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ESTUDOS LINGÜÍSTICOS

A GENERAL VIEW ON LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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ISSN: 1517-7238 v. 8 nº 14 1º sem. 2007 p. 163-177

RESUMO: A pesquisa em aquisição da linguagem é importante para que possamos entender o ser humano como um todo e, particularmente, o desenvolvimento intelectual da criança. A pesquisa nessa área aborda grandes questões sobre a natureza do homem, questões estas que continuam gerando inúmeros debates vigorosos e, muitas vezes, acirrados ao longo dos séculos entre filósofos, psicólogos e lingüistas. Pesquisadores e escritores destacam a importância da linguagem da criança no processo de socialização e adaptação ao seu meio-ambiente. O modo como a criança entende e utiliza a linguagem fornce elementos para compreendermos o desenvolvimento do seu pensamento e raciocínio. As crianças omitem palavras e terminações de palavras, utilizam a ordem das palavras de maneira distinta da dos adultos e as combinam de forma diferenciada. Estes e outros aspectos serão aqui discutidos para mostrar, de uma forma geral, como as crianças adquirem a sua língua materna.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: aquisição da linguagem, classe social, atitudes dos pais

ABSTRACT: Language acquisition research is important for our understanding of man in general and of the intellectual development of the child in particular. It deals with major questions about the nature of man, questions that have generated a great deal of lively and often acrimonious debate over the centuries amongst philosophers, psychologists and linguists. Researchers and writers point to the importance of language in child's socialization and adaptation to his environment. The child's understanding and use of language provides us with the best window on the development of his thought and reasoning. The children omit words and word endings, use word orders different from the adult ones, and combine words in a way adults would not. These and other aspects will be discussed in this work to show, more generally, how do children master their first language.
KEY-WORDS: language acquisition, social class, parental attitudes

INTRODUCTION

Although the human infant appears to be born with a predisposition to emit sounds, these cannot of themselves be considered 'language'. Because a language is composed of arbitrary but conventionalized signs which stand for meanings, and of localized rules for combining these signs into intelligible units representing ideas, a child has to *learn* the conventions of language. These conventions may differ obviously from country to country, less obviously from one part of a country to another. Even in a single village, there may be differing language conventions as between social clas-

ses; not only may different words be conventionally employed to describe the same object or action, but the ways in which similar words are combined or arranged may vary.

1. THE MAIN FUNCTION OF LANGUAGE

Language is a distinctively human activity, which makes possible the complex social relationships upon which civilized life depends. As human beings talk or write about themselves and their environment, interaction between different individuals becomes systematized, and cultural and social patterns emerge. "The child is not in a dark room listening to language through a loudspeaker and attempting to understand it; he is engaged in interaction with the world and the helpful people in it." (VILLIERS; VILLIERS, 1979:112).

Language enables the discussion of kinship, status and role, through such words as 'mother', 'father, 'husband', 'wife', 'spouse', 'son', 'daughter', and so on. These words go far beyond mere naming - they express relationships. A named individual may fill many positions when viewed from certain standpoints: he may be father to one, son to another, brother to another, husband to another. Only language makes consideration of these standpoints possible, and without it there could be no instructions and no rules for the regulation of society. Because language can be written, knowledge may be transmitted from individual to individual across time. It even becomes possible to re-sort information into new and perhaps highly original forms (O'GRADY 2005).

2. THE PRE-LINGUISTIC STAGE

Much of the earliest communication from adult to child is in the form of facial expressions. A child first comes to know his parents' personality through the medium of a smiling, scowling, grimacing, or frowning face. Despite the absence of understood words, a mother does succeed in communicating with her child, in expressing her love, her annoyance, and her wishes. In return, the newcomer may make himself understood in a rudimentary way by crying, screaming or babbling. Indeed,

ISSN: 1517-7238 v. 8 nº 14 1º sem. 2007 p. 163-177

within his first year almost every conceivable human sound may occur in his vocalizations.

> ...Prelinguistic infants use a number of communicative gestures that are ritualized from non-communicative behaviours; for example, the 'hands-up' gestures as a request to be picked up may be a ritualization of the infant trying to pull its way up to the parent's arms. There is no evidence that prelinguistic infants learn this gesture by imitative learning, or even that they comprehend these early gestures when they are produced by another person. (BOWERMAN ; LEVINSON, 2001:152).

