detect similarities and differences in phenomena presented to him. It is believed that such cognitive abilities are vital for both linguistic and non-linguistic interactions (Lieven, 2008). Later on, during the first year, these gestural elements are incorporated into the conversation to compensate for any linguistic pitfalls (Clark, 2009).

Before infants attempt to generate speech, they are capable of communicating in complex ways through deictic, iconic, and conventionalized gestures (Gleitman & Newport, 1995). Newborn

babies are also capable of differentiating between native and non-native sounds till about ten months. This has been further supported by manifold event-related potential (ERP) studies, which measure electrical activity of the brain structures when responding to a stimulus (Kuhl, 2007).

Children usually start cooing when they are between 6 or 8 weeks old. Cooing develops along with crying and is usually quieter, lower-pitched and more musical than crying sounds. It has been observed that as child grows older, cooing sounds become more frequent (Crystal, 2003b). Cooing stage apparently does not play any fundamental role in first language acquisition. This can be explained in the light of the fact that children prevented from cooing because of physical problems, do not have any difficulty in language acquisition when they grow older and they gain physical ability to make sounds (Falk, 1978).

The Babbling Stage (4-8 months)

After cooing stage, usually at age of 4 or 5 months, babbling stage emerges and lasts until approximately one-year-old. Babbling is a stage in which sequence of syllables happen (Lightbown & Spada, 2007). That is, a 6-month old infant has acquired many of the sounds of his own native language, and up until he is about a year old he constantly produces these sounds during babbling stage (Denham & Lebeck, 2013). At first these syllables are fixed ones like *bababa*, but after a period of time they become more varied like *adu* and *muba* (Crystal, 2003b). Babbling seems to be an innately determined activity

(Falk, 1978); even deaf children if they are exposed to signing will start to babble with their hands (Hudson, 2000). Moreover, it is interesting to note that all hearing babies who are capable of vocalization babble, so it is a universal process (Brown, 2001). During this period, babies tend to produce the same consonants irrespective of a language they are exposed to: /p, b, t, m, d, n, k, g, s, h, w, j/ (Crystal, 1996).

Babbling has two important stages. The first one is known as reduplicated babbling. Infants first apply to reduplicated babbling in which they repeat a consonant-vowel sequence, such as *bababa*. By 11-12 months, infants resort to variegated babbling in which syllable strings they generate are rich consist of different consonants and vowels (Carroll, 2008), like *bigudabu* (Carroll, 2008). During this period, the categorical perception of nonnative contrast heavily declines and infant starts to acquire the phonology of his native language (Crystal)

Although all children go through variegated babbling stage, this stage does not play a communicative role for them. Carroll (2008) presents two reasons in support of this idea. As the first reason, he explains that sounds in babbling stage are sloppier than the corresponding sounds articulated later; for example, *ma* at a seven-month old child is sloppier than the *ma* of an eighteen-month old one. The second reason in his view is that children have been observed to babble in the absence of adults more than they do in presence of them.

Although there is no genuine meaning associated with babbling,

it can reveal some insights into infant's language development. In some cultures, infants are encouraged to babble, and gradually infants learn to stop in order to listen to their interlocutors, something identical to give-and-take exchanges, and this known as *proto-conversations* (Fasold, 2006).

Before a child starts to link a specific object with its symbols in the language, they sometimes create their own symbols to refer to objects or events in their environment. This is known as *idiomorphs* (Carroll, 2008). As an example, Carroll reported that his daughter tended to refer to milk as *ca ca*. Idiomorphs represent an important aspect of development: first, it shows that children's language is creative, that is, children do not simply imitate the language they are exposed to; rather they generate their own novel utterances. Second, children show a good level of consistency when it comes to referring objects in their environments. All in all, idiomorphs are an important transitional stage between babbling and true words (Lieven, 2008).

