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Linguistic Overgeneralization: A Case Study

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Abstract

The current study described a single child's language acquisition. The importance of this study resided in the circumstances and the environment in which the child lived. He came from a family in which the parents were from different countries and cultures; spoke different Arabic dialects and who lived in a country in which English is spoken. The child was in his critical period of language acquisition. He seemed to have established a unique way of communicating with people surrounding him to cope with all the linguistic varieties around him. The study showed that the child had semantic, syntactic and morphological overgeneralized structures. The data and results showed that overgeneralization and language acquisition were primarily an innate faculty of the human mind and that imitation did played a primary role in language acquisition. It showed, nevertheless, that imitation and behaviorist approaches could not fully account for language acquisition nor did the generative approach. The results went in favor of an Emergentist approach of language acquisition where both innateness and imitations were crucial constituents of children's acquisition of linguistic forms.

Keywords: Overgeneralization, Arabic, Language Acquisition, Interlanguage, Innateness, Emergentist, Imitation.

Introduction

When one stops to think of the mystery of how he, his children, and everybody else acquired their first language (L1), he will be fascinated with the incredibility of this phenomenon, and most of the time had no answers to the questions he might think of. We all believe that this is natural and is going to happen, unless biologically disturbed. However, still there is confusion about how language acquisition takes place.

Language is not only the production of sounds and words. It is a sophisticated system that distinguishes humans from other creatures. It is a cognitive and biological system that can never be said to be gained by experience but rather by natural development based on age and other environmental surroundings. Much research took place, and still taking place to solve the mystery of language acquisition (Slobin, 1975; Fantini, 1985; Atkinson, 1992; Hardina, Jessner and Kienpointner, 1996). Some of what was revealed was quite convincing while some other discoveries, nevertheless, were just predictions and speculations that needed proof.

Most facts and findings introduced by researchers concerning this issue of language acquisition are fascinating. What motivated us in the first place to write this paper was that the little child 'Mohammad' (Moodi) was in the time of data collection in the critical period of his language acquisition, and the circumstances surrounding him were not those that every child would experience.

In this paper, we discuss a concept of overgeneralization in the child's (Moodi's) Arabic utterances, semantically, syntactically and morphologically. We include some of the new English utterances he had gained during his first five years of age. Later, we discuss the transitional period of his language acquisition that appeared to be taking place between his Arabic L1 and English L1.

Imitation and Overgeneralization

Overgeneralization is the phenomenon when one overextends one rule to cover instances to which that rule does not apply. This phenomenon may appear in different aspects such as semantic, syntactic, morphological, or behavioral. It is a systematic way that children create and unconsciously use, and here appears the greater opposition to the idea of imitation. It is creative. "The phenomenon of overgeneralization itself is not in doubt, nor is the creative nature of the psychological processes that cause it" (Marcus, 1992)

There are many theories on language acquisition. For example, the relational frame theory (Hayes, et al, 2001), which is selectionist. It is based on Skinner's behaviorist approach in which he claims that language acquisition is determined by the type and period of linguistic interaction. The psychological events that the child experiences are a crucial and have great influence in his language acquisition; these include feelings, thoughts and behaviors. The Imitation Theory says that children learn language by imitating the speech of the people around them. It consists of memorizing words and sentences and drawing conclusions from them as to what are the grammatical rules of the language. This theory is probably at least partly correct. There are some things (like the meaning of words) which the child learns by imitation, but there are some things that the theory fails to account for. For instance, children's speech is full of errors. In individual cases this is due to the fact that language is complex and a child's first attempt is often not successful. It is commonly believed that children acquire their mother tongue through imitation of parents, caregivers, or people in their environment.

Furthermore, some approaches were neutral in that they considered the environment and biological influences. For example, the Emergentist theories, such as MacWhinney's (2005) competition model, which assert that language acquisition is a cognitive process that emerges from the interaction of biological pressures and the environment explaining that the acquisition process is emergent due to the competition of linguistic forms such as syntactic, lexical, and phonological forms. The above approaches were challenged by another approach which views language acquisition as an innate faculty.

Chomsky's generative grammar (1957, 1965, and 1980) is one of the principal theories of children's acquisition of syntax. In this approach language acquisition is innate and universal. According to Baker (2001), the child comes equipped with all the tools he needs for acquiring, producing and perceiving language while other factors are of minimal importance. In favor of this approach is the argument of Poverty of the stimulus. This argument, Lenneberg (1967) and Stromswold (2009), poses the question of how can a child produce utterances that he never heard; and how can a child produce an infinite number of sentences. In other words, since the child's input

is limited due to many factors, how can he have this rich output? Why does a child make mistakes when these mistakes have never been part of his input? For example, why would a child say 'goed' instead of 'went' knowing that he probably heard 'went' and never heard 'goed'. This revolutionized the study of language acquisition. Children of three are able to manipulate very complicated sentences. As a result of this, the theory of imitation now is thought of as partially unacceptable. If children really acquire all of their linguistic knowledge from what they hear adults say, how could we explain the frequent errors which occur due to overgeneralization? We may get phrases that could never have been copied from the adult's speech. This idea by Chomsky, though convincing, needs to compromise with the theory of imitation because nobody can deny that children imitate certain things.

