The Developmental Stages of Child Language

Habibu Sule
Department of General Studies,
AbubakarTatari Ali Polytechnic, Bauchi
habibusule@gmail.com

Aishatu Inuwa Muhammad
Department of General Studies
College of Nursing Sciences
Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University Teaching Hospital Bauchi
inuwaaishatu2@gmail.com

Simon Timothy
Department of General Studies,
AbubakarTatari Ali Polytechnic, Bauchi
simontimothyrabo67@gmail.com

Abstract
This paper examines the various developmental stages of language as observed among children aged zero (0) to three (3) years and evaluates the intricacies involved as children grow through a complex situation in the process of not only language development, but also learning and acquisition. The paper adopts the theory of Language Acquisition Device (LAD) Chomsky (1960) which states that every child is born with an innate ability to learn human language which is the major reason they grow up using and speaking the language with the aid of support and influence from their environment. This paper believes that the developmental stages in language leaning is common among children between the ages of zero (0) to three (3) years

Introduction

Every aspect of language is complex. Yet very young children before the age of four already know most of the intricate systems we have been calling the grammar of a language. Children, therefore,grow up constructing statements and using the language creatively while adapting to the rules in using the language creatively. This is what Chomsky (1960) identifies as Language Acquisition Device. The LAD concept is a purported instinctive mental capacity which enables an infant to acquire and produce language. It is a component of the nativist theory of language which asserts on the 'innate facility' for acquiring language. This paper discusses the different stages of child language development, the significance of child language development and also the causes of language delay in child-language acquisition.

Definition of Key Terms

- **Language Acquisition** refers to the process by which humans acquire the capacity to perceive and comprehend language. It usually happens subconsciously and without a formal teacher.
- **Language Learning** refers to a formal (conscious) process of learning a language with the help of a dedicated tutor.
- **Language Delay** is when a child has difficulties understanding and/or using spoken language.
- **LAD** refers to Language Acquisition Device
- **Child Language Development** is a process by which children come to understand and communicate in language during early childhood. Language is acquired in stages with each stage displaying unique characteristics.

Theories of Child Language Acquisition

Chomsky(1960) believes that children are born with an innate ability to learn any human language. He claims that certain linguistic structures which children use so accurately must be already imprinted on the child's mind. This source believes that every child has a language acquisition device (LAD) which encodes the major principles of a language and its grammatical structures into the child's brain. He points out that a child could not possibly learn a language through imitation alone because the language spoken around them is highly irregular. Evidence to support Chomsky's (1960) theory is as follows:

- Children often say things that are ungrammatical such as *mamaball* which they could not have learnt passively.
- Mistakes such as 'I drawed' instead of 'I drew' shows that they are not learning through imitation alone.
- Children learning to speak never make grammatical errors such as getting their subject, verb, and object in wrong order.

Critics of Chomsky's (1960) theory say that although it is clear that children don't learn through imitation alone, this does not prove that they must have an LAD- language learning could merely be through general learning, understanding abilities and interactions with other people. Crystal (2007) on the other hand is of the opinion that children learn language in five stages, which are not clearly defined and some tie in with each other.

Stage One

This is where children communicate for three purposes which include:

- getting something they want;
- getting someone's attention; and
- drawing attention to something.

During this stage children begin naming things with single words and then move on to relating objects with other things, places and people. For example, 'there mummy'. They also relate objects with events, for example, 'bird gone'. At this stage, they do not have much vocabulary so they use intonation to ask questions.

Stage Two

This is the stage in which children ask questions, 'where questions come first'. Their questions often begin with interrogative pronouns:*'what', 'where', etc.,* followed by a noun or a verb such as "where gone?' Children become concerned with naming and classifying things by frequently asking *'wassat*?' They also begin to characterize things. For example, big/small.

Stage Three
At this stage, children ask lots of different questions but often signaling that they are questions with intonation alone. For example, 'sally ply in garden mummy?' This is made into a question by varying the tone of voice.

