

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: LEXICAL SUBSTITUTION

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Language is a complex phenomenon and a normal child masters this exceedingly complex phenomenon with an astonishing speed and in circumstances usually less than ideal. A remarkable fact about the acquisition of language is the speed with which a child is able to acquire a language. The speed of language acquisition is not conditioned by the socio-economic environments in which a child starts acquiring language nor is it conditioned by the history, culture or even the complexity of the language which is being acquired by the child. Within a linguistic group normal children arrive at the same grammar of a language within a broadly identical brief span of time with almost the same speed.

There is not much of conscious education given to the children on the part of the parents. The situation obtaining between a child and his parents is far from a learning or instructional one. Usually parents do not tend to correct the 'defects' in the formal features of early speech by children. The 'defects' are rather relished by the parents. We tend to correct mistakes in truth value. We tend to 'reinforce' the children's speech guided mainly by its content. In addition to this, a child encounters different samples of language, same or most of which need not be grammatical or coherent. In spite of these, normal children all around of the world from diverse linguistic families acquire their language in three to four years.

When we look into the child speech we find that it has the characteristics of imitation and even at times rote learning. But it is productive characteristic that plays the dominant role throughout. Children fail usually in their attempts to imitate adult speech in the beginning of syntactic development. They are more successful in spontaneously producing the sentences. Further a child becomes capable of putting the structures he has already acquired into use in increasingly novel ways. Many utterances may be regular from the syntactic sense but, semantically they are novel and have not been uttered either by parents or by the child himself.

Children around the world seem to start with a single word and go from one-word stage to a two-word stage. It is common knowledge, however, that children understand more than what they can speak in the beginning.

This article is to analyse the part played by lexical substitution in the linguistic development of a young child. The child was growing up in a bilingual environment where adult discourse was weighted in favour of English. But still, his second language acquisition really began at the age of 3 years, when he entered a Montessori school where conversation among his peers was mainly in English. This provided the impetus for him to speak in English. Within the short space of a month he started speaking English in simple sentences straight away, that he had not only acquired a sizeable vocabulary, but had also internalised certain basic rules of English syntax too. By the age of 3 years, the child was saying-

1. I going to run
2. Bring me a chocolate

This was evidence that he had acquired the basic sentences structure in English. How wonderful and how complex is the acquisition of language. And how easily does the child acquire the second language. He is exposed to thousands of different sounds with variation in quality, pitch, length and loudness. But he restricts himself to the acquisition of the few, the significant sounds with their patterns of occurrence, and to the acquisition of the language system, the processes of word and sentence formation. He does imitate and get he is capable of producing something uttered never before.

In a second language learning situation, the child does not go through the several stages of first language acquisition such as babbling, single, double and multiple word utterances what we have is a conscious effort or attempt in learning another language. The child of a second language knows already another language and, thus, he is in a position to communicate with appropriate content in majority of the cases. His problem is to express this content through the use of the norm of the structures of the second language in an appropriate manner. The child did not go through the one - word sentence and two -word sentence stages. He skipped the 'telegraphic' language stage too. This may be because he had gone through these stages in the process of acquisition of his first language and therefore he could bypass these stages during the acquisition of his second language. This connects up with Chomsky's view that base rules are the same across languages in which case there is no need to report these stages.

The first language is not learned by everybody with the same rate of acquisition. There are individual differences in the degree of success with regard to acquisition of different components of language. It is possible that such differences get reflected in the acquisition of second language, at least in the beginning stages of acquisition. Likewise intelligence may also influence language acquisition in so far as it is concerned with the grasping of patterns, guessing meanings from the context etc.

3. I want a barbie toy. I girl

The child said this when she was offered a barbie toy to play with other children or when she visited the home of a relative. This unique phrasing illustrates how the child strings together meaningful elements with ease and economy to express her ideas. Here the economy is achieved by making the noun 'girl' function as an adjective. Utterances of this nature showed that the child's communicative needs were expanding.

Around the age of 3 1/2 years, the child showed an amazing speed in the acquisition of English vocabulary and syntax. At the same time it became apparent that the length and complexity of his utterances were increasing. He appeared to be trying to express more complex thoughts. But as his language capacity was not developed enough to meet this need, he often got his number and tenses mixed up in the struggle to express himself. It was at this stage that he started resorting to lexical substitution, i.e. using English words in Tamil sentences and Tamil words in English sentences. It appeared as though he made no distinction between the two languages.

