

The Real Story of Child Language Acquisition

Day 15

0. Questions

- Some researchers did their experiments using animals, especially, chimpanzees. How do they use these results for human child language study? [REDACTED]
- According to some researchers, critical period of language learning ends at about six years old. How did they know this fact? How did they conduct an experiment? [REDACTED]
- Sometimes, children forget the language they first get into contact. For example, a kid learned Cantonese for the first three years. Then, he moved to the UK and live in an English-oriented environment. He tends to forget Cantonese, then. How does “imprinting” work in here? [REDACTED]
- How do the supporters of the critical period hypothesis explain the critical period? Is there a noticeable change in the structure of the brain? [REDACTED]

CW15-1: Warming up pair work

Try to think of any examples of prejudice or discrimination based on language. e.g., Speakers of the “standard” Japanese are superior to speakers of a local dialect.

Be specific.

- General Review

1. What we learned about child language acquisition
 - (1) Children naturally acquire:
 - a. speech sounds
 - b. words (out of stream of speech sound)
 - c. what the words mean
 - d. how to make phrases/sentences
 - e. what sentences mean
 - ...
 - (2) Children are very creative about their language.

“goed” “breaked” “wugs”
“Daddy, did your hair slip?”

- (3) Children are very conservative about their language as well:
"goed": less than 10%
Children usually do not try out other imaginable word orders,
"big red balloons"
 - (4) Children are not "passive receivers" of PLD but "active users" of what they need among PLD
 - (5) Children learn by "forgetting": systematic difference among languages
Potentially ready to acquire any human language systems innately.
Pick up elements/systems necessary for your native language
("Forget" or "make inactive" anything unnecessary)
- Child language acquisition is guided and controlled by some kind of "LAD":
innate endowment
- (6) We use the term "LAD" in a broader sense in this class.
 - a. Some may be related to general cognitive abilities
 - b. Some may be specific to language acquisition

Note on "foreign language" learning

- a. native language acquisition is a natural phenomenon and everybody succeeds: but we do not know much about what is really going on.
 - b. foreign language learning is completely different and we know much less about what is really going on?
Affected by various conditions
personality, necessity, motivation, cultural economical conditions, etc.
2. What we can learn from what we learned about child language acquisition
- (7) Many people believe they know many things about their native language.
Do we really "know" our language? Yes and no.
 - (8) We "know" all about our native language in the sense that we are all fluent users of it: Unconscious/automatic "knowledge"

but

Child Language Acquisition

- (9) We do not know much about our knowledge of language objectively and explicitly. What is the exact nature/mechanism of our knowledge of language?
- It is extremely difficult to tell explicitly the difference between Japanese 「は」 and 「が」 even for native speakers of Japanese.
 - It is extremely difficult to tell explicitly the function of *the* in English even for native speakers of English.
 - Some part of our knowledge of language is completely unconscious.
“kikuchi kun” (vowel devoicing in Japanese)
 - Wh-island condition
 - physical and biological states of our brain?
- (10) “Common sense” accounts of native language acquisition do not work
- “imitation”?
 - “direct instruction/correction”?
 - “recast”?
- (11) Knowledge of language naturally develops in our brain (given an environment of natural language community)
- (12) Trees natural grow (given an environment of natural soil and sunshine).

CW15-2

What do you find most interesting about child language acquisition through this class? (What was most surprising? What was most unexpected? What are you still not convinced of?) Be specific.

- (13) Try to have a healthy intellectual mind.
- (14) It is important to be careful and conscientious about what you learn anew.
- *I believe it because a text/TV/professor says it is right.
 - *I don't believe it because a text/TV/professor says it is wrong.
- (15) It is important to be open to new experience.
- *I don't believe it because it is against what I have believed.
- (16) Healthy balance between conscientiousness (careful and reasonable) and openness to new experience (curious and tolerant) is the key to a healthy intellectual mind.

3. What is the use?

“So learning about child language acquisition does not help much my foreign language learning. Then what is the use of child language acquisition study, or scientific study of human language?”

- (17) Actual use of language can be harmful. Language can be a very powerful weapon either for good or for bad.
- (18) Science (including scientific study of human language) can make people free from prejudice and discrimination.
- (19) Trying to understand what human language is is trying to understand what human beings are.
- (20) If you find it amazing and wonderful how children learn language, it is all about you. And it is all about everyone of us; human.
- (21) All and only human beings have this amazing ability to acquire and use human language.
- (22) We are biologically very unique existence on the earth, and probably in the entire universe. We cannot find the same system in any other places in the natural world!
- (23) All of you have this wonderful property. Knowing this fact would be one of the strongest reasons that you will like yourself more than ever.
- (24) All of us have this wonderful property. Knowing this fact would be one of the strongest reasons that we, human beings, should respect and cherish each other.

