

FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: GRAMMAR IN THE SPEECH OF A TWO-YEAR OLD BANGLADESHI CHILD

Sadia Nasrin
Centre for Languages
BRAC University, 66 Mohakhali C/A
Dhaka-1212, Bangladesh

ABSTRACT

The paper explores the grammar in the speech of a two-year old Bengali-speaking child. Though language acquisition process is still a mystery, linguists throughout the world confirm that it follows a systematic process in case of any language of the world. However, they have tried hard to discover the grammar in the speech of children. This research is such an attempt to apply the theories of first language acquisition to a Bengali speaking child which identifies that children's speech is 'grammatical' as they follow a systematic pattern.

Key words: Children, Grammar, errors, rule-governed, Universal

I. Introduction

Learning language is not to master rules, but to make connections with other people and to make sense of experiences (Wells, 1986).

The scientific study of language acquisition commenced in the late 1950s. It is probably one of the most controversial issues to the researchers. However, it is still a mystery to them how a child takes a full control over a complex language within his or her five years. Scholars kept diaries of their children to enlighten the acquisition process. The concept of Universal Grammar (Nativist theory) which acknowledges the presence of a LAD (Language Acquisition Device) in human being and later, the Functional Approach to language acquisition contributed a lot to this field. Therefore, it is not very difficult to analyze the stages that a child undergoes during his/her language acquisition process. The analysis and research on first language acquisition thus helped a lot to understand how to learn a second language.

II. First Language Acquisition

The five major stages of first language acquisition process suggested by Stern (1929), Nice (1925) and Brown (1973) are: i. '**Cooing**' (babies only cry in this stage) ii. '**Babbling**' (a large variety of sounds is produced by children in this stage), iii. '**One-**

word stage', iv. '**Two words or Telegraphic stage**' (children speak only content words like a telegraphic message) and v. '**Complete Sentence stage**'. They opine that these stages are almost universal for any language speaking child around the world.

Speaking, as Krashen (1985) mentioned in his book *The Input Hypothesis*, is a result of acquisition and not its cause. Speech can not be taught directly but 'emerges' on its own as a result of developing competence by means of 'comprehensible input'. Crystal (2003) stated that acquisition is not just a matter of producing sounds; it also implies to be able to perceive sounds, to understand the meaning of utterances and to be able to interact with others i.e. to know how to hold a conversation. By 12 months a child becomes quite 'sophisticated' in all these three areas.

Apparently, from the earlier months, children start 'speaking' but the first efforts at speech are not words but cries. Later, when they start to speak the words of a language, they do not randomly rotate words but generate a large number of diverse utterances. They very rapidly acquire the notion that words do not combine randomly but follow a systematic pattern of 'permissible sequences'. They are prone to come up with all kinds of words and expressions they have never heard and their language is always rule-governed. Even at an

earlier age, acquisition of syntax displays a subtle understanding of universal properties of human language (Scovel 1998).

III. Context of Study and data collection

Ria, the subject of this research, is a 26 months old (March 2008) Bengali-speaking child. Therefore, she is possibly at the 4th stage of her language acquisition process (Nice 1925), which is called the 'telegraphic stage'. She can speak multi-word sentences. She tries her best to express her thoughts clearly. Her relatives understand her language though she 'makes mistakes', because her 'mistakes' are also rule governed, not random.

Ria was observed for a couple of days and her utterances were recorded and transcribed instantly so that the reliability of the research can be upheld.

IV. Phonological 'Errors' in Ria's Speech

Ria's pronunciation of many words shows 'substitution of one feature for another or one phoneme for another' (Rodman & Fromkin 1998). She can pronounce the nasals [m], [n], bilabials [p], [b], & dentals but she has not yet acquired the palato-alveolars [tʃ]. For example, instead of 'chini' (sugar) she says 'tini'. She can not even produce some aspirated Bengali sounds like [Kh], [Gh], [Bh], as she has not acquired aspirations yet. Ria simplifies the consonant clusters, if she finds any difficulty to pronounce them. Instead of pronouncing two consonants at a time, she repeats one consonant twice and drops another. In that case, she prefers dentals [t] to velars [k], [g] and nasals [m], [n] to dentals [t]:

Mukta (a name) ----- mutta
aunti (aunt)-----aunni.

According to Crystal (2003), some sounds take months before they are used appropriately in all words and in all positions in every word. It is also true about Ria. She can pronounce the bilabial stops [p], [b] except when it comes before any nasal sounds [m], [n]; for example, she can say: Pakhi (bird), ball (ball), baba (father). On the other hand, she can not pronounce [p] or [b] if they occur before nasal sounds. She replaces 'banor' (monkey) with 'mano'. In the same way, she says 'mani' instead of 'pani' (water). The reason is that she is not aware of the position of [p] or [b] before nasals. Though this seems to be an 'error' for the

adults, Ria has her own phonological 'rules' which drive her conversation smoothly.

V. Morphological 'Errors'

Ria has not acquired all the inflections of Bengali words yet. She often drops the inflected sound of a morpheme. Her sentences are usually like the following ones:

Eta ama(r) gatii (this is my car)
Apu guma(i) (sister sleeps)

In Bangla, the verb used with 1st person always takes the inflection "o", with 2nd person "e" or "a" and with 3rd person "e"; for example: 'jabo' (I'll go) and 'jabe' (you/ he/ she will go). As Ria has already acquired the regular form of verb used with 1st person, she 'overgeneralizes' this rule while talking about 2nd or third person. Thus, instead of 'apu khabe' (sister will eat), she says 'apu kabo', and 'apu gumabo' (sister will slip) for 'apu ghumabe'. Though these mistakes occur very often in her speech, these are not considered as errors by linguistics. Rodman and Fromkin (1998) say that this 'Overgeneralization' of rules actually is the evidence that they have acquired the regular rules of the language while they need more time to get familiar with the irregular forms of the language.