Stage Four
This is when children use increasingly complex sentence structure and begin to:

- explain things;
- ask for explanations using the word 'why';
- make a wider range of request, "shall I do it?"

Now, they are able to use complex sentence structures and have flexible language tools for expressing a wide range of meaning. The most remarkable development is their comprehension of language and use of abstract verbs for example know' to express mental operations etc.

Stage Five
By this stage, children regularly use language to do all the things that they need it for. They give information, ask and answer questions, make requests directly and indirectly, make suggestions, offer ideas, make statements and expressions. By this stage, children are very comfortable with all questions beginning with words like "what" and "when", where the subject and verb are reversed such as, "what does that mean?"
Overall, Crystal's theory was that children learn in amorphous stages by trial and error to successfully learn the language. They learn the grammar in stages through different forms of intonation and by recognizing the rhythms of voices.

Stages of Child Language Development
Observations of children in different language areas of the world reveal that the stages are very similar and possibly universal. Some of the stages last for a short time while others remain longer. Yule (1947) identifies the stages as follows
:
Pre-Verbal Stage (0 – 6 months)
When a child is born, it is able to produce some sounds which are regarded as animal or primitively nonsense sounds. These sounds make no meaning and they are involuntary sounds. At this stage, the child's cries and whimpers are not clear language utterances. It could be a sign for hunger or discomfort.

Babbling Stage (6 – 12 months)

According to Surakat (2006), by six months, the child is usually able to sit up and can produce a number of different vowels and consonants such as fricatives and nasals. The sound production at this stage is described *as babbling* and may contain syllable type such as ma and da. These sounds are consistent in pattern and are made voluntarily, e.g. "da" for daddy and 'ma' for mama. It is at this stage that a child distinguishes between nonsense and meaningful sounds. The child's babbles are produced voluntarily and the sounds resemble those of human language, as they convey specific meanings. The sounds made at this stage are called *echolalia* and contains features such as:

The sounds are both phonological and visual, i.e. sounds are capable of being heard and contain body movement which can be seen. The child uses body language such as face contortion, which may indicate his state of mind like happiness, sadness, discomfort, attention-getting gestures and expressions, e.g. *crying* , yelling, struggling, etc. Psycholinguists agreed that a child must receive auditory input in other to acquire human language. Olaoye (1994) believes that it is at this stage that the child begins to distinguish between the sounds of his own language and those of other people. It retains the right sound while it rejects or discards wrong ones. A pitch and intonation contour in the child's utterances beginto resemble adults' intonation pattern.

Holophrastic Stage (12-18months)

This stage varies from child to child and this stage is called one-word stage and is characterized by speech in which single terms, is uttered for everyday objects such as milk, cookies, cat, cup, etc.

- The words appear one at a time in a manner that is consistent and spontaneous, all showing that the child understands what it says.
- The first words are distinctive in, at least, three aspects: (a) in their pronunciation or phonetic forms. (b) in their meanings or semantic forms. (c) in their use.
- The child produces original words through coinage, such as "no" which may mean "do not take the ball". This goes to confirm LAD theory because this meaning is different from adult interpretation of the word "no".
- This stage is also marked by one or two syllabic words which are concrete objects, names, etc. The words are both phonological and morphemic. Phonetically the words are quite regular and consist of the form, consonant and vowel (CV).
- The child over-extends the meaning of some words. A given word often does not mean the same thing for the child as it does for adults. A common phenomenon is the over-extension of the word to refer to a broader category than is appropriate in adult language. For instance, the word "candy" may mean sugar, sweet, biscuit, chewing gum, etc. "Ball" may refer to all round objects like stone, orange, etc., which is an over-extension on shape. This is the child's creative use of words and this confirms the innateness hypothesis to the effect that the child does not just imitate adult language, rather,it createsits own, since its mind is not a *Tabula Rasa* or empty slate.
- As the child acquires more vocabulary, the meaning of over extension becomes

narrowed down until they come to adult meaning.

