

Acquisition of Noun and Verb Inflection in Child`s Development

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Abstract

Here is a work of language acquisition. How do nouns and verbs inflect children in their development? We combined some researchers and scientists' opinions and researches in this field. Several explanations have given to see and understand differences in use of nouns and verbs by children in different stages of their development. How children begin to communicate from their early childhood. What is the role of parents in their children's speech, especially mother's influence in first language acquisition and of course what is a teacher's role in second language acquisition. Through which stages passes a child until he/she produces correctly nouns and verbs. I tried to explain how and why nouns are learned before verbs and what does scientist say about this. I shared some of my experiences that I had as a parent in my private life in first language acquisition and as a teacher in a school with my students in second language acquisition.

Key words: child`s development, language acquisition, noun, verbs, lexis development

1. Introduction

Language is a tool/method of human communication that could be either spoken or written. People begin to learn it from their born, even though they express it in different way.

The children do not have any firm, fixed beliefs about language as they acquire it. So far, they do not seem to know what to look for, or what to avoid – though some of this knowledge clearly develops over the course of time.

Children are a focus of attention and affection in all societies. The presence of infant is a key to the hearts of strangers anywhere on the globe. (*Thomas Scovel, 1998:7*)

According to Chomsky, children learn language so efficiently and fast because they know in advance what languages look like. It is seen and proved from our everyday life, that children who learn a new language can learn it easier and faster than adults. This is because their memory and brain is cleaner than adults'.

Two types of explanation have been put forward to account for the mysterious nature of language acquisition. First of all, there is Chomsky's content approach. Secondly, an alternative process approach has been proposed. What is the difference between them? A content approach postulates that a child's brain naturally contains a considerable amount of specific information about language. A process approach, on the other hand, suggests that children have inbuilt puzzle – solving equipment which enable them to process the linguistic data they come across. (*Jean Aitchison; (1998:136)*)

Chomsky's content approach presupposes that the pre-wired knowledge is specific to language, and is independent of general intelligence. But the process approach comes in two versions, an intelligent Peggy and a linguistic Peggy. The intelligence version, Peggy makes use of the same general cognitive abilities as she would to cope with everything else she comes across in the world. In the linguistic version, her processing mechanisms are geared specifically to language. (*Jean Aitchison; (1998:137)*)

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First kind of language without speech is crying. Baby's cry helps to produce linguistic sounds. During the first weeks of child's life crying is a kind of reflex, but then it becomes a transparent link between the physical sound and its communicative intent. For example the hungrier baby becomes, the louder and longer crying becomes. *Thomas Scovel;(1998:9)*

Crying randomly is associated with child's needs. After several weeks of extensive interaction with its caretaker, the child starts to coo. The cooing stage emerges at about two months of age but is succeeded, when the child is about six months old, by babbling stage. This is a natural tendency of children of this age to burst out in string of consonant-vowel syllable clusters, almost as a kind of vocalic play.

After crying, cooing and babbling, comes the culmination of a child's early language development – the first word. Parents noticed that their children seemed to use single words as a sentence. Ex: milk is a version of "I'd like some milk". When a child is approximately two years old, it begun to use two-word sentences.

Research pursued by applied linguists for several decades demonstrates that, like little children, adolescent and adult foreign learners also differ a great deal in their rate of language acquisition but not in the stages through which they progress. The process of language acquisition is a common psychological challenge for both the young, maturing child and older, experienced adult. When it comes to the human mind, age differences tend to evaporate, and we witness one common cognitive process when the minds of either youngsters or their older counterparts are confronted with a similar task, for example the tremendous challenge of picking up a completely new system of symbolic communication – in other words, learning a language.

From my experience as a parent of two children I noticed these stages in my children's development. First my daughter passed through these stages and she began talking in early, of course using single words first, and now she (8 years old) acquires both (Albanian and English) languages fluently.

Our little son (7 months old) now is at the stage of babbling. He smiles with me - his mother and of course the other members of our family.

2. Acquisition of Nouns

Nouns are the words that are used to identify people, places or things. Children first are in contact with their toys, parents or the object around them that help learning nouns earlier and easier than the other parts of speech.