Other theories that considered language acquisition are chunking theories, Freudenthal, Pine, and Gobet (2005); Jones, Gobet, and Pine (2007). These assume that the child's input is influenced by the surrounding environment and that the learning process is dependent on the acquisition of meaningful chunks of certain constituents such as phonemes, words, syllables, etc. This in turn, stimulates the syntactic and phonological production. These chunks constitute the knowledge the child builds in grammatical and phonological rules.

The Subject's Background and Language input

Moodi is 12 years old now, so his linguistic background is that of an ordinary child at this age. But during his first five years of age, he used to string two and three- word telegrams. His parents used to address him in Arabic in the period during which he lived in his hometown (Petra/Jordan). Recognizing the fact that his parents come from different countries with different dialects and cultures, Moodi used his mother's Iraqi dialect more than he did for his father's Jordanian because he spent more time with her.

Moodi's parents are native speakers of Arabic who learned English as foreign language; however, Arabic was mainly used at home but during their five year stay in the United States of America, things have changed for Moodi. At home there was a balance between English and Arabic; the parents spoke both languages, the media (TV, Radio, etc...) in English, and everybody outside home whom the child got in contact with spoken English except for some of the parents' Arab friends who would meet once or twice a month for short periods of times.

Furthermore, the differences between the parent's two dialects are significant one being part of the Levantine dialects and the other part of the gulf dialect. According to Versteegh (2001) and Bassiouney (2009), Levantine is a variety of Arabic spoken in the 100 km-wide Eastern Mediterranean coastal strip. It is considered one of five major varieties of Arabic, and abuts Mesopotamian Arabic to its East. On the other hand, Iraqi Arabic (also Mesopotamian Arabic) is native to the Mesopotamian basin of Iraq, southeastern Syria, and western Iran.

Data Collection

Moodi was the only son of his parents, and since they were linguists, they started from the very beginning to observe his linguistic behavior and language acquisition progress. They recorded him because they were alarmed, during a diagnostic test at the swift elementary school in Arlington-Texas, that it would be difficult for him to deal with two dialects at home plus English outside and at school, and perhaps that atmosphere would result in unwanted delay in his acquisition. Therefore, the parents were very keen to help him overcome this experience as much as they could.

At home, after having understood that the child might be suffering due to the above described linguistic environment, the father and mother decided to speak Iraqi when addressing the child since he spent most of the time with his mother. The parents started then careful recording and observation of the child's linguistic progress.

The Subject's Overgeneralization

As mentioned above overgeneralization may appear in different ways. In the following discussion examples of overgeneralized tokens are categorized into semantic, syntactic, and morphological.

Semantic Aspect

The semantic aspect deals with words and meanings. According to Shipley and McAfee (2008) a child has a vocabulary of fifty words or more by the time he is 18 months old. The typical vocabulary of a child of three years old is nouns or noun-like words, with verb and adjective-like words. These words may reflect properties, actions, greetings, or short answers. Here are some examples of words overgeneralized. These examples only showed nouns and adjectives:

- i. Colors: The Subject used mainly two colors for different things. These colors were [ahmal] 'red' and [buni] 'brown'. He used them randomly; he might use both colors for the same object. Some other colors, though he did not say them, were related to specific objects, for example, yellow and yellow like cars were for him taxicabs.
- ii. Numbers: It is unfamiliar for a child of this age to be able to count numbers for the sake of counting. The Subject only used three numbers, [waha] 'one', [nein] 'two', and [ešreen] 'twenty'. He usually used the first two numbers as a compound (one-two) for several purposes such as plurals. As for the 'twenty', he used it in a funny way; he said twenty instead of money. A cent, or a dollar, was twenty; even if he had more than one unit of the same currency at the same time.
- iii. People and their titles: All adult strangers were either his [amo] 'uncle' or [khalto] 'aunt' depending on their appearance. While any armed person or any person in uniform was [šotah] 'police'. As for children, they were all [dada]. When he saw the neighbor's children playing outside he said:
 [Mammy dada waha-nein] = 'There are many children'
 Mother children one-two
- iv. Vehicles: Before the Subject got his first small bike, all vehicles were the same with the small ones like bikes, motorcycles, and cars called [an-an], and the larger ones as being [baas] 'bus'. He was able, after getting the bike, to distinguish them as not being [an-an], but still everything else was the same.
- v. Animals and Insects: The size of the animal determines its name, either a dog or a horse. The dog was [how-how] and the same applied for all small animals except cats. Big animals were [san] 'horse'. Insects were all similar [do-do]. Anything smaller than a little cat was [do-do]. As for flying birds, they were [foor] 'bird' while non-flying birds were [tei?a] 'chicken'.
- vi. Animal-like toys with Fur: When asking him about the names of his small toys, those without fur, they were dogs and horses, but those with fur were [anoob] the name of his little favorite rabbit.