- Generally, nominal forms and action verbs are the first set of words acquired at this one-word stage, with the action verbs being the more frequently used. Other categories of words acquired include modifiers, personal-social words, such as yes, no, please, thank you, etc.
- Words may be used to indicate possession or ownership e.g. when a child sees his father's pair of shoes, he simply says "daddy", pointing to the shoes, meaning daddy's shoes Words may be used to indicate location, e.g. "up" may mean upstairs, over the roof, on top of a car or even in this air.
  Psycholinguists agree that the child's words are more than just single words; rather they are attempts to express complex ideas, ideas which would naturally be expressed in full sentences by an adult. Some explanations can be given for these one-word language behaviors (holophrases).
- It may be that the child has something like a full sentence in his mind, but he can omit or utter only one word because of the limitations of memory span.
- Children have relatively complex and complete ideas in their minds but they lack the linguistic expertise to translate these ideas into sentences.
- Children's failure to produce more than one single word does not accurately convey their meaning to the listener (Olaoye, 1994).

The Two Word Stage

This stage begins around eighteen to twenty months, as the child's vocabulary moves beyond fifty distinct words. By the time the child is two years old, a variety of combinations, similar to baby chair, mummy eat, cat bad, will have appeared. The phrase baby *chair* may be taken as an expression of possession: *this is baby's chair* or as a request, *put baby in chair*, or as a statement, *baby is in the chair*, depending on different contexts. Whatever it is that the child actually intends to communicate via such expressions, the significant functional consequences are that the adult behaves as if communication is taking place. By this, the child not only produces speech, but receives feedback which actually confirms that the utterance worked. At the age of two, whether the child is producing 200 or 400 distinct words, he or she will be capable of understanding five times as many and will typically be treated as an entertaining conversational partner (Yule, 1947: p.180).

Telegraphic stage (24-36months)

Between two and three years old, the child will begin to produce a large number of utterances which could be classified as multiple word utterances. The salient feature of these utterances ceases to be the number of words, but the variation in word forms which begin to appear of particular interest is the sequence of inflectional morphemes which occur.

The telegraphic stage is characterized by strings of lexical morphemes in phrases such as *Andrew want ball*, *cat drink milk* and *this shoe all sweet*. The child has developed some sentence-building capacity by this stage and can order the form correctly. While this type of telegram-format speech is being produced, a number of grammatical inflections begin to appear in some of the words, and the simple prepositions (in, on)

also turn up.
According to Yule (1947) as cited in Surakat 2006, by the age of two and a half years, the child's vocabulary is expanding rapidly and the child is actually initiating more talk. Increased physical activity such as running and jumping is taking place during this period, too. By age three, the vocabulary has grown to hundreds of words and pronunciation has become closer to the form of the adult language, so that even visitors have to admit that the little creature really can talk.

The Acquisition of Sign Languages
Deaf language impaired children who are born to deaf parents (using sign language) are naturally exposed to sign language just as normal children with hearing abilities are naturally exposed to spoken language. Given the universal aspects of sign and spoken languages, it is not surprising that language development in these deaf children parallels the stages of spoken language acquisition.

Deaf children "babble", they then progress to single signs similar to single words in the holophrastic stage, and finally they begin to combine signs. There is also a telegraphic stage in which the function is omitted. The use of function signs becomes consistent around the same age for deaf children as function words in spoken languages.
Deaf children of hearing parents who are not exposed to sign language, may take many years before these children are able to have encounter with a conventional sign language. Yet, the instinct to acquire language is so strong in humans that these deaf children begin to develop their own manual gestures to express their thoughts and desires. Cases such as these demonstrate, not only the strong drive that humans have to communicate through language, but also the innate basis of language structure (Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams2002*)*.

The Process of Acquisition
As the linguistic repertoire of the child increases, it is often assumed that the child is in some sense, being 'taught' the language. This view seems to underestimate what the child actually does. For the vast majority of children, no one provides any instruction on how to speak the language. Now we picture a little empty head gradually being filled with words and phrases. A much more realistic view would have children actively constructing, from what is said to them and possible ways of using the language.