Interestingly, Ria is aware of the rule of "reduplication" which is necessary to establish opinion. Like adults, she repeats a word twice if she wants to convince anyone. To persuade her mother to believe in the fact that someone beat her, she said 'sotti sotti' (truly). This explains that she is on her way of acquiring a cognitively complex language. However, the informant can not utter the aspirated morphemes like 'khabi' (eat) or 'ghumabo' (sleep); instead she says 'kabi' and 'gumabo' which is very typical at this stage.

VI. Syntactic Relations

After 18 months, a child's primitive syntax begins, they can comment on people doing things and seeing things, reject and request objects and activities, ask about who, what, and where. These sequences already reflect the language being acquired: in 95% of them, the words are properly ordered (Braine 1976, Brown 1973, Ingram, 1989). Pinker argues that children do not favor any particular language; instead they swiftly acquire free word order like **SVO** (subject-verb-object) or **SOV** (subject-object-verb). Ria, follows the **SOV**

word order which is the usual pattern of Bangla sentences. She states clearly “ami dudu kabo” (want to drink milk) but never says “ami kabo dudu”.

She can construct negative as well as interrogative sentences. If she dislikes something, she puts stress on ‘na’ (no):

‘Baat kabo naaa’ (don’t want rice)

In case of interrogative sentences, she uses rising intonation which is archetypal for all the languages in the world. She was asking her pet during the observation:

‘Tini kabii?’ (want some sugar?)

All the sentences mentioned above follow Bengali sentence structure (SOV). Following is a table that shows that her utterances do not break the SOV word order:

Subject	Object	Verb
1. ami	Dudu	kabo
2. (tui)	Tini	Kabi?
3. (ami)	Baat	Kabo na.

Thus the examples of positive, negative and interrogative sentences represent that Ria follows the ‘universal grammar’ which explains that the principles of every language is the same but the ‘parameters’ differ the languages from each other. To illustrate, Ria follows the principle in her speech that a verb is needed for meaningful utterances while she acknowledges the parameter of Bengali language placing verbs after objects.

VII. Meaning of Her Utterances

Though Ria understands the difference between two different persons, she calls them in the same way. She knows very well that every woman is not her mother, but as another woman is her aunt, she calls all unknown woman by ‘anni’ (aunt). These are often referred to as false analogies (Scovel 1998), but this is not actually done erroneously as Yule (1985) states that this kind of ‘Overextension’ is a common feature of children’s language acquisition process across the community.

Similarly, Ria often refers to a cat using the word ‘mao’, and then ‘extends’ (Yule 1985) the meaning to refer to other animals unknown to her. However,

children categorize unfamiliar animals according to their shapes, taxonomic category and lexical knowledge (Clark 2003). As Ria is relatively aware about the distinction (size, notes) between different animals, she calls the animals that are familiar to her (but does not know the name) using their notes, ‘humba’, ‘cockco’. However, she refers to all the insects by ‘pipa’ (ant). If she is afraid of anything, she calls it ‘baao’ assuming it as a ghost. Once she whispered seeing a picture of a black man: ‘baao, baao ase’ (ghost is coming).

Therefore, Ria’s utterances are meaningful. She can express her excitement without any difficulty. She puts proper intonation and stress on the words, which are necessary to show excitement. The following example proves the fact. Ria can not look through one of the windows at her home because of her size. Once she brought a chair in front of the window and rode on the window grills. She then started shouting with joy: ‘Deko ami kotai utsi’ (see, where I’ve ridden). Her stress was right on the word ‘kothai’ (where) which was necessary to express her excitement as the focus was on the place where she was standing.

VIII. Ria’s Speech: Universal Grammar

The Nativist theory says that children’s language at any stage is systematic. It is proved earlier that Ria follows SOV word order. Ria also produces sentences containing all of the components of any grammar. There are usually five types of components (Brown 1973) in complete sentences of any language:

Agent Action Recipient Object
Location

In Bengali sentences the components follow the order below:

Agent Recipient Location Object Action

If we analyze Rias speech, we get the following order:

Agent	Recipient	Location	Object	Action
Apu				Guma(i)
Ammu	Apu(k)			Dake
Dako ami		Kota(i)		utsi
Eta	Amar		Ga(r)ii	

Other than this, Ria has her own rules for combining sounds as well as words to make meaningful utterances as mentioned earlier. She has her own pattern for expressing unfamiliar

sounds, words and sentences that she upholds throughout her speech, which represent the hidden grammar of the language she is going to master on.

IX. Conclusion

In spite of all the 'mistakes' evident at the stage of her language acquisition process, Ria does not speak incorrect grammar. The kinds of errors she makes in forming her grammar show that 'the mistakes are all in keeping with what is called universal grammar, which is the principle that constrains all grammars'. She is not developing her grammar gradually from 'wrong' to 'right'; instead she is following her own hypothesis in constructing her conversation which is rule-governed, not random. Thus her grammar is not erroneous but systematic or 'right' for the stage she is going through now. Therefore, we can voice the words of Rodman & Fromkin (1998): 'children do not construct wild grammars, their errors fall within the bounds of syntactic, phonological and morphological natural linguistic process'.

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