A one word utterance varies from the child's age. When a 16 months child says Mummy. It means: That is mummy. But at the age of 19 month it means an interaction between mumm and the surrounding environment and it means: mother's cup when is said Mummy. (*Jean Aitchison;199:113*)

Usually nouns are learned by pointing the objects.

Like the acquisition of first language nouns in learning the foreign language nouns mostly are the first words that children use.

Children learning the foreign language in formal school settings learn best by communicating primarily through oral language; effective programs give children opportunities for practice of routine language and basic language patterns, but also for imaginative play , action rhymes and songs, response to narrative texts and participation in narrative and simple description. As they grow older (beyond eight) and become more proficient, young learners continue to learn best primarily through oral language, moving into conversations, narratives, simple recounts and reports. Written language is limited in its support of oral language learning in the early years, though a "switch point", when written language becomes more supportive of oral language development, happens around eight or nine years of age . When children move beyond social interaction in the classroom to academic use of language, activities move toward being content - based activities. (*Penny McKay;2006:177*)

From our everyday life it is noticed that pointing the objects, playing with toys, pictures are the best ways to learn nouns in early childhood. Saying people's name. It is seen from the area that I live that little children shorten the long names ex: Erijon- Eri; telephone-alo; or Edi/Dita instead of Edita.

Learning the foreign language in Macedonia, children start in their first class age of (6 - 7 years old), through oral language. At first stage of learning foreign language of course learners learn by pointing things in their class or pictures in their books. Example: This is a door; this is a ball; This is a book.

Children in this stage do not learn nor the alphabet, they have their books full of pictures, plays and songs. They successfully learned new language through songs, pointing and oral language. The best example of this is the song "Head and shoulder" where my pupils learning the song and pointing to their parts of body, they learned parts of their body.

The gesture plays a role in the lexical development of children learning English.

- Babies usually interact with their mother's gestures. They star at mother's direction and follow her mother by a smile.
- Now my baby follows my gestures and smiles.

It is during the turn from eight to nine month when the babies start to present cognitive competence specific from the specie that mother and baby begin to perform the joint attention process, which emerges from other individual's comprehension as intentional agents. (*Leonor S. Cabra; 2010:174*)

According to Tomasello (2003) it is in this stage that the baby begins to see the others as intentional agents like him and begins to comprehend the relation between action and result and the intentional acts of others. The beginning of the baby's production usually happens after the mother's primary encouragement, that is, after the mother's gestural production. In a second moment, as the sensory motor system develops and time passes, the child is able to produce his own gestures without the mother's primary encouragement. In fact, in this second moment, it is the child through his production that calls the mother to the interaction.

The baby then performs the gestures in a disorganized way. The pointing gesture, for instance, it totally out of order, the fingers are semi flexed and the hand partially opened. As time goes by, with the mother-baby interactions and the sensory motor system development, the baby performs the gestures more accurately and intensely – that is, gestures throughout time are to be produced more and more closely to the adult structure. (*Leonor S. Cabra; 2010:174*)

The situations below, extracted from two mother-baby dyads from eight to seventeen months, show how the types of gestures proposed by Kendon in his continuum appear during these first steps towards gestural production:

This first kind of gesture is characterized by the movement of some of the baby's body parts, for example, head, hands and arms, beginning from eight months of life, during the life span of the first nine months. It is after this first gesture that the child will start to produce other gestures. This process is initiated by the mother's interaction, which is one the most relevant elements in the construction of the baby's gestures. In the second moment, the child herself will try as well as other gestures and the process only begins with an attempt in which the movements are done in an awkward way. Later it is produced on a concrete form and it gets better during the gesture production. So, even though in the first step babies do these kinds of gestures, they yet do not know what are producing from them? In the second step these gestures begin to be related with a process of language acquisition, and at last movements are, done gestures are done and related with words that are being learned from these gestures.

In this situation, the child not only reacts to the encouragement of her mother, but also begins an attempt to produce the gesture. The child that is now eight months and eight days, and through a playful context tries to show gestures through arm movements in an awkward way.

Singing a song with any kind of gesture makes children learn better words. Clapping hands, making a telephone conversation, crying or smiling make children imitate their mother and learning new actions.

It has been suggested that noun meanings are easier to hypothesis because they can be often inferred by pairing a string of sounds with an object or an individual by sheer observation of the extra-linguistic situation, whereas actions seem more difficult to identify. Terms for actions are always relational in meaning, they link one or more participants to the event (Gentner 1982, Clark 1991). Maybe that is the reason why they can almost never occur in ostensive definitions.