The child's linguistic production then is mostly a matter of trying out constructions and testing whether they work or not. It is simply not possible that the child is acquiring the language through a process of consistently initiating (parrot-fashion) adult speech. It is obvious that the child can be heard repeating versions of what adult say and is in the process of adopting a lot of vocabulary from their speech.

However, adults simply do not produce many of the types of expressions which turn up in children's speech. One factor which seems to be crucial in the child's acquisition process is the actual use of sound and word combinations, either in interaction with others or in word play alone. A two years old child recorded as he lay in bed alone,

could be heard playing with words and, phrases, *I go dis way …way bay...baby do dis bib…all bib... bib ...dere* (Meir, 1966). It is the practice of this type which seems to be an important factor in the development of the child's linguistic repertoire.

The Linguistic Features in Child Language Development

(1) Acquisition of Morphology

When a child is three years old, he/she is going beyond the telegraphic stage and is incorporating some of the inflectional morphemes which indicate the grammatical function of the nouns and verbs used. The first to appear is usually the "-ing" form in expression such as *"cat sitting*" and *"mummy readingbook*". Then comes the marking of regular plurals with the '- s' form, as in boys and cats. The acquisition of this is often accompanied by a process of overgeneralization. The child overgeneralizes the apparent rule of adding '-s to form plurals and will talk about foots and mans (Slobin1971).

It is important to remember that the child is working out how to use the linguistic systems while actually using it as a means of communication. For the child, the use of forms such as '*goed*' and 'foots' is simply a means of trying to say what he or she means during a particular stage of language development. The embarrassed parents who insist that the child didn't hear such things at home are implicitly recognizing that "imitation" is not the primary force in child language acquisition

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(2) Acquisition of Syntax

Similar evidence against *'imitiation'* as the basis of a child's speech production has been found in studies of the syntactic structures used by children. An example is a two year child specifically asked to repeat what she heard from an adult who said "*the owl who eats candy run fast"*. The girl repeated and said *"owl eat candy and he run fast"*. It is clear that the child understands what the adult is saying. She just has her own way of expressing it.

There have been numerous studies of the development of syntax in children's speech. We shall restrict our consideration to two features that are in the formation of questions and the use of negatives which appear to be in three identifiable stages. The ages of children going through these stages can vary quite a lot, but the general pattern seems to be that:

Stage 1 – Occurs between 18 and 26 months
Stage 2 – Between 22 and 30 months
Stage 3 – Between 24 and 40months.

Questions

In forming questions according to Yule (1947) based on the following data, the first stage has two procedures. Simply add a wh- form (where, who) to the beginning of the expression or utter the expression with a rise in intonation towards the end. Example:

(a) Where kitty? Where horse go?

(b) In the second stage, more complex expressions can be formed, but the rising intonation strategy continues to be used. It is noticeable that more wh-forms come into use, e.g.
What book name? why you smiling?

You want eat? See my doggie?

(c) The third stage, the required inversion of subject and verb in English question has appeared, but the *wh-* forms do not always undergo the required inversion, e.g.

Can I have a piece?	Did I caught it?
Will you help me?	How that opened?
What did you do?	Why kitty can't stand up?

Negatives

In the case of negative, Stage 1 seems to have a sample strategy which says that 'no' or 'not' should be stuck on the beginning of any expression. Example:

No mitten not a teddy bear not fall no sit there. (Yule 1947)

The second stage consists of the additional negative forms,'don't' and 'can't' which are used, and with 'no' and 'not', which begin to be replaced in front of the verb rather than at the beginning of the sentences. Examples:

He no bite you	There no squirrels
You can't dance	I don't know

The third stage sees the incorporation of the other auxiliary forms such as *didn't and won't* and the disappearance of the Stage 1 form. A very late acquisition is the form isn't, so that some Stage 2 forms continue to be used for quite a long time. Examples:

