

The Real Story of Child Language Acquisition

Day 1

0. Guidance

- a. General objectives and outline of the class
- b. Don't skip any class, or you will easily get confused.
- c. Be curious.
- d. Open Course Ware agreement

1. Introduction : What is the issue?

- (1) Questions about "language" (I-language)
 - a. What do you know when you know/have/speak a particular language?
 - b. How did you acquire this knowledge?
 - c. How do you put this knowledge to use?
 - d. How did these properties of the mind/brain evolve in the species?
 - e. How are these properties realized in mechanisms of the brain?
(Chomsky 1995: 17)
 - f. Why are there so many languages? (Berwick and Chomsky 2011)
- (2) These are some of the questions about language currently being discussed very actively (and there so many we do not know yet).
- (3) This class focuses on (1b) (and thus inevitably on (1a) as well).
- (4) **Class Work 1**
What do you think you know when you know/have/speak your native language? Be specific. (put aside your ability to read and write)

- (5)
- a. words
 - b. meaning of words
 - c. how to build a sentence (syntax)
 - d. meaning of a sentence
 - e. "accurate" speech sound
 - f. ...

(6) Many aspects of your knowledge of language is ~~very abstract and hence they~~ are almost unconscious. Let us take a look at some examples.

(7) **Example 1**

More than the meaning of constituent words

- a. John saw a girl with binoculars
(Not the simple sum of the meaning of the words in the sentence)
- b. Taro-ga John-to Bill-o izimeta
Taro-NOM John-with Bill-ACC bullied

(8) Every native speaker of English knows that (7a) may have two completely different meanings, and every native speaker of Japanese knows that (7b) may have two completely different meanings. But why?
How do we acquire this knowledge of language? Does anybody tell you these sentences may have two different meanings (or "ambiguous")?

(9) **Example 2:** you know a lot more than you have heard/experienced

<wanna contraction>

The school grammar teacher said that *wanna* is not a proper form of *want to*.

So try not to use *wanna*. "I want to visit John. => I wanna visit John."

What is wrong with the school grammar teacher?

- (10)
- a. I will visit John. Who do you want to visit?
=> Who do you wanna visit?
 - b. Someone has to visit John. Who do you want to visit him?
=> *Who do you wanna visit him?

(11) There must be some system in our brain/mind which enables us to produce/understand grammatical sentences.

Knowledge of language = "grammar"

If you simply say that *wanna* is a bad way of speaking, you will miss the system/rule behind the *wanna* contraction phenomenon.

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(12) What is actually surprising is:

- a. You know something more than the meaning of the words you know.
- b. You know this "something more" although nobody teaches them to you explicitly.

(13) The main theme of this class:

How do all children acquire "I-language" (the system in their brain) by simple exposure to example data alone?

- If you are ready to be surprised to watch an apple falling, you are ready for scientific study.

- If you are ready to be surprised to notice how children acquire language, you are ready for scientific study of language!

Class Work 2

- a. When you try to learn a new foreign language, what is good about the fact that you already know your native language? (How the knowledge/ability of your native language helps you learn a foreign language?)

Try to give as many points as possible. Be specific.

- b. When you try to learn a new foreign language, what is bad about the fact that you already know your native language? (How the knowledge/ability of your native language negatively affects your learning?)

Try to give as many points as possible. Be specific.

- (14) Recall that children learning their first language cannot use whatever is available when you try to learn a new foreign language.
2. Examples of children's speech: immature or excellent?
- (15) English Example:
 Girl: I want that toy.
 Mother: No, it's too expensive.
 Girl: Why don't you get some expensive money? (A three-year-old)
- Japanese Example
 Looking at the crescent moon, "Look. Someone has eaten the moon!"
 (four-year-old)
- (16) Example 1: Word "expensive" does not modify "money," but the child considers that we need "expensive money" to buy an "expensive toy." A mistake on adjective-noun collocation.
- (17) Japanese Example (three-year-old girl, picking up a call from her grandma)
 Girl: moshi moshi, Tanaka desu.
 GM: Aa, Yuko chan. Okaasan iru?
 Girl: Hai, imasu.
 [and she did nothing but just holding the phone receiver]
 (a long pause)
 GM: ... Okaasan, dashitekureru?
- (18) What's funny about these "child speak" is all about their knowledge of the world and/or how to use language to interact with people around.
- (19) What's amazing about "child speak" and any other utterances by children is that they are almost perfect about their understanding of word meaning, sentence structures and meaning, and their pronunciation!
- (20) Parents usually do not (and actually cannot in many cases) teach their child
- how to identify words out of a sentence (CD track 4)
 - the meaning of a word (e.g., *war*, *possible*, *somewhere*, etc.)
 - how to build a grammatical sentence using words
 - how to move the lips, tongue, vocal chords, to make proper sounds
- (21) It seems children do all of these by themselves, in the proper environments where a language is just spoken around them.

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- (22) Some mothers believe they have taught most words to their child, but an average child acquires about 13,000 words by school age.

3. Faculty to Create Language

<Language Acquisition Model>

- (23) a. **Primary linguistic data: PLD**
(utterances you hear/experience in the ordinary situation)
- ↓
- b. **Language Acquisition Device, LAD**
- ↓
- c. **knowledge of language, grammar (of language you speak)**
(knowledge here means unconscious faculty/system that enables you to use language)

- (24) Poverty of Stimulus Problem : **Plato's problem**

(23a) <<(23c)

(23b) Significance of the role of LAD (a genetic endowment of human beings)

- (25) Children know what they never heard.

Father : Did you go there?

Child : Yes, I goed.

- (26) "Simple imitation theory" does not explain child language acquisition.

- (27) The role of (23b) (LAD) seems to be a lot larger than usually conceived.

- (28) By exposed to rather scattered actual data, children can discover rules/regularities behind string of words, and then they try to apply the rules to new data by themselves.

(For more sophisticated examples, see Creolization in Pinker's book)

HW1: Turn in by Tuesday 12:30.

Student Information: Complete and submit in the next class.

OCW agreement: Turn in now.

Question/Comments card: fill in and turn in now

References

Berwick, Robert C. and Noam Chomsky. 2011. "The Biolinguistic Program: The Current State of its Development," in Di Sciullo, Anna Maria, and Cedric Boeckx (eds.) *The Biolinguistic Enterprise*, pp.19-41. (Oxford University Press)

Chomsky, Noam. 1995. *The Minimalist Program* (MIT Press)

Pinker, 1994. *Language Instinct*. Harper Perennial.

Ross, J. R. 1967, Constraints on Variables in Syntax. Ph.D. Dissertation, MIT.