**Lesson 08 : LANGUAGE ACQUISITION STAGES**

All infants pass through the same stages in the acquisition of a first language; but they progress at different rates. So, while a child’s age in years and months is often cited (as two figures separated by a semicolon), it is not a reliable indicator of development. Many accounts record development in terms of the phonological or linguistic content of the child’s productions. The following stages are universal, the first two being prelinguistic:

**Cooing:**

(about 0;3). Gurgling moves on to vocalisation involving sounds which resemble vowels. The infant responds vocally to human speech.

**Babbling:**

(from 0;6). The infant produces consonant-vowel (CV) sequences which may resemble those of the target language. The child’s later productions become imitative: there is often a phase of echolalia from about 0;8, when the child imitates adult intonation patterns with some degree of accuracy.

**One-word stage:**

(from 1;0). Sometimes termed holophrastic speech. The first words appear at about 1;0, and by 1;6 the child may have a vocabulary of around 50 words, usually nouns. The child recognises the referential function of words, using them to name objects.

**Two-word stage:**

(1;6 onwards). Sometimes described as telegraphic speech because of the absence of most function words. The two-word combinations exhibit a set of primitive semantic relationships (constituting a child grammar) of which the earliest are usually naming (this), recurrence (more) and non-existence (no). At about the same time, the vocabulary spurt begins, with an increase of about six to ten words a day in the child’s repertoire.

**Multi-word stage:**

(2;6 onwards). The child uses strings of three or more words, often based upon established two-word patterns. Adult syntactic patterns gradually become more prevalent. Instead of age, a more precise way of calibrating the development of an infant is by mean length of utterance (MLU): a figure based on the average number of morphemes in the infant’s productions. This is said to be a reliable marker of development until the age of about 4;0. Using MLU, early researchers proposed six stages of development

Those who take a Piagetian perspective have attempted to relate progress in language to the cognitive developments of the sensorimotor period (age 0–2) and the pre-operational period (2–7).

These include object permanence, the formation of categories and an understanding of causality and displacement. The argument is that the child cannot understand linguistic forms representing such notions until the notions themselves have been acquired. Vygotsky’s developmental stages also provide a loose framework for language development. Vygotsky identified a first stage when thought and language (a child’s first words) are unrelated; a second stage of egocentric speech when the child expresses its thoughts aloud; and a third when egocentric speech becomes internalised. Yet another account of the stages of acquisition represents them in terms of the pragmatic functions which the child commands rather than surface features of syntax (see functionalism). In any of these accounts, some caution has to be exercised in accepting productions as evidence of development.

Receptive recognition of form and understanding of meaning may occur well before an item appears in production. Conversely, the production of a form might predate ‘acquisition’: it might, for example, result from mimicry without understanding.[[1]](#footnote-2)

**How familiar names help babies begin to segment speech:**

How do infants learn to segment the speech stream and to recognize individual words? Bortfeld et al. (2005) provided evidence that infants

can exploit familiar words, such as their own names, to segment adjacent unfamiliar words from a fluent stream of speech. In other words, infants’ names appear to serve as an “anchor” in the speech stream, helping them to disambiguate the words which come just after their name.[[2]](#footnote-3)

**The preschool years:**

As the child leaves the one-word stage, vocabulary development speeds up and children begin to combine words to form small sentences. Even at the earliest stages of combinatorial speech, it is obvious that syntactic principles govern the creation of the child’s sentences. When children begin combining words, the resulting rudimentary sentences reflect the structure of the child’s target language. English-speaking children obey word order very strictly, with subjects preceding verbs and verbs preceding objects (e.g., Mommy push, Pull car). Sentences can also consist of just a subject and an object (e.g., Baby cookie), but they always get the order right. Adjectives precede nouns (e.g., Big doggie), and the rare function word is correctly placed (e.g., That kitty).

**Later Language Development :**

As children grow older, they develop much more proficiency with language. Their processing capacity increases and their ability to produce and interpret longer and more syntactically complex sentences improves. In fact, the ability to process difficult sentences, such as those with relative clauses described in the previous section, is related to reading ability in the early school years. Lexical learning continues at a rapid rate, and around school age, children begin using derivational morphemes and the word combinations provided by derivational morphemes.

A child’s interpretation of sentences also changes in later childhood, making it appear that there are changes in the child’s syntactic knowledge. It is probably the case, however, that much of this change is due to increased knowledge about the grammatical characteristics of lexical items and an enhanced ability to create grammatical structures. Both these factors probably account for the observation that it is not until later childhood that children develop adult interpretations for sentences that contain clauses that appear to be missing subjects, like the following examples:

a. John met Mary before seeing the show.

b. John invited Mary to see the show.

In both sentences, the subject of see is not stated and must be inferred from the sentence structure. In (8a), John will see the show; in (8b), Mary will see the show. Young children, however, interpret both sentences as meaning that Mary will see the show. The adult interpretation of such sentences depends on detailed knowledge of the properties of verbs and subordinating conjunctions, and of the structures those properties require. It is such knowledge that probably develops in later childhood.[[3]](#footnote-4)

1. **Clark, E, V. (2009). First Language Acquisition. Cambridge University Press.**

   [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. RALPH FASOLD AND JEFF CONNOR-LINTON: **An Introduction to Language and Linguistics** Cambridge University Press 2006, P210 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Lastri Wahyuni Manurung : **Psycholinguistics’ Teaching Materials** , **ENGLISH EDUCATION DEPARTMENT,**  **UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAM ,** **FACULTY OF TEACHER TRAINING AND EDUCATION,**  **HKBP NOMMENSEN UNIVERSITY, 2022 ,** P20,21 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)