- vii. Flowers and Trees: The word he uses for a tree, a flower, or any plant is [wada] 'flower'. And it is even used for fake plants.
- viii. Meals and food: It appeared that one meal, that is [ghada] 'lunch', stood for all other meals neglecting their times. When the food was served, it is 'lunch', but when he was hungry, he asked for [amia] a word that his parents never used. Again, [amia] was also used for cooked food especially rice, while other kinds of food were lunch. For Candy he used [neiha] and [nestala], the smaller ones were [neiha] while the larger ones were [nestala], even if they were similar in kind but different in size.
- ix. Demonstratives: "This and That": [na] "this", [nak] "that" seemed to have different meanings from those his parents usually had. He used "this" for "now" and "that" for "yesterday and tomorrow" (This was noticed when he was trying to tell about his visit to parent's school, the university of Texas at Arlington). If he said [minnak] 'from there', he meant a place, but if he said [nak] alone he meant time.

The above data show that no verbs are overgeneralized so far, and the reason might be that, the number of verbs needed for communication is small compared to other language forms. This could make it easy for the child to determine what verb to use in each specific occasion since they are limited in number. On the other hand, nouns and adjectives are of great variety, which makes it difficult for him to recognize them all, and thus, he picks the easiest ones and overextends them over others.

Syntactic Aspect

Syntax basically deals with sentence structure, and word ordering. Thus, not much is expected from children at this age concerning sentence building; however, at his age, Moodi should have used and recognized some basic syntactic structures.

Arabic, as being the Subject's first surrounding language, is quite different from English syntactically in relation to word ordering of the constituents of sentences. Sentences that express ordinary statements follow VSO structure. As for questions, no auxiliaries are used and the verb precedes the subject. As for adjective-noun ordering, usually the noun comes first and this is one of the main problems that Arabic learners of English as a foreign language face.

The Subject, in building sentences, usually used the subject as the first constituent as in (i),

- i. [amo rahat sook] 'Someone went to the store'
 Uncle went store.'
 [Moodi la?abat la?ba] ' I want to play with the toys'
 Moodi play toy.
 [daddy rahat zam?ah] 'daddy is going to the university'
 Daddy go university.
 [daddy moodi i:zi zam?ah wayak] ' I want to go with you to the university'
 Daddy Moodi come university with you.

This arrangement seemed to have influenced his imperatives constructions where he placed a noun before each verb; although his parents never did that in Arabic, for example he would say,

- ii. [mammy moodi zabat ma:y] 'Bring me water'
 Mommy Moodi bring water
 [daddy ?u:f la?abah] "Do not touch the toys."
 Daddy leave toy.

Another rule that seemed to be generalized was that of negation. He used “ma” for “not” and “makoo” for “no and not”.

- iii. [ma deed] I do not want.
 [Moodi makoo] I am not here.
 [makoo l?abah] There are no toys.

These examples show that he used the negation marker, most of the time, as the first consistent of his sentences. Another interesting issue appeared when comparing the examples in i,ii and iii. He seemed to have a mechanism for distinguishing between people and other objects. For example, he used his name and his parents’ titles to begin his sentences with; while those of objects never come first.

Morphological Aspect and Tense

Morphology, as known, is the study of the forms of words. As morphologies differ from one language to another, Arabic is distinguished for the difficulty of its morphology due to its richness. For example, plurals can be formed in many different ways for a word and each form has a different indication for example the word for “writers” would appear as follows [kutab], [katabah] or [katateeb]. So, for a little child it seems like an impossible task to distinguish or intentionally use a specific form for its intended meaning. Instead children tend to find their own ways to form plurals. For example, let us consider pronouns,

- [ketab-uh] ‘his book’
 [ketab-uk] ‘your book’
 [ketab-i] ‘my book’
 [kutub-uhm] ‘their books’

It could be difficult for the reader, who has no or little knowledge of Arabic morphology, to understand how the Subject overgeneralized morphological markers, but here is an attempt to clarify this issue.