4. /nānukku / same frock / vēnum /

'I want same frock'.

5. *Yadhu told me to bring / ammā appā / phōṭō / vum / mar_ratum /*

'Yadhu told me to bring mother and father's photo and other people also'.

This substitution or switching occurred very smoothly and spontaneously. There was no pause in the stream of speech to show that the child was looking for words. As the concepts arose in the child's mind, he picked out the labels for them and the labels were there in both languages as alternate vocabulary items. The child probably picked out the one that surface first in his mind. It may be that in example 5 the word / mar_ratum /

occurred to him first before the English word 'other'. This substitution cannot be accounted for in any other way for the child knew the word 'other' too. But the case of the word 'same' in example 4 is different. The child did not know its Tamil equivalent /orē/ 'same' and therefore he substituted the English word he knew. The lexical substitution in the sentence.

6. *now it is /rā/*
 'Now it is night'.

can be explained in the same way, i.e both Tamil and English words are there in his vocabulary and they are indifferently used. In this instance the Tamil word/ rā / came up first. It seems as if both Tamil and English words occur in one and the same dictionary.

In the following sentences we see English verbs and verb phrases being used with Tamil auxiliary verbs within Tamil sentences.

7. */rōcy/ milk drink/panṇutu/*
 'Rosy drinks milk'.
8. */nān varēkkay/you don't sleep / mānā*
 'Uncle, You don't sleep when I am coming'.
9. */nān/ night/ veḷḷana / sleep/ paṇṇuvēn*
 'I sleep early in the night'.

Here the manner in which the child uses the English verb + Tamil auxiliary gives one the impression that the English verb is well integrated within the structure of the Tamil sentence. What is the natural and smooth manner in which the substitution takes place?

Tamil nouns are substituted within an English sentence. The sentence given below shows it.

10. *There is only one/citti/but/ava koḷumpilay/, /ava/ mummy/ oṭu/*
talk /paṇṇa māṭṭā/
 "There is only one aunty, but she is in Colombo, she doesn't talk with mother."

In this example, the child did not know the English word 'aunty'. So he had to resort to using the Tamil word /cittū/. Here the child's first language is acting as a bridge in the acquisition of his second language. In the case of the word /koḷumpu/, though the child knew its English equivalent, the Tamil word was remembered since this form was often used in his home environment. Perhaps the negative form /māṭṭā/ and

other verb phrase of the preceding sentence caused confusion in his mind. This is because, as the child's utterances became more and more complex, he had greater difficulty in handling the grammar of the language. In such a situation a child is bound to get his grammar rules mixed up.

So far the child's lexical substitution involved only nouns and verbs. In the following sentence we find him substituting prepositions too.

11. *now I want to go /amkālay / because the car /nerikkappōvutu/*

'Now, I want to go beyond this place, because the car is going to strangle me'.

One would have expected the English preposition 'beyond' to have come to him more readily than its Tamil counter part. This probably, is a case of simple interference.

12. *my new slippers is not /paḷutu/ yet*

'My new slippers are not damaged yet'.

At the age of 4 years, the child still resorted to lexical substitution now and again.

Second language acquisition is part of the socialization process, the child is undergoing and is an important tool for the acquisition and stabilization of concepts. The child acquires his first language so as to become a member of the community he is born in. He is influenced by the behaviour of his elders, but slowly and steadily a personality of his own may develop with concomitant characteristics. Second language acquisition requires some adjustments with the culture imparted through the language. His habits, intelligence, aptitude, attitudes, motivation and other psychological and linguistic factors may facilitate his learning or may inhibit him from learning the second language. Personality factors and motivation play a very important role in the acquisition of second language.

According to the facts presented here, such instances of lexical substitution as this leads one to conclude that the child's Tamil lexicon is not distinct from his English lexicon. The smooth flow of words in these utterances is suggestive of a situation where both Tamil and English words occur in one and the same dictionary. This could be expected of a child caught between two languages, in whose linguistic environment code-switching is a regular feature. That lexical

substitution is a necessary and inevitable stage in the linguistic development of a young child acquiring a second language.

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