At this stage, however, a child could no be said to be using or understanding 'language'. Even when he *names* objects, as some infants do towards the end of their first year, we should still not say that he is *using* language. It is only when he is capable of analyzing a situation in terms of words, and of putting the words together again in a certain fashion to convey meaning either to himself or to another person, that a truly linguistic stage may be said to have been reached.

3. LEARNING SOUNDS, WORDS, AND GRAMMAR

According to Bloom (2000) and O'Grady (2005), a child's responses to his parents' speech suggest that he can hear and appreciate differences in sound before he can reproduce them. If the parents are associated with pleasure and reward, a child probably learns to speak by a process which involves listening to himself as he imitates parental noises. Since he is likely to be further rewarded when his imitations approximate closely to the model, his own successful utterances become reinforced and learnt.

Just as the young child's motor skills are gradually refined from his early, coarse, overall activity, so his ability to distinguish one sound from another proceeds from an appreciation of maximum differences to an awareness of more subtle distinctions.. Because it is probably the easiest discrimination to make, he learns first to distinguish between vowels and consonants, after which 'stops' (p, t, etc.) are distinguished from nonstops (f, m, etc).

ISSN: 1517-7238 *v. 8 nº 14 1º sem. 2007 p. 163-177*

Sounds such as 'th' and 'r', which require delicate adjustment of the tongue, are pronounced only with difficulty, since the relative sizes of the tongue and the mouth cavity are not the same for young children as for adults. Thus, we find children starting school who still say 'fing' or 'wabbit'. It is now realized that attempts to correct such errors must show patience, for forcing at too early an age may lead to inhibition. The importance of visual cues becomes evident if one considers the difficulty of distinguishing 'p' from 't' or 'k', without the opportunity to observe the placing of the speaker's lips (VILLIERS; VILLIERS, 1979).

Sometimes, although a child has learnt to distinguish one sound from another ("t" from "k", for instance), and makes the distinction in *new* words , the archaic form may be retained in words which were used before the distinction was appreciated. Thus, if he had become familiar with a car before he met a kite, he may say that he is going in the 'tar' to fly his 'kite'. Normally, such archaisms disappear when additional visual information is acquired as a child learns to read.

By the end of the fourth year, the phonological system of a normal child approximates to that of his model. If this model is incorrect, his system will be incorrect too.

Most children utter their first intelligible words between eight and seventeen months after birth. Thereafter, new words are added slowly until the 'naming' stage occurs, usually towards the end of the second year. During this short period, about 250 recognizable words, many of them nouns, are acquired. With the appearance of simple sentences, a 2-year-old is able to make his needs known and to ask questions.

In the second, third, and fourth years, the fundamentals of grammar are acquired. Grammar may be seen as a series of devices for imposing meaning on signs. Sometimes, this is done by varying the order of words, as when one says 'Bill hit John', as against 'John hit Bill'. Again, one may use various markers (such as apostrophes), or function words (such as 'and', 'the', and 'his'). On occasions, one may both vary the order of words and employ markers, as in the following sentences:

'John and Bill gave Robert his bat' or
'John gave Bill and Robert his bat'.

According to Clark; Clark (1977), with the learning of sounds, a child seems to have the ability to decode adult grammar before he can himself use it very accurately. A 2-year-old, for instance, may understand quite lengthy adult sentences, but his own attempts at sentence-construction may consist merely of two-word abbreviations of the adult form. 'That is the ball' becomes 'That ball', 'Where is the ball?' becomes 'Where ball? (GUASTI, 2002). Great strides are made in the third year, when prepositions, conjunctions, articles, possessives, tense, prefixes and suffixes may all appear. One of the most important ideas learnt at this stage is the difference between singular and plural. Normally, a child will have learnt the singular form first, but where the plural occurs more often (as in 'shoes', 'eyes', or 'toys') he will have become familiar with the plural form and must later learn the singular. Sometimes, a grammatical rule learnt in one context may be incorrectly applied in another, as when the plural in '-s' is used for such words as 'mans', or the past tense in '-ed' is used to construct the word 'goed'.

It should not be thought that a child must learn every new grammatical rule from scratch. On the contrary, he brings to each new grammatical situation a store of concepts already acquired. That he has indeed abstracted some concepts from his experience is demonstrated in the examples of misapplication of learnt rules just cited.

