

Lecture Two: Stages of Language Development

I) - Stages of Language Development:

1) - Babbling:

Approximately by the age of six months, all normal children start to babble; making long sequences of varied vowels and consonants. Per se, babbling is a linguistic universal. Children at this stage do not produce sounds proper to their mother tongues. Babbling belongs to infants of all communities. Babbling is not a true language though it shares with adult language the property of being stimulus -free. Infants do not babble to express a physical need. They rather do it for pleasure.

Babbling sequences are usually stretches of vowels, or stops followed by vowels. They generally have the structure of (CV) or (VV) e.g. / gaa/, / boo/. / aa/etc..., these sequences usually have the intonation patterns that are similar to the intonation of the adult language they hear. Babbling is considered as the first stage of the acquisition process.

2) - The First Words

Towards the age of twelve months- sometimes later- the child produces his/ her first words with some overlapping with babbling sequences at first. The first words the child produces are monosyllabic and are not different from babbling sequences except in their symbolic function. They are of the form / CV(V)/ / daa/ , / maa/, etc... and may be similar to adult words.

For about six months, children seem to pass this stage in which the single words which they produce represent full adult sentences. In the case of English, / waa/ means water, or I want water or this is water. Here a variety of functions and intentions are conveyed through these single words.

3) - The Two- Word Stage

Between 18 and 24 months, children begin to use two-word utterances. They first utter two single word utterances one after the other, with a pause in between. Later, the two words are uttered with no pause.

E.g. Baby sleep - Mommy sock

4) - The Hierarchical Stage

After the two-word stage, children combine their two words together to produce longer utterances. At the beginning, the utterances do not contain function words and syntactic markers but only words which carry important information, e.g. mommy eat bread. Though they lack function words these utterances are sentence-like.

II) - The Acquisition of Linguistic Subsystems:

1) - Phonology:

Infants respond to speech sounds a few days after their birth. Experiments carried on infants' perception demonstrate that they are able to perceive contrasts on voicing, place of articulation, nasals, and stops. Infants do this without any previous experience with language which is evidence that human beings are born with an innate ability to acquire language.

The production of sounds in infants starts with babbling. Most of babbling sequences start with stops and end with vowels or voiceless stops, and there are no consonant clusters. At about 10-12 months, the infant starts copying accurately the sounds he hears from the adults around him. At this age, the child pronounces the same words differently when trying to imitate adult pronunciation. The child can discriminate between sounds but cannot contrast in production. Comprehension is not problematic for him/her whereas production is.

Individual sounds are produced gradually; some are acquired earlier than others, and therefore substituted for them. The sound system is fully acquired by the age of seven. The early words are generally monosyllabic (until the age of 2), of the form / CV/ or / CVC/. However, consonant clusters appear later. Children shorten adult words by deleting final consonants, or by reducing clusters and omitting unstressed syllables.

2) - Morphology:

The child learns early the morphological rules of the language. In the two-word utterances production we can notice that they lack affixes and function words. Children learn them later when they start constructing rules for using morphemes. At the beginning over generalise, but later they perfect their rules.

Inflections or grammatical morphemes are learned in order, depending on their regularity, transparency, and frequency of use. In English, / ing/ is acquired earlier than the present tense /s/. In the same way productivity and regularity in derivational morphemes are factors affect the order of acquisition. In English, for example, the agentive / er/ is learned early e.g. writer, teacher, baker, etc

3) - Syntax:

A Holophrases or one-word sentence used by the child to express what adults would use sentences for are the first step in the syntactic development. Though children possess only single words, they use them for different functions: naming, asking, requesting, etc.... They intend their utterances to be understood a full sentences. Any way they understand full sentences when they hear them.

With the two –word stage, the structure in the child’s utterances comes into existence. The two words are usually linked with some word order. However, the structure of these utterances is semantically determined. The variety of relations between the two words can be exemplified in the following English examples:

Daddy sleep (agent-action)

Daddy car (possessor-possession)

Kick ball black car (action –object)

Mommy bed (subject –location)

These examples indicate the child is aware of the different semantic relations.

After this stage when there is a lack of inflections and function words, the child's sentences develop to look like adult sentences. In the stage of the acquisition of syntax, the child moves from simple to more complex sentences by learning the negative, passive, questions, etc...The acquisition of syntax progresses until the age of ten or beyond where some syntactically complex sentences develop longer than others.

4) - Semantics:

The acquisition of meaning is more complicated than the acquisition of phonology and syntax. Semantics is a never-ending process. We always learn vocabulary and store it continuously. Children produce their first words at the age of one and associate each word with its meaning through the process of trial and error. By the age of six, children acquire about 14000 words. The progress of vocabulary acquisition is so rapid that it is impossible to give statistics at any time, add to this the fact that the person/ child possess two types of vocabulary: active and passive. Active, which the person actually uses in his speech, and passive, which he does not use in his speech, but recognises when he hears it. The former is larger in number.

There are many things specific to children's acquisition of vocabulary. There is a certain order in learning words. The first words a child learns are those which include words that the child can act on, or things that can act for themselves, and names of large objects that exist in his environment. The meanings of the words acquired by the child are different from their adult's meanings. This is a proof that the child has not acquired the semantic system of the language.

The child's language is full of cases of overgeneralisation . A child may use an item for a wider range of things than he should. The word *doggie* is used by an English-speaking child to refer to dogs, horses, cows, sheep ,etc...This demonstrates that a general feature is acquired which covers all these things.

End of Lecture Two!