We often say “This is a book” or “This is water”, but we hardly ever say “This is reading” or “This is eating”.

Nouns are predominant in early vocabularies because noun meanings are easier to infer than verb meanings.

Even when we say ‘Look, he’s eating!’ the hypothesis space is much larger than when we say ‘Look, this is a flower’.

3. Verb Inflections

A verb is a word that is used to describe an action or a state and forms the main part of sentence the predicate.

The space of noun meaning will also apply to the acquisition of verb meaning. The whole constraints apply in the acquisition of both nouns and verbs.

Action verb often is heard before or after the action takes place. For example, the child can hear an utterance like “I will give you something to eat” before the action actually takes place.

Ambalu, Chiat and Pring (1997) studied the effects of verb input on the acquisition of verb meaning on 30 children aged 2; 3 to 3; 6. Interestingly, the findings of their experiment show that verbs which describe movement can be better learned when heard before the event has taken place, whereas verbs which focus on the result are better learned if the child hears the unfamiliar word after the action has taken place.

Also, some very simple verbs, used in every day conversation, and which denote perceivable events, may encode perspectives and beliefs which cannot be inferred by mere observation; some semantic components (causation, manner of action, etc.) are conflated into the meaning of the verb. Consider, for example, pairs of verbs such as *buy/sell*, *win/beat*, *give/receive* (Gleitman; 1990:83).

Action assumption will tell the child that a novel term denoting an action refers to the act that links the different participants in that event as a whole. The generic-level assumption relates to the expectation that words (nouns or verbs) denote categories which are distinct from each other, but whose members share a maximum number of properties. The equal-detail assumption also applies, according to Clark, in the learning of both noun and verb meanings. The child somehow knows that each word denotes equally detailed instances of categories.

However, this does not seem to be enough. Even if one adopted the view that these constraints are sufficient to guide the child through the maze of hypotheses, they still cannot explain why children are slower to learn verbs than nouns. Nor can they explain how children acquire pronouns or proper names.

There are also verbs which denote states of affairs which cannot be observed at all, such as think, believe, want, wonder, guess, understand. And these verbs are used by parents quite a lot when talking to their children.

Fisher et al. (1994) advance a different point of view. According to them, nouns and verbs are actually acquired in different ways: when learning a novel noun, the child must map a word to the world, whereas when learning a new verb, he/she must map a sentence to the world. This sentence-to-world mapping could explain why early vocabularies contain few verbs (if at all); noun meanings can be learned in the absence of structural knowledge, but verbs cannot.

From Fisher's point of view, I think that it is easier the child to map a word to the world , than a sentence to the world, and for this reason may noun meanings are easier to infer than verb meanings. Child's first words usually are from their first toys: "a ball-ball", "a cat-cat", "a doll-doll"; after these first words (nouns) come sentences or the first contacts with verbs: "give me a ball", "take a cat", " it is my doll".

The acquisition of language features shows how children's language develops systematically, and they go beyond what they have heard to create new forms and structures.

4. Negative Form

Children learn negation very early, it is learned by disappearing objects, to refuse a suggestion, or reject an assertion, even at the single word stage.

Negation is expressed by the word "no" : No. No cookie. No comb hair.

The negative word appears just before the verb: Daddy no comb hair. Don't touch that.

Children may add forms of negative other than "no", including words like "can't" or "don't". They do not vary these forms for different persons or tenses: He don't want it.

Children may have difficulty with other features related to negatives. : I don't have no candies.

These forms of negatives I noticed in every normal child that learned negative forms in their L1. Usually when a child touches any object in a room that is forbidden for him parents use: "don't", "no", "you can't". When the object is disappearing the parent say: "no daddy", "no ball".

When I taught negatives to my English-learning pupils (beginners) I tried asking them questions that need negative answers. First I answered myself: Do I speak German? - No, I don't. Children always first make mistakes in third person singular saying: "he/she don't" instead of "he/she doesn't".

5. Interrogative Form - Questions

- Children's earliest questions are single words or simple two- or three- word sentences with rising intonation: Cookie? Mummy book?
- Where's Daddy?
- They use declarative sentence when they ask more new questions: You like this? I have that?
- Then they can even add "do" in declarative sentences: Do dogs like ice-cream?
- After this stage children form question by WH- and YES/NO questions are formed correctly: Why did you do that? Are these your books?