> Initially the child construes experience of phenomena that are in, or are brought into, a shared visual field; once constituted into meaning, the experience can be shared, validated and scaffolded dialogically in collaboration with other members of his/her meaning group. (HALLIDAY ; MATTHIESSEN, 2000: 69).

In addition, quite young children are able to understand nonsense rhymes and stories, which would be unintelligible without an appreciation of the difference between some nonsense words intended as nouns, others as verbs, and so on. Even though he will be unaware of the terms 'verb', 'noun', 'adjective', and 'plural', a normal 5-year-old will correctly apply the rules such terms imply to new situations, demonstrating that he has a concept which exists outside the experienced store of examples he has met. It is only the exceptions which

must be learnt unsystematically, since no rule will help him to form 'bought' from 'buy'. Such exceptions together with such infrequent patterns as 'the reason for ...is that...', not only...but...', 'neither...nor...' appear at a comparatively late stage, and may indeed never be correctly applied.

4. FACTORS INFLUENCING THE ACQUISITION OF SPOKEN LANGUAGE

For Peccei (1996), since learning to speak normally depends upon both hearing and seeing other people speaking, it is evident that a child will be severely handicapped if his eyes and ears are defective. Poor visual acuity may prevent him seeing the placing of his parents' lips when sounds are being formed, and poor hearing - particularly high-tone deficiency - will make the discrimination of various consonants far more difficult.

A child's language development will be encouraged if his physical environment is reach in stimulation. As he begins to master the means of communication, the infant will progress more rapidly if there are things in and around the home which are sufficiently interesting to be worth asking questions about, and discussing. It is not easy to isolate the effects of a stimulating physical environment from other factors, since such an environment is usually found in homes where other advantages are also present: the superior language development of so many children of higher-income parents is no doubt due in the main to the better speech models and language habits provided by such parents, and perhaps to an innate superior capacity for learning. But it is likely, too, that these higher-income homes will constitute a physical environment richer in objects which stimulate a child to talk, and that this factor is itself of some importance (KATHLEEN, 1999).

4.1 The social factors

There is general agreement that social conditions reflected in the home have a profound effect upon the language development of children. As has been implied above, the higher the socio-economic level the greater is the likelihood that

ISSN: 1517-7238 v. 8 nº 14 1º sem. 2007 p. 163-177

parents will provide good speech models, and will have the time and inclination to converse with their children and to read to them. A number of studies have been designed to discover the relationship between language development and socio-economic status. Clark; Clark (1977), for instance, found that nursery-school children from homes receiving relief were consistently behind children from self-supporting homes in the number of comprehensible words spoken, and in the length of sentences used; whereas Fletcher; Garman (1999) observed a more rapid phoneme development in infants from professional, business, and clerical groups than in those from labouring groups.

> In all of these circumstances, children manage to acquire a native language - and rather quickly at that. Some of the differences between children's experiences are cultural, some social, and some accidental. After studying many children, our report would conclude that even children growing up in the same linguistic community, and ultimately learning the same language, may have a wide variety of experiences with language during their early years (CRAIN; LILLO-MARTIN, 2001:7).

4.2 The family environment

The importance of parental attitudes to verbal usage, particularly with regard to the child's place in family conversation, cannot be overstressed. Some parents believe that young children should be offered 'baby-talk', whereas such talk appears in fact to be confusing to a child when the later meets the correct word. This baby-talk takes two main forms: the repetition of syllables as in 'bye-bye', 'choo-choo', 'ma-ma' and 'dada', and the addition of suffixes as in 'doggy' and ' horsey'. Sometimes, a parent may fail to offer a lengthy word to a child because he is himself unfamiliar with it. Yet where parents themselves employ appropriate words chosen from a wide vocabulary, even quite young children respond favorably (KATHLEEN, 1999).

> When talking to infants, human mothers use vocal patterns that are unusual by the standards of normal conversation. Mothers, as well as fathers and adults who are no parents, speak consistently more slowly and with higher pitch when interacting with infants, in smooth, exaggerated intonation contours quite unlike the choppy and rapid-fire speech patterns used when addressing adults. (BLOOM, 2000:51)

The importance of the opportunity for children to converse with adults has been demonstrated repeatedly. Guasti (2002), showed how adult attitudes to childish contributions might affect a child's linguistic development. They described conversation at table, differentiating adult-centered from child-centered conversations, and noting in addition that in many families children were never allowed to finish a sentence for themselves. They suggested that stammering and other speech defects might be related to these continual adult interruptions. Besides such intensive studies, evidence of the need for children to converse with adults has come from comparisons made between only children and children from larger families, and from investigations which have recorded the developing language of singletons, twins and triplets. No doubt part of the observed correlation between small family size and superior linguistic progress can be accounted for by the tendency of parents in the higher socio-economic groups, who may pass greater learning capacity by inheritance, to have fewer children; but nonetheless, there is evidence that the greater opportunity for conversation with adults in the case of only children has an effect.