4. Post Class Work

5. Course Evaluation

Reminder: Term paper deadline

August 1 (Fri)

For further inquiries/questions about study of human language, feel free to contact me; satoshio@imc.hokudai.ac.jp

For those who are interested in being a language teacher and/or language teaching related jobs, I strongly suggest that you read the following :

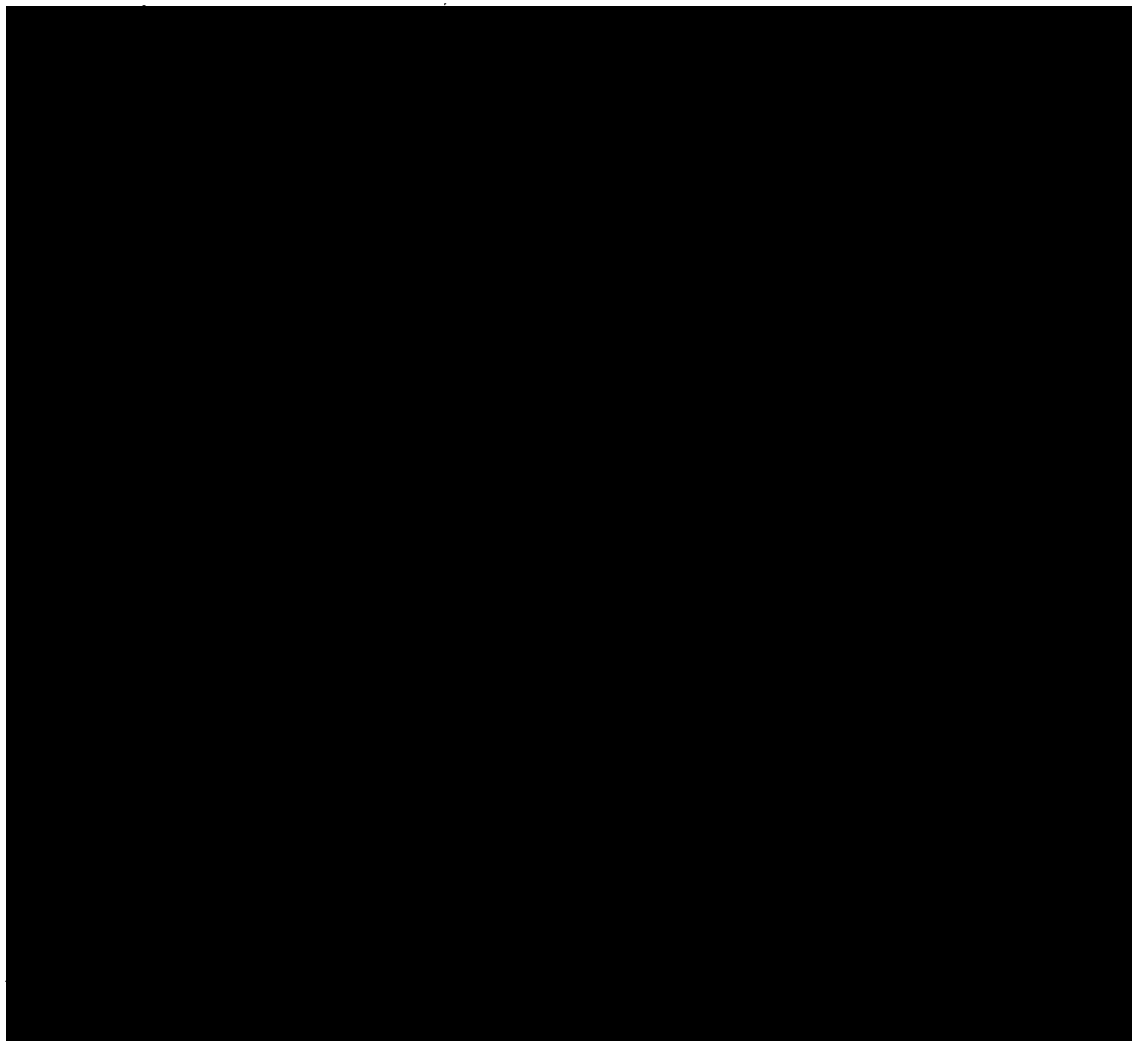
江利川春雄 (他) 2013. 『英語教育、迫りくる破綻』 (ひつじ書房)

江利川春雄 (他) 2014. 『学校英語教育は何のため?』 (ひつじ書房)

Some feedbacks to Qs ⑮

Some researchers did their experiments using animals, especially, chimpanzees. How do they use these results for human child language study? [REDACTED]

* Comparison between human language and communication systems of other animals is very useful. We see what human language system can/cannot do in specific ways that might not become clear if we look at only human languages. You may find many examples of this type of research.