The pre-school years – children at this age (3-4age old) can ask questions give commands, create stories.

In this stage children tell us fairy tales, that their mother read them or they may add or imagine any other story similar to those learned from parent/ educators.

The school years - in this stage vocabulary is growing . Children learn how spoken language differs from written one.

An example here I may add that our children in Albanian say "nana" to their mothers , in this stage they realise that the correct form is "nëna" and not "nana".

Young children often use words in a way which suggests they have a different understanding of them compared to adult usage. They may use a word to refer to too wide category of things, such as "apple"¹¹ To refer to all fruit that are round known as over-extension. Or to use a word to refer to too small category of things, such as "dog" only for pet dog not for neighbour's dog- under- extension.

My daughter said "choco (chocolate)" for all brown sweets or cookies.

Children often make errors in the way they form past tenses, plural of nouns .

Errors like these: We buy a new house last year; did you spoke to him? Irregular plural: mousses-mice, mans-men.

One very productive approach to the language of fewer than fives especially is to study apparent “mispronunciations”.

When children are describing any verbs they pay attention to the words round the verb. Kelly, a blind child focused on verbs and the words accompanying them. She paid attention to the ways her mother used the verbs Look and See. You look like a kangaroo. Let’s see if grandma is home.

The learners of English as a second language learn it by giving commands: "Sit down", "Stand up", "Open the door", "Walk to the table", etc. Soon after, sometimes even within the same class hour, questions are paired with commands: "This is a book. Give the book to Sarah". "The book is on the table. Put the book on the chair". "Who has the book?" "Give the book to Anne."

According to a view children just listen carefully to what people say and add on verbs one by one. But youngsters do more than this : they generalize their knowledge to new verb. (Alison 1998:46)

6. From Verbs to Nouns

In order to infer the meaning of a verb the child has to examine all the syntactic frames in which it occurs. The arguments which have been discussed so far in defense of syntactic bootstrapping belong to the verbal domain. Actually, one of the assumptions we started from was that verb meaning is more difficult to infer than the meaning of nouns because the structure of verbs is more complex. Does this mean that syntactic cues are not relevant with nouns? Are they less relevant? There is experimental evidence that syntax also helps children to infer the precise noun meaning. Syntactic cues are important in the acquisition of nouns as well.

Bloom and Kelemen (1995:43) show that children can detect the correct collective noun meaning on the basis of syntactic cues. They tested this hypothesis on 16 adults and 16 4- and 5-year olds. Each subject was first shown pictures of novel objects, described as either “These are fendles” or “This is a fendle”. The subjects in the plural condition were expected to treat the word “fendle” as an object name and the subjects in the singular condition were expected to treat “fendle” as a collective noun. After the new word was taught, each subject was shown sets of two pictures, one depicting a single object and one a collection of objects, and asked: “Can you show me the fendle?” If “fendle” was assumed to be a collective noun, the subject was expected to point to the picture depicting a collection of objects. If the word was assumed to be an object name, the subject should have pointed to the picture depicting the individual object.

The results revealed that the children were sensitive to syntax. The ones in the singular condition favored the collective interpretation and the ones in the plural condition the object name interpretation.

Bloom (1994:35) reports another experiment designed to test if children can detect the syntax-semantic mapping in the case of mass/countable nouns. 3- and 4 year olds were taught novel nouns denoting ambiguous stimuli, i.e. stimuli which could be interpreted either as a set of individuals or as an unindividuated portion, such as spaghetti or lentils, or a string of bell sounds from a tape recorder. The children were divided into two groups. One group was introduced the novel term in a countable frame,

e.g. These are feps – there really are a lot of feps here.

The other group heard the new noun in a mass frame,

e.g. This is fep. There really is a lot of fep here.

Then the children in the first group were asked to “give the puppet a fep”. Most of them tried to give the puppet an object. The children in the “mass” group were required to “give the puppet fep”. They tended to give the puppet a handful of objects.

These findings show that children are aware of the syntax-semantics mappings. And it seems that these mappings help them to infer the meaning of nouns as well as the meaning of verbs.