O'Grady (2005) states that twins used shorter sentences than singletons, and that triplets were even further retarded in this respect. It seems that children from multiple births are relatively isolated from adult contacts: they talk among themselves, and may even develop their own special 'language'. It appears, too, that where there are several children in a family, particularly in cases where they are close together in age, the parents devote more time to the discussion of language with the older children than with the younger.

Whatever the financial background of a family, children are likely to make more rapid and lasting progress if parents read stories to them and teach them nursery rhymes, since the children in this way acquire a store-house of known language examples. However, it is worth mentioning that variation in children's linguistic behaviour or in rate or route of development is not caused uniquely by one factor alone:

> …the style of interaction that the child experiences depends on his own inherent attributes and on attributes of his own language

ISSN: 1517-7238 v. 8 nº 14 1º sem. 2007 p. 163-177

> behaviour, as well as on the characteristics of those with whom he interacts and on the situations in which these interactions occur (FLETCHER; GARMAN, 1999:112-113).

In addition, it seems that a 'welcoming' attitude to childish questions facilitates language development. The children may need help in framing their questions accurately, and the parents may find difficulty in providing answers which are both correct and comprehensible; but it appears that those who make the effort are likely to enhance the language of their children. The problem of providing answers which are, at one and the same time, both correct and comprehensible is considerable. If, for example, a very young child asks where babies come from, it would clearly be almost as foolish to discuss cell-fertilization in detail as to refer to gooseberry bushes or storks.

Family contacts usually determine not only the extent of a child's early vocabulary, but also the meaning he associates with particular words.In Gleason's (2001) point of view, while errors of the type mentioned above can prove confusing and even embarrassing, they are perhaps less serious than the subtle and often unconscious formation of attitudes which the particular use of certain words may encourage in children. In some families, parental taboos are passed on to children by means of language. The discussion of God or of sex may be prohibited, or may take place in such a way that an attitude is revealed and learnt. Reference to such bodily functions as urination or defaecation may be permitted only when cloaked in euphemism.

Even in a relatively compact country such as Paraguay, the effects upon language development of four quite specific family characteristics may be observed: geographical area, parental occupation, religion, and social class. Regional language variations, for example, may be considerable. More striking even than the regional pronunciation differences is the use of totally different words for the same everyday items and occurrences. While these variations make for a richness of national language, they can also lead to confusion. Many northeastern children in Brazil may say: 'este é um cara *porreta*' (this is a good boy), but such word is not commonly used in other places of the country. By the same token, the sentence "que guri espeloteado!"(what a crazy boy!) can only be heard in the southern part of country (Rio Grande do Sul).

ISSN: 1517-7238 v. 8 nº 14 1º sem. 2007 p. 163-177

According to Guasti (2002), parental occupation may not influence the content of the conversation (which will be heavily loaded with the jargon of a particular job), but may also determine the imagery and figures of speech employed. When children are exposed to parents who 'talk shop', they are likely to use expressions appropriate to the parental occupation more readily than others. If a parent commonly uses a word or phrase in a very particular way, the child may come to accept this as the *only* appropriate use for the word or phrase: a Civil Servant's child, for example, may associate the word 'service' only with Civil Service; a car-mechanic's son may associate the word 'timing' only with ignition timing. Not all 'shop' talk has a deleterious effect, however, since it can give rise to vivid smile and metaphor, may contribute to an understanding of the environment. One child was heard to refer to the clouds of smoke arising from his grandfather's pipe as 'Grand-dad's exhaust'; another 3-year-old son of an electrical engineer, responded to a warning about the dangers of electricity by bending to investigate the sockets, and saying, "It's all right, they're shuttered". In the same way, parents' position in society may affect tremendously their children's' performance: a woman born into the black working class has a very different life experience from, for example, a man born into the white upper middle class:

> With this different experience comes different knowledge, different opportunities, different views of the world…the set of beliefs and dispositions that a person develops as a result of his or her accumulated experience in a particular place in society. Depending on where people are in society, they will see and experience different things, know different people, develop different knowledge and skills (ECKERT; McCONNELL-GINET, 2005:42).

