

Mustansiriyah University

College of Arts

Department of English Language and Literature

4<sup>th</sup> Year Linguistics

Main Textbook: The Study of Language, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition (George Yule, 2017)

Title: First Language Acquisition

**Aim:** this series of lectures aims to investigate first language acquisition at different linguistic levels, and explores the different stages children go through when acquiring their mother tongues.

### **Acquisition**

- Language is not only a genetically endowed capacity but also culturally transmitted knowledge and skills.
- During the first two or three years of development, children require interaction with other language-users in order to bring the general language capacity into contact with a particular language, such as English, Arabic, Chinese, etc.
- This is because children's acquisition of their mother tongues is not genetically inherited, but is acquired in a particular language-using environment.
- To acquire language, children must be physically capable of sending and receiving sound signals in a language. All infants make 'cooing' and 'babbling' noises during their first year, but congenitally deaf infants stop after about six months. So, in order to speak a language, a child must be able to hear that language being used.

### **Input**

- Since language acquisition involves cultural transmission of linguistic knowledge, they need linguistic input.

- Input refers to the language a learner is exposed to during his or her language acquisition.
- Human infants are helped in their language acquisition by the typical behavior of older children and adults in the home environment who provide language samples for those infants. Of course Adults such as mom, dad and the grandparents tend not to address the little infant before them as if they are involved in normal adult-to-adult conversation. They tend to use a simplified speech style, which is known as caregiver speech or motherese.
- Thus, caregiver speech refers to the characteristically simplified speech style adopted by someone who spends a lot of time interacting with a young child.
- Salient Features of Caregiver Speech (or motherese) include:
  1. Frequent use of questions with exaggerated intonation
  2. loudness and a slower tempo with longer pauses
  3. Incorporating a lot of forms associated with simplified words (tummy, nana) or alternative forms, with repeated simple sounds and syllables (choo-choo, pee-pee, wa-wa).
  4. Simple sentence structures and a lot of repetition.

### **Language Acquisitions Schedule**

Children start developing their language skills gradually. Below are the stages of language development children often go through:

1. *Cooing and Babbling*: it is the earliest use of speech-like sounds has been described as cooing. Between six and eight months, the child is sitting up and producing a number of different vowels and consonants, as well as combinations such as ba-ba-ba and ga-gaga. This type of sound production is described as babbling.
2. *One-Word Stage*: between twelve and eighteen months, children begin to produce a variety of recognizable single-unit utterances. One-word stage is characterized by speech in which single terms are uttered for everyday

objects such as “milk,” “cookie,” “cat,” “cup” and “spoon” (usually pronounced [pʌn]).

3. *Two-Word Stage*: the occurrence of two distinct words used together (two-word stage) can begin around eighteen to twenty months, as the child’s vocabulary moves beyond fifty words. By the time the child is two years old, a variety of combinations, similar to baby chair, mommy eat, cat bad, will usually have appeared.
4. *Telegraphic Speech*: between 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. The telegraphic speech is characterized by strings of words (lexical morphemes) in phrases or sentences such as this shoe all wet, cat drink milk and daddy go bye-bye.

### **The Acquisition Process**

- The idea that children are, in some sense, “taught” their first language is not really supported by what children actually do. For the vast majority of children, no one provides any instruction on how to speak the language. This is why we should not picture the process of first language acquisition as a little empty head gradually being filled with words and phrases.
- A more accurate view stipulates that children actively construct from what is said to them, possible ways of using language. Children do not just imitate and repeat what they hear, but they actively use the input to which they are exposed to develop their language skills. A child’s linguistic production appears to be mostly a matter of trying out constructions and testing whether they work or not. This construction process involves different linguistics levels:

#### *1. Developing Morphology*

- At the age of two-and-a-half years old, a child begins to incorporate some of the inflectional morphemes that indicate the grammatical function of the nouns and verbs used; such morphemes include:

- i. The-ing form in expressions such as cat sitting and mommy reading book.
  - ii. The marking of regular plurals with the -s form, as in boys and cats.
  - iii. The use of the possessive -'s occurs in expressions such as girl's dog and Mummy's book.
- Children tend to overgeneralize these rules and start applying them to irregular cases. This is called 'overgeneralization'. Overgeneralization occurs in L1 acquisition, when an inflectional morpheme on more words than is usual in the language (e.g. two foots).

## 2. *Developing Syntax*

- Children start learning how to deduce the different syntactic rules gradually. These rules include:
  - Rules of forming questions:
    - i. Stage one: (Where, Who) to the beginning of the expression with rising intonation:
 

Examples: Where kitty? Doggie?      Where horse go? Sit chair?
    - ii. Stage two: more Wh-forms come into use,
 

Examples: What book name?                      You want eat?
    - iii. Stage three: the movement of the auxiliary in English questions:
 

Examples: Did I caught ... ?      Why kitty can't ...?
  - Rules of forming negatives
    - i. Stage 1: putting No or Not at the beginning
 

Examples: no mitten      not a teddy bear
    - ii. Stage 2: don't and can't appear, and with no and not
 

Examples: He no bite you      I don't want it      That not touch

- iii. Stage three: incorporation of other auxiliary forms such as didn't and won't

Examples: I didn't caught it                      He not taking it

### 3. *Developing Semantics*

- During the early process of acquisition of words, children use their limited vocabulary to refer to a large number of unrelated objects. This process is called overextension.
- Overextension occurs when the child overextends the meaning of a word on the basis of similarities of shape, sound and size, and, to a lesser extent, movement and texture. For example, ball is extended to all kinds of round objects, including a lampshade, a doorknob and the moon.
- Although overextension has been well-documented in children's speech production, it isn't necessarily used in speech comprehension. For instance, one two-year-old used apple, in speaking, to refer to a number of other round objects like a tomato and a ball, but had no difficulty picking out the apple, when asked, from a set of round objects including a ball and a tomato.