The One-Word Stage (9-18 months)

After the babbling stage, children enter a new stage, the one-word stage. This stage starts at the age of twelve months (Dominey & Dodane, 2004). By the end of the first year, infants have mastered two developmental components: "the use of gestures to convey meaning and mastery of speech sounds in non-communicative situations" (Carroll, 2008, p. 263). After a year, hearing babies recognize the word and start to produce their own words, particularly nouns and verbs. Within the period of 12 and 18 months, infants attempt to

produce the most common words in their environment (Denham & Lebeck, 2013). In some cases, these productions are adult-like, while other may be so distorted that is hard to understand (Brown, 2001).

These isolated forms refer to objects in the environment or people around. Sometimes, these words do not refer to a single referent. That is, children tend to use their very first words to refer to things and people they know in daily contact such as family, relatives and toys. These words may function as a phrase or even as a sentence. These isolated forms are *holophrases* or *telegraphic speech*.

Holophrase is a single word, but functions as a condensed sentence or proposition. For example, the word 'ball' could mean 'I want a ball', a sentence in which some grammatical elements are omitted (Zahradenikova, 2011). According to McNeil (1970, cited in Carroll, 2008), children at holophrase stage have some knowledge of syntactic relations but are not capable of incorporating that knowledge in their production.

It should be added that it is not easy to understand what a child says when she uses such a phrase; the meanings which we understand from child speech depend on ourselves and our understanding.

Parents' asserting that they understand what their child means does not mean that the child really means it. The speech produced by young children is frequently unintelligible, and even when their words are intelligible their meaning may be unclear. In one study, despite the superior performance of parents especially when they are listening to their own children's speech, the most accurate parent performance

was 56% accuracy for words and for meaning. Mothers often indicated their failure to comprehend children's utterances by ignoring their children's signals, using nonverbal behaviors, asking questions, and explicitly stating that they did not understand (Fagan, 2008).

At this stage, infants tend to utilize both *overextension* and *underextension* processes in their daily production. In overextension, infants extend the meanings of words and apply a single word to more complex concepts. As an example, the word 'ball' is used for any round object. In underextension, however, the meanings are narrower than for adults, or a general word is used to refer a specific thing, for example 'kitty' for particular cat not for other cats (Denham & Lebeck, 2013; Zahradenikova, 2011).

During this stage, children can produce up to 50 different words, but the common observations indicate that they can understand more than that (Fasold, 2006). This is because of the fact that they have greater motor control of the speech apparatus, which assist them to generate sound in a more distinguished way. The cognitive developments enable the infants to associate specific objects with specific symbols in the language (Carroll, 2008). While parents often brag about a child who is early talker, there is little evidence to suggest that the timing of the first words corresponds to later intelligence (Fasold, 2006).

It has been observed that children might go through another step before the next stage – the two-word stage. In this step, children tend to use a combination of gestures and words. For example, they point

to a cup and say *mine*. It seems that the lexical items have appeared in child's repertoire first in gesture and then in word (Carroll, 2008).

These gestures are so important that are used to predict the vocabulary size in older ages (Yule, 2006). A study has shown that the number of early child gestures predicts later vocabulary and "children who use more varied vocabulary in speech, use more varied vocabulary in gesture, and vice versa" (Rowe, 2008, p. 182).

The Two-Word Stage (18-24 months)

The next stage which children go through is the two-word stage. Generally, it starts from eighteen to twenty months of age and lasts until the age of two years. Having achieved vocabulary arsenal of about 50 words, children are ready for the two-word stage. Children start to test grammatical elements in two-word utterances (Zahradenikova, 2011). Precisely speaking, during eighteen to twenty months old, child's vocabulary has moved beyond fifty words; so in two-word stage a variety of combinations of words can be observed. These combinations of words are mostly interpreted by adults according to the context in which they appear (Yule, 2006).

In two-word stage, lots of combinations like *bye-bye mommy*, *bye-bye daddy*, *bye-bye TV*, *baby chair*, *mommy eat*, and *cat bad* appear. If we analyze these combinations, we can find some words (here bye-bye) that frequently happen. These are commonly called pivot words. Pivot words happen as the first word of these combinations (Falk, 1978). Other words which appear in such combinations are called open class words (Yule, 2006). Analysis of

two-word utterances of Tanya, an American English speaking girl, has shown the following pattern in her speech:

$S \rightarrow (P) O$

and

$S \rightarrow O O$

Which means her utterances have the form of a single open class word, a pivot plus an open class word (parentheses show that pivot word is optional), or even a sequence of two open class words (Falk, 1978).