Certain religious groups may employ direct or indirect religious references in their conversation, and in extreme cases these may border on a secret dialect which tends to set a family apart from its neighbours. To a child brought up in a family of Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, the word 'Kingdom' can have a very different significance from the usual (O'GRADY, 2005).

The process whereby children from one social class may learn many different words and expressions from those

ISSN: 1517-7238 v. 8 nº 14 1º sem. 2007 p. 163-177

learnt by children from another, can lead to a confusion similar to that caused by regional differences in usage. This is especially marked when different meanings are assigned to similar words. For some children, breakfast is followed by lunch, dinner, tea and supper; for others by elevenses, lunch, tea and dinner. More crucial than these vocabulary differences, however, is the fact that, generally speaking, families at the higher social levels employ more appropriate language and more soundly constructed sentences. They usually have a wider store of phrases and constructions, enabling distinctions and subtleties to be expressed. Bernstein (1961) pointed out that speakers using what he called an 'elaborated code' develop an orientation to the world different from that developed by speakers using a 'restricted code'.

It may well be that the basis of much misunderstanding between classes is to be found in the relative 'restriction' of the linguistic code of the unskilled worker in particular. Certainly nothing delineates the lower-working-class child so clearly as his poorer language, and no other single factor contributes so markedly to his relative failure to profit by an academic education. For many such children grow up in a small society where complex verbal procedures are unusual, where meaning is normally inferred from the context of a remark, and where gesture (coupled with such phrases as 'you know' and 'you see') replaces verbal precision. Removed from their home environment, they find themselves without the necessary linguistic equipment to express meaning accurately. By contrast, a middle-class child will have been encouraged by his mother to express his ideas and emotions verbally, and she will have given him a model to follow in that she will herself have talked about her feelings and thoughts. If we accept the notion expressed by Luria; Yudovitch (1961) that speech is itself a complex of signals, which isolates perceptions and relates them to certain categories, we can see that the far richer spoken language of the middle-class child is likely to give him a much greater understanding of the world and a considerably better tool of handling it.

5. WRITTEN LANGUAGE

Many of the factors which have been seen to bear upon a child's acquisition of spoken language operate equally in the case of written language. In particular, parental attitudes are of great importance. While it is of interest to note that towards the end of the first year, a child presented with paper and crayon will progress from jabbing at the paper with the crayon to making lines upon it, it is perhaps more important to state that some parents will make a point of giving him paper and crayon while others will not.

Just as a child's early experiences with books, and his parents' attitudes to them, are important preparatory factors for the later business of learning to read, so his early doodlings with chalk and crayon, and his parents' attitudes to written language, in large part determine his later skill in writing. Following Gleason's (2001) opinion, in some families a child will be watched and encouraged: he will be offered materials appropriate to his physical and mental maturity, and will observe that his parents write fluently and with confident pleasure. In others, he may have no such experience at all, so that when he goes to school he will need to be given an extended opportunity to repair the omission before any formal teaching can be attempted.

An individual's written language will tend to reflect his speech. For this reason, there is no need to repeat what has already been said with regard to the factors, particularly the social factors, which affect the development of spoken language. It should, however, be remembered that an idea, once written, acquires a permanency denied to the ideas merely spoken: as a result deficiencies are even more obvious than in speech. Children from homes employing a restricted code may seldom be required to express their ideas on paper, and when they are asked to do so they may encounter extreme difficulty. Thus there may be an even greater difference between the written language of middle-class children and that of the working-class, than between the speech of each social level, wide though the latter difference may be.

ISSN: 1517-7238 v. 8 nº 14 1º sem. 2007 p. 163-177

CONCLUSION

We know that a child does not invent his own language, nor does he merely learn English, Portuguese, or Italian (PECCEI, 1996). He learns, and later perhaps modifies the English of a specific mother of a specific social class in a particular street in a particular town. Thus his language will, in a sense, be unique; it will contain many common elements, but will differ in some respects from the language of every other child. He is likely, therefore, to acquire certain ways of looking at the world, because his language will imply these. The importance of language is clearly beyond exaggeration if it affects the very view an individual has of the world.

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