According to some researchers, critical period of language learning ends at about six years old. How did they know this fact? How did they conduct an experiment? [REDACTED]

* As we have discussed in class, we cannot perform any controlled experiments on this. So the supporters of the idea are generally based on reported

facts/experiences such as, "acquisition of second language is difficult after a certain age", "discarded children cases such as Genie," etc.

Is it better to learn a foreign language through just the foreign language so that the student will think in that language? [REDACTED]

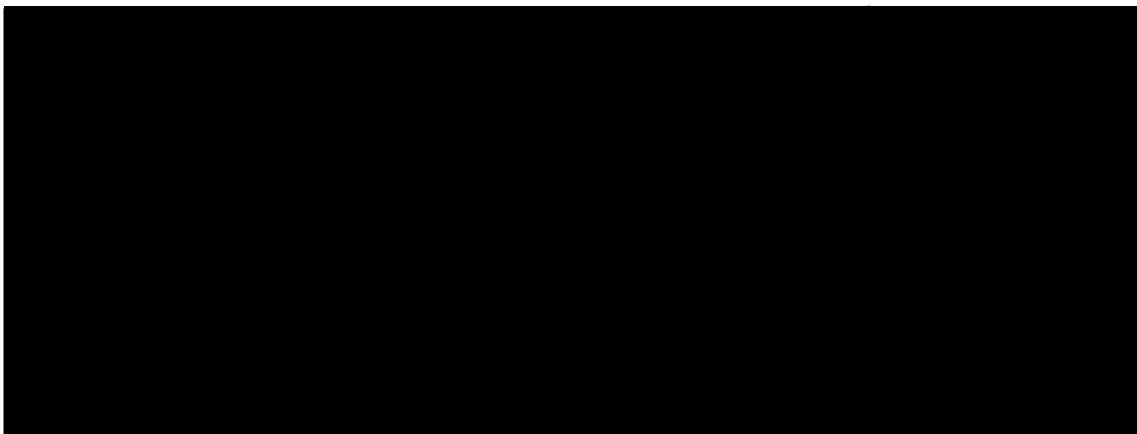
*It is now known among specialists that using only a foreign language to teach/learn that language is an out-of-date fashion and is not effect. It is, of course, important to use the target foreign language a lot of time, but it is very effective to use your native language when you learn various complex aspects of the target language. Imagine that you are trying to learn the difference between "could" and "was able to" in English. It would be very easy to learn the difference if you read the explanation in the dictionary or in the grammar book written in your native language.

How do the supporters of the critical period hypothesis explain the critical period? Is there a noticeable change in the structure of the brain? [REDACTED]

*It is known that the development of the synapsis network in your brain is substantial before age three. However, it is not very clear yet what specific brain structure (say, structure of synapsis network) is related to what aspect of your knowledge of language. The interdisciplinary study between theoretical linguistics and brain science is now a developing and most exciting field of study.

In a field of linguistic study, do people share ideas in English? [REDACTED]

*It is true that researcher communities in many fields are now international. So many researchers who are trying to be part of such a community read and write papers and books in English.



[REDACTED]

Given that language apparently cannot be directly taught to children, how could one speed up/improve a child's language acquisition and production? [REDACTED]

*The question is whether we can speed up or improve a child's language acquisition and whether it is necessary (even if we can). Children acquire their native language naturally anyway, and so it seems that we do not have to worry much about it. What may be good for children would be something other than purely linguistic. For example, if your household has an atmosphere which encourages children to say whatever they want to, the children may have confidence in themselves. If children are accepted by their parents depending on what and how they say, they would be more reluctant to using their language. These conditions are more like psychological or sociological, but not linguistic.

Sometimes, children forget the language they first get into contact. For example, a kid learned Cantonese for the first three years. Then, he moved to the UK and live in an English-oriented environment. He tends to forget Cantonese, then. How does "imprinting" work in here? [REDACTED]

*Even if you are 20 years old, if you start living in an environment in which your native language is not used at all and you have to learn a new foreign language to live and use it for another 60 years, you may forget your first language and you are going to be a (near-) native speaker of the second language. This kind of experience is one of the evidence that there is not a actual critical period for human language acquisition, and that language acquisition is a complex process, not an instance of "imprinting."