7. Input and Lexical Development

The input has also been invoked as a possible cause of the predominance of nouns or verbs in early vocabularies. The predominance of nouns in early vocabularies has been said to be the result of the linguistic input which children receive at this stage, and which provides more evidence for the meanings of nouns than for the meanings of verbs (Snedeker and Gleitman 1999:77). On such an account, it is not relevant to stress the difficulty of inferring the meaning of verbs and as such to try and link the lack of verbs in early vocabularies to the cognitive limitations of young learners. Certain properties of the input are responsible for the predominance of nouns in early vocabularies. This view predicts that the way in which children cope with nouns vs. verbs, being dependent on properties of the input, may differ from one language to another.

This prediction is borne out by data from child Mandarin Chinese and Korean. Mandarin-speaking children produce more verbs than nouns in their early vocabularies. Tardif (1995:60) accounts for this phenomenon by resorting to a comparison of the percentage of nouns and that of verbs in the subjects' speech and in the input which they received. Similarities between the percentage of nouns and verbs in the input provided by adults and in the early speech of Mandarin-speaking children have been found.

One more possible explanation for the early predominance of verbs or nouns may be one which takes into account the morphological variation (i.e. the number of forms used for one and the same word) available in the input¹³. Yamashita (1999:14) argues that Japanese children acquire nouns earlier because nouns have the least variation in the linguistic input, whereas verbs are acquired late due to the fact that they have the most morphological variation.

Such findings lead to the conclusion that the noun bias or the verb bias in early speech may be language dependent and not universal as previously claimed (Gentner 1982, Nelson 1973). This conclusion is supported by a study of the early lexical acquisition of four Mandarin Chinese-English bilinguals (Nicoladis 2001:50), Nouns and verbs are acquired differently. The predominance of nouns in early vocabularies may be the result of the linguistic input.

8. Conclusion

Even though it isn't very easy children acquire words quickly.

Cognitive abilities, memory, attention span and socializing skills may also help the child in the domain of vocabulary acquisition.

They make use of all the cues (prosody, semantics, syntax, extra-linguistic context) available, using them differently at different developmental stages.

The most frequent type of error is that of overextension. The possible causes of this type of error are:

- a limited vocabulary
- retrieval difficulty
- under specification of semantic features
- different, non-adult-like importance attached to certain attributes

Children never overextend in comprehension.

It has been proposed that the nature of the input plays a more important part in the process of lexical development than it does in the case of syntactic development.

The conclusion we can reach so far is that the meaning of at least some classes of verbs is even more difficult to hypothesize by mere observation than the meaning of nouns. And there is experimental evidence that indeed verb meaning is more difficult to infer than noun meaning. Gillette and Gleitman (1995) devised an Experiment in which adults' ability to infer verb meaning by observation was tested. The subjects were shown short videotapes of mothers playing with their infants, with the audio turned off. Whenever the mother uttered a noun, a beep was heard and the subjects were required to guess what noun had been uttered. About 50% of the guesses were accurate at the first beep, but the results improved for later beeps. In a second experiment, the subjects watched videotapes, as in the first experiment, but this time a beep was heard every time the mother had uttered a verb. The subjects managed to guess the right verb only 7% of the time.

By analogy, Gleitman and Gillette conclude that it must be more difficult for children to infer verb meaning than noun meaning. This hypothesis is also supported by the fact that early vocabularies (the first 50 words) often contain no verbs and the number of verbs continues to be smaller than that of nouns until around age 3. This fact is more intriguing as these early vocabularies do not contain only nouns which denote basic-level classes of objects (which could be learned by observation) but also nouns which refer to locations, events or temporal entities, i.e. which can hardly be learned by mere observation. This suggests that verbs are not more difficult to learn only because their meaning cannot always be inferred by resorting to the extra linguistic environment but for some other reasons as well which may be linked to the complexity of their structure.

From my experience (as a parent and an English teacher) and discussion of my colleges that teach languages, may conclude that really nouns are learned easier than verbs. Even though there are errors made in gender (in German , Albanian- from Turkish spoken children), number of nouns , whereas verbs are learned more difficult because they need explanation by action and some of them , using gesture , pantomime or miming. Our students make mistakes in tenses, third person - in English, aspect and mood mostly in Albanian. Also errors are made in non-finite forms of verbs.

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