Arabic makes no difference between simple or perfective past. Generally simple past is used for all completed past actions, while the case in present tenses is different. The Subject used only the past tense to express everything but not imperatives. He would say,

- i. [moodi rahat sook] ‘I went to the store’
 Moodi went store
 [moodi naamat] ‘I want to sleep’
 Moodi slept
 [moodi zabat l?abah] ‘I will bring the toys’
 Moodi brought toy

The only sentence in which he never failed to use the present tense was:

- ii. [ma deed] ‘I do not want’

In Arabic morphology the suffix [-t] is used for 3rd singular feminine, as in

- iii. [thahabat] ‘she went’
 went-she

And it only appears in the past tense. What the Subject did is that he, by using this suffix, expressed past verbs, while those without it were not, for example,

- iv. [Moodi raahat] ‘I went’
 went

[Moodi raah] ' I want to go'
went

[Mammy naamat] 'Mommy slept'
slept

[Mammy nam] 'Mommy. Go to sleep'

As mentioned before, plurals are very complex in Arabic. The subject has created his own way of telling that there were more than one thing available or seen. The examples below show this,

([waha-nein] = one-two)

v. 'dada one-two' 'kids'
One- two 'Many'
Moodi one -two 'Give me more'

And while playing with someone:

[waha-nein]
One-two 'Do it one more time'

While, on the other hand, he was able use correct Arabic plurals in a very limited number of words like,

vi. [mua'een] 'dish or dishes'
[la'abat] 'toy or toys'

He seemed to be using the word for singular and plural objects, which indicated that he did not recognize what he was saying, for he would say a sentence like,

vii. [mua'een one-two] 'dishes'

Which, if translated into English would be like

* dishes + s

Pronouns in Arabic may appear separate from the word whether it is a verb or a noun, or as an attached suffix. (Usually suffixes when addressing a person or as in the third person pronouns).

The Subject only succeeded in using the second person masculine singular to express himself, or either parent,

viii. [Moodi rass- ak] 'I have headache'
moodi head your
[mammy rass-ak] 'Mommy has a headache'
[daddy rass-ak] 'Daddy has a headache'
[Moodi sanan-ak] ' I want to clean my teeth'
Teeth

Another pronoun incorrectly used is [-at] as it appears in the examples in (vi)

Conclusion

Ignoring the fact the Subject was still young, to have that much knowledge about morphological aspects, at the time the data were collected, what appears is that he picks up the easiest ways to communicate assuming that he would be understood since, most of the time, he receives positive responses.

Again, as an opposition to the theory of imitation, the child created his own way for plurals, of course, the parents tried to make him say numbers and to use his fingers to show them, but they did not tell him to use them for plurals. Nevertheless, The Subject still copies some words, especially when using pronouns like [-ak]. It is sometimes confusing to determine which word is his own

creation and which is an imitation of heard utterances. It seems that there is some sort of interlanguage between his first L1 and his new developing second L1

After the parents had been to the States, the environment Moodi lived in had greatly changed. He no more hears Arabic from people, other than some friends, outside the house. The fact that he was in his critical period of his language acquisition, suggested that he could acquire any language he was exposed to. Thus, he would be bilingual.

“Linguistic interactions (i.e. switches) do not constitute a major interference in the acquisition of bilingualism since children appear to be able to differentiate their two linguistic systems from an early age”. (Lindholm and Padilla, 1976)

What appears to be suggested here is that interference is not likely to appear in such circumstances. And this is true because children in their critical period of language acquisition have little information about the language. What they intelligently do is customize their brains to meet all the differences between two or more different languages.

Moodi used to address people in his hometown in his mother’s dialect but during data collection, he addressed them in a language form that nobody understood. It is known that interlanguage takes place in the period between L1 and L2; a language neither L1 nor L2 and which cannot take place in the critical period. The child seems to have lived a transitional period or as in Lindholm and Padilla's terms, switching. A language that takes place between the first L1 and the second L1 in the critical period of the child’s first language acquisition and which exists if the child has some knowledge of a L1 and then exposed to another L1 in different environments.

Moodi was trying to communicate with people in his own creative way. When he was in his hometown, he could understand what others say, simply because they spoke to him that way, so it was fine for him to do the same. But now when he was outside he did not understand what other people said, so he thought that if he spoke to them the way he used to, they would not understand, therefore, he spoke in this new way which he created thinking that they would understand what he was saying.

In conclusion, nobody can truly predict what a child is thinking of. It is only that we try to postulate the ideas on the bases of what we see and observe. Nevertheless, children are better observers than we thought; they capture everything in a blink. Language acquisition is a complex process that no one can remember and tell how he had done it when he was a child.

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