Within this period, children seem to go through a process called *fast mapping* or *vocabulary spurt* in which they grasp the idea that things have names. This process is characterized with rapid acquisition of new words (Denham & Lebeck, 2013). Children begin to combine words into two-word utterances with fairly consistent word order. The utterances produced by infants are determined by *semantic* relationships rather than by syntactic ones (Lieven, 2008). Children speak telegraphically and tend to omit function words (e.g., articles, prepositions, verbs such as *don't*, *is*) and inflectional endings (plural -s, past tense -ed) (Denham & Lebeck, 2013):

Agent+action	mama sleep
Action+thing	Kick ball
Determiner+thing	my sock

It is remarkable to note that although the expressions mentioned above seem to be limited in scope and are devoid of any syntactic rules, they nevertheless can communicate quite efficiently and expressively (Carroll, 2008). Children begin to add about two hundred words a month to their disposal, but still their comprehension outpaces their production ability (Fasold, 2006).

The two-word utterances show a variety of syntactic or semantic relations. For example, a two-word sentence (utterance) with a noun+noun structure like *mommy sock* can be interpreted as subject+object (Mother is putting her sock on) or as possessive relation (It's mother's sock) (Fromkin, 2003). Carroll (2008) has shown some of the semantic relations of such utterances in table 1.

Table 1. Semantic Relations in Two-Word Speech

<i>Relation</i>	<i>Instance</i>
Nomination	That ball
Recurrence	More ball
Nonexistence	Allgone ball
Agent and action	Daddy hit
Action and object	Hit ball
Agent and object	Daddy ball
Action and locative	Go store
Entity and locative	Book table
Possessor and possession	Daddy chair
Entity and attribute	Big house
Demonstrative and Entity	That box

Source: Carroll, D. W., *Psychology of Language* (p. 274).

Children at roughly two years old reach telegraphic stage in which speech of a child is like a telegram; it only contains lexical words and not functional words and other morphemes (Yule, 2006). Crystal (2003a, p. 300) defines functional word as a “term used in word classification for a word whose role is largely grammatical, like articles, and contrasts with lexical words which carry the main semantic content”. When a child says, for example, *there rabbit*, she means *there is rabbit*.

As words like *is* and *are* are grammatical morphemes (Hudson, 2004). Sentences like *Daddy go bye-bye* show that child at this stage has the capacity of sentence forming and can get the word order correct. Alongside with telegraphic speech, children start using some inflectional morphemes, a morpheme used to indicate grammatical function of a word (Yule, 2006), (like *-ing*) and some simple prepositions (like *in*) (Yule, 2006).

The Multiword Stage (24 to 30 Months and Older)

Between the age of two years and two and half years, a new stage appears that can be called multiple-word stage. The most important feature of this stage is not the number of words, but is the variety of word forms that begin to appear (Yule, 2006). At this stage, children begin to acquire different grammatical rules and learn to overgeneralize them to different contexts. Acquisition of complex syntactic structures begins in this stage. However, still there is a long way for these syntactic structures to approximate those of adult grammar (Fasold, 2006). From around two years of age to 4, children

learn to form questions by simply placing question words at the front of the sentence (Denham & Lebeck, 2013):

Where kitty?

What me think?

Children heavily rely on intonation to form questions and produce the utterances such as the following (Denham & Lebeck, 2013):

That mine?

See doggie?

Acquisition of negative sentences is also regulated by certain patterns. First, infants learn to put *no* to indicate negation (e.g., no eat), later on *no* would appear at the beginning of more complex statements (e.g., no do that) (Clark, 2009). Around 30 months of age, the pace of language development is so rapid that the idea of stages fades away (Lieven, 2008).

