



# PSYCHOLINGUISTICS

## LECTURE 14

### LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

# LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

- Language acquisition refers to the process by which humans acquire the capacity to perceive and comprehend language. It is a process which can take place at any period of one's life.
- In case of first language acquisition, it refers to the acquisition (unconscious learning) of one's native language (or languages in the case of bilinguals) during the first 6 or 7 years of one's life.

## CONT...

- The process of Language Acquisition takes place in the first years of childhood and leads to unconscious knowledge of one's native language which is practically indelible.
- A point worth mentioning is that acquisition has nothing to do with intelligence, i.e. children of different degrees of intelligence all go through the same process of acquiring their native language.

## CONT...

- It is but, natural that parents enjoy children's first step in acquisition of language. For instance, before the completion of a year a child limited to babbling, has come to label objects and people around him. The process enables him ask for the desired objects.
- For example, a child will only say, "mama" and then point to the object. Parents' encouraging attitude towards this attempt of their child, is in fact, a sort of inspiration that promotes early language acquisition on which is set the base of a complex process of language acquisition.

# CHARACTERISTICS OF FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

- It is an instinct. It is an admitted fact that language acquisition starts with birth and takes its own course, though of course linguistic input from the environment is needed for the child to acquire a specific language.
- 2) It is very rapid. The time period needed to acquire native language is quite short as compared to that needed to learn a second language successfully later on in life.

## CONT...

- 3) It is very complete. The quality of first language acquisition is far better than that of a second language (learned later on in life). One does not forget one's native language.
- 4) It does not require instruction. Despite the fact that many non-linguists think that mothers are important for children to learn their native language, instructions by parents or care-takers are unnecessary, despite the psychological benefits of attention to the child.

# PRE-LINGUISTIC COMMUNICATION

- Until the beginning of first part of their second year, children communicate with their world primarily in nonverbal ways.
- For instance, they tug at others' clothes, point out the desired objects and sometime snitches it. These gestures remain courageous for a child to communicate for achieving the desired objects and that actions remain helpful for the desired goal. These steps take place in the first year of a child's life and it indicates and facilitates the child's acquisition of phonology, syntax and semantics.



# THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF PREVERBAL INFANTS

- Social circumstances count a lot in shaping human life. It equally plays role in the process of language acquisition. For example, a child brought up in 'X' social system, will certainly acquire the language spoken in 'X' circumstances.
- SPEECH TO CHILDREN PRIOR TO BIRTH
- It is claimed that a child, before his birth, can listen to what his mother says. This claim was tested by DeCasper and Spence (1986) who asked mothers to read a Dr. Seuss book during the last six weeks of their pregnancies.



## CONT...

- A few days after the children were born, the babies were tested using a special pacifier that measured their rate of sucking. Half of the babies heard the story that their mothers had read and the others heard a new story.
- The babies who heard the familiar story modified their sucking rate when they heard the Dr. Seuss story, but the other group did not.

# SPEECH TO CHILDREN IN THE 1<sup>ST</sup> YEAR OF THEIR LIFE

- It is a common experience that adult talk to the children in their first year in a distinctive way that differs from a speech of adult to other adult. The input influences child's phonology. In fact, it is observed that children like the baby-like speech than that of adult speech probably, because they are attracted by the similarity in it. These children seem to catching and than repeating the most prominent sound in a word.

# DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATIVE INTENT

- At about 08 months of age, infants began to use gestures, such as pointing and showing, in communicative manner. However, it is not easy to determine whether behavior is meant to communicate something or is simply behavior that an infant enjoys.
- For example, a child tugs the leg of adult and waits for the adult to look at him and when the adult looks at him, he points out the desired toy. It means that the child know to get the attention of adult first and than ask for the needed object.

# BEGINNING TO INTENTIONAL COMMUNICATION

- True intentional communication occurred when children apply their understanding of means-and-ends relationships to social goal. At this stage the child is using familiar behavior for novel end: making sounds and gestures to get the attention of adults.
- Their communicative advances seem to be the result of basic changes in cognition during infancy. Shortly after children understand intentionality in non-social context, they use pre-linguistic gestures in a social, communicative manner.

# COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AND EARLY COMPREHENSION

- Very little information is available about early comprehension activity but it is experienced that young children also use communicative strategies for comprehension. Children use to comprehend language in a manner similar to how they produce it.
- According to Shatz (1978) young children often respond to complex speech by using a simple action based comprehension strategy. The strategy is to respond to utterance by performing an action on the object that is specified in the utterance. For example, if a child is asked: ‘why don’t you keep your books in the bag?’ The child can comprehend such complex interrogative sentence and put the books in the bag.

# EARLY PHONOLOGY

- Children in their pre-linguistic stage know how to make gestures to express desires or question and once this system is mastered, they are quickly used for the same communicative functions.
- Child's first attempt to produce sounds, however, have more to do with practicing with sound system than with communicating with others. Eventually, the ability to communicate without words and to vocalize without meaning merge into productive and communicative speech. Apparently, a child can perceive a distinction that she cannot produce, an occurrence that has been christened the fis phoneme after a child who called fish (Broke & Brown, 1960). Hence a child's perception of speech, then turns to the production of speech.



# THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPEECH PRODUCTION

- We have seen that a child in his pre-linguistic phase can't demonstrate some sophisticated speech perception abilities mainly because their power of perception is immature and that they have not mastered the process of listening.
- **Babbling:** The early process of vocalization of a child passed through series of stages and by the end of 2<sup>nd</sup> month a child begins to do a lot of cooing. **Coos** are acoustically different from cry. Coos are articulated in the back of the mouth and they are similar to back vowels and velar consonants.



## CONT...

- At about 6 to 7 months, babbling starts. Children first use reduplicated babbling in which they repeat a vowel consonant sequence.
- For example, baba, mama, tata, papa, etc. These developments suggest that a child begins to acquire the phonology of his native language by the end of first year of life.
- Babbling is considered to be a sort of game in which various sounds are practiced and mastered before they are used in communicative ways.

# TRANSITION TO SPEECH

- By the end of first year, two aspects of infants begin to merge. They are: the use of gestures to convey meaning and the mastery of speech sounds in communicative situations. At this stage a child acquires the ability to use speech sounds to communicate.
- Just before grasping this stage, children try to invent their own symbols for the desired object they want to refer to. These personalized words are termed as idiomorphs.

# LEXICAL DEVELOPMENT

- By the time a child reaches his 6<sup>th</sup> birthday, he acquires about 14000 words (Carey, 1978). In this case if it is assumed if a child starts learning words by 18 month, he acquires 08 words per day. However, everyone knows the word in different ways depending the context and type of meaning.
- **EARLY WORDS:** It is often seen that the early words a child learns relate to the objects found and seen in his surroundings.
- For example: they learn the names of toys, water, milk, pen etc.

## CONT...

- Children's early vocabulary is not limited to nominal only rather, according to Nelson (1973) a child uses words from various grammatical classes (closed class and open class). Nelson observed that that early words a child had learned were the basic ones such as: ball and car etc. they were followed by specific nominal such as (money), action words (go, up), modifiers, (dirty, pretty), personal and social words (please, want) and function words (what, for) etc.

# EARLY GRAMMAR

- In common a child begin to speak while combining words by about 02 years of age and over the few coming years a child makes enough progress and make impressive advancement in grasping the grammar of native language. The aspects of grammar varies from language to language and sometimes it is based on cognitive issues.
- The grammar of early days reflect simple assertion such as desires and requests. Once they master the use of these expressions, they start questioning and use adjectives.

## CONT...

- A much advanced stage than this reflects exclamation, narration and the use of complex sentences. This is the stage when a child seems to be perfecting his native language.
- According to Slobin (1985), these early stages are almost the same in all languages. However, with the passage of time grammar is