I didn't caught it	She won't let go
He not taking it.	This no ice cream

The study of the use of negative form by children has given rise to some delightful examples of children operating their own rules for negative sentences. One famous example by McNeill (1972) also shows the futility of overt adult correction:

Child: Nobody don't like me
Mother: No Say “nobody likes me”
Child: Nobody don't like me
Mother: No, now listen carefully; “nobody likes me”
Child: Oh! Nobody don't likes me

Acquisition of Semantics

It seems that during the holophrastic stage, many children use their limited vocabulary to refer to a large number of unrelated objects. One child first used bow-wow to refer to a dog and then to a fur piece with glass eyes. The moral bow-wow seemed to have a meaning like object with shiny bits. It may also derive from onomatopoeic sense of the barking of the dog.

Other children often extend bow-wow to refer to class, horses and cows. This process is called overextension and the most common pattern is for the child to overextend the meaning of a word on the basis of similarities of shape, sound and size and to a lesser extent, of movement and texture. Thus, the word ball is extended to all kinds of round objects including 'lampshade',' a door knob' and 'the moon' (Clerk 1973).

The semantic development in a child's use of words is usually a process of over extension initially followed by a gradual process of narrowing down the application of each term as more words are learned. Although, over extension has been well documented in children's speech production, it is not necessarily used in speech

comprehension. An example is a child, while speaking, used an apple to refer to a number of other round objects like tomatoes and balls, but had no difficulty picking out an apple when asked from a set of such round objects.

Significance of Child Language Development

The ability to use language symbolically set humans apart from the rest of the animal world. It allows people to express thoughts, ideas and emotions, and communicate with others. New research conducted by scientists at the institute for learning and Brain Science at the University of Washington reveals that early language development begins in the womb and continues throughout a lifetime.

Receptive Language

Receptive language refers to the ability to decode and understand spoken language. Children's receptive language begins developing as they listen to the world around them and begin to understand language. Parents and caregivers that immerse children in an environment rich in language help the child develop strong receptive language skills. This includes speaking directly to the child, as well as providing opportunities for the child to observe conversation between adult, and other children. Children typically understand many words long before they are able to verbalize them.

Expressive Language

Expressive language refers to the ability to use language to speak or write, as the child get older and communicate needs, emotions and express thoughts. Children who have good development in expressive skills are prepared to communicate effectively when they enter school or encounter the outside world.

Reading

Children with good receptive and expressive language skills understand the nuances of language and are generally better able to tackle reading skills. Learning to read follows the natural progression of language development. Reading opens the child's world and allows him to access information and ideas.

Writing

Written language is an important skill that takes many years to master. As your child matures and tackles more complex writing task throughout school years, the child will master the art of written language as a means to communicate thoughts and desires, and convey information to others (Richford,2003)

Causes of Language Delay

According to Sunderajan and Kanhene (2019) Language delay is a common development in children. There are many causes for language delay both environment and physical. About 60 percent of language delays in children under age three resolves spontaneously. Early intervention often helps other children to catch up with their groups. Common circumstances that can result in language delay include:

- concentration on developing skills other than language;
- inadequate language stimulation and one on one attention

- psychosocial deprivation;
- mental retardation;
- maturation delay;
- a hearing impairment;
- a learning disability;
- cerebral palsy;
- autism;
- Klinefelter syndrome, a disorder in which males are born with an extra X chromosome.

Brain damage or disorder of the central nervous system can cause the following:

- receptive aphasia or receptive language disorder, a deficit in spoken language comprehension or in the ability to respond to spoken language.
- expressive aphasia an inability to speak or write despite normal language comprehension
- childhood apraxia of speech in which a sound is substituted for the desired syllable or word (Berry, 1980*).*

Conclusion

The development of language in children is guided by a set of "innate ideas and principles", that is, a genetically determined linguistic capacity that all humans are endowed with at birth. Child language development can thus be regarded as analogous to other biological development in human growth and maturation. In this way, the traditional view that language is unique to human beings may, in fact, have a sound biological basis.

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