During this stage, children begin to produce innumerable sentences of varied length and complexity. To form question, new questions words would appear (e.g., why, how), and still using intonation is preferred to inversion (Lightbown & Spada, 2007). At the same time, more complex negative structures with *no* or *not* and some auxiliary verbs, and such as *don't* and *can't* (Denham & Lebeck, 2013):

I can't move it

He not tall

Later, children produce utterances with ‘not’ in the right position after auxiliary verbs (e.g., Mommy won't play), which is consistent with adult grammar. Finally, children learn to invert subjects and auxiliary verbs in questions as in adult grammar (Lightbown & Spada, 2007):

Why did doggie run?
How can he do that?

Finally, children master function words, coordination, and dependent clauses (Denham & Lebeck, 2013):

He was stuck and I got him out.

In tables 2 and 3, the child’s language acquisition and vocabulary development’s milestones have been shown.

Table 2 Milestones in Child’s Language Acquisition

Stage	Typical age	Description
Babbling	6-8 months	Repetitive CV patterns
One-word stage (better <i>one-morpheme</i> or <i>one-unit</i>) or holophrastic stage	9-18 months	Single open-class words or word stems

Two-word stage	18-24 months	"mini-sentences" with simple semantic relations
Telegraphic stage or early multiword stage (better <i>multi-morpheme</i>)	24-30 months	"Telegraphic" sentence structures of <i>lexical</i> rather than <i>functional</i> or <i>grammatical</i> morphemes
Later multiword stage	30+ months	<i>Grammatical</i> or <i>functional</i> structures emerge

Source:

http://www.ling.upenn.edu/courses/Fall_2003/ling001/acquisition.html on 18.12.2009.

Table 3. Milestones in Child's Vocabulary Development

Milestone	Nelson 1973 (18 children)	Fenson 1993 (1,789 children)
10 words	15 months (range 13-19)	13 months (range 8-16)
50 words	20 months (range 14-24)	17 months (range 10-24)
Vocabulary at 24 months	186 words (range 28-436)	310 words (range 41-668)

Source:

http://www.ling.upenn.edu/courses/Fall_2003/ling001/acquisition.html on 18.12.2009.

Developing Morphology: Inflectional Morphemes

Developing morphology is a good evidence that children acquire their

first language in the same way, and their language acquisition process is rule-ordered. American English speaking children acquire inflectional morphemes in a rule-ordered way and similar to each other (Raford, 2004b). The first inflectional morpheme acquired for most American English speaking children is the suffix *-ing* (Hudson, 2000), which appears before the age of two and a half years. The second inflectional morpheme which appears is the plural morpheme *-s*, as in *cats*. The next one appearing after a short while is the possessive morpheme *- 's*, like *mommy 's socks*. At the same time, forms of the verb 'to be', like *was* and *are*, are acquired. Then the irregular past tense verbs appear, like *went* and *came*. The next inflectional morpheme is the past tense *-ed*, as in *played* and *worked*. The last one is the third-person singular *-s* that happens in *He works* and *She plays* (Yule, 2006).

There is a process of overgeneralization in acquiring inflectional morphemes. Overgeneralization refers to the process by which a child extends her use of a grammatical feature to the context beyond those that appear in the adult's language (Crystal, 2003a). Given this, children go through three steps to acquire the inflectional morphemes. Consider these words:

broke *broke broke

In the first step, child learns the correct form, but in her mental lexicon, *break* and *broke* are totally distinct items; they are not related

items in her lexicon. In the second step, child overgeneralizes the structure; she applies the *-ed* rule to all verbs to produce past tenses, so the form **breaked* appears. (The asterisk shows that the form is ungrammatical in adult's language.) In this step, her language is more regular than the one of the adults. At the third step, child learns that there are exceptions to each rule, so she uses *broke* again. At this time, however, the past tense form and the original root (here *break*) are related in her lexicon (Fromkin, 2003).

In the presence of negative evidence, most of the times children revise their errors in speech and produce the correct forms; but if there is no negative evidence, the correction would not happen. Negative evidence is any sentence produced by an adult to correct a child's error (Yule, 2006). In the following sentences, the adult's sentence is negative evidence:

Child: *He work hard.*

Adult: *He works hard.*

Developing Syntax

When children are still in holophrastic stage, they have knowledge of syntax. For example, experiments show that American English speaking children at the age of seventeen months can understand the difference between *Ernie is tickling Bert* and *Bert is tickling Ernie*. Because the words are similar in these two sentences, the only way to understand them is to have some syntactic knowledge (Fromkin,

2003). In studying the development of syntax, one should study the acquisition of questions and negative sentences which go through somehow similar stages; both go through three stages, each stage more sophisticated than the preceding one (Lightbown & Spada, 2007).

In developing questions, American English speaking children go through three stages. The first stage that occurs between 18 and 26 months has two procedures. Simply add a *wh*-form like *where* at the beginning of an expression or just pronounce the expression with rising intonation:

Where Kitty?

Doggie?

In the second stage, between 22 and 30 months, more complex questions can be formed. The rising intonation is still used.

What book name?

Why you smiling?

See my doggie?

In the third stage, between 24 and 40 months, the obligatory inversion of subject and verb in English questions occurs. However, this inversion does not always take place in regard to *wh*-questions (especially with negatives). It is not unusual to see some American English speaking children in their fifth year when they are at the

beginning of their school to produce wh-questions without the obligatory inversion. However, apart from this lack of inversion and some problems with verb tenses, the questions produced in the third stage are close to those of adults' (Yule, 2006):

.
Can I have a piece?

Did I cut it?

Will you help me?

Why kitty can't stand up?

In developing negatives, American English children go through three stages, each stage approximately parallel to the ones in forming questions. The first stage is to put the negative element at the beginning of the sentence:

No mommy get babysitter.

In the second stage, the negative element is moved to its appropriate position in the sentence:

Mommy no get babysitter.

In the third stage, between 24 and 40 months, child's linguistic competence in negation approaches to the adults' one, so the required additional morphemes occur:

Mommy did not get the babysitter (Falk, 1978).

Developing Semantics

American English speaking children go through two important steps in acquiring semantics: – overextension and then narrowing down the meaning (Lightbown & Spada, 2007; Yule, 2006). In the process of developing semantics, a child first learns a word like *bow-wow*, for example, to refer to a dog, then she applies this word to a shirt with shining buttons and then to the moon. This word seems to have a meaning like “object with shining bits” to her. This is the overextension process. It can happen also with regard to the size; for example, the word *fly* may be used to refer to an insect first and then to crumbs of bread. After a while, as the child learns new lexical items, she narrows down the meaning of the word *bow-wow* to dogs only (Yule, 2006).

It is interesting to note that although overextension is well-documented in children’s speech production, it is not necessarily used in speech comprehension. A child may refer to every kind of fruit as *apple*, but she can find the apple in a basket containing different kinds of fruit (Falk, 1978). Antonymous relations seem to be acquired relatively late, after the age of five. A kindergarten child may give an identical answer to the questions *Which tree has more apples?* and *Which tree has less apples?* The reason is that she has not acquired the difference between *more* and *less* (Lightbown & Spada, 2007).

According to Yule (2006, p. 232), “by the age of five, the child has completed the greater part of the basic language acquisition process.

According to some, the child is then in a good position to start learning a second (or foreign) language”.

Conclusion

Developmental stages and patterns are universal and happen in all languages. It seems that children advance through the processes of L1 acquisition at relatively the same rate and follow similar stages regardless of the language they are exposed to. Although within these stages there is a good deal of variability, still the similarities outweigh the differences. It is evident that there is a fair degree of continuity and consistency present in L1 acquisition. Every stage has incorporated the components of a stage it has proceeded it. Normal American English speaking children go through similar stages in acquiring their first language – English. This substantiates a good degree of consistency in L1 acquisition irrespective of language they are exposed to. Although the length of each stage differs from one child to the other, almost all normal children go through these stages and even when it is reported that one child has not experienced one stage, more observations show that the child has gone through that stage, but she/he has passed to the next stage so fast that the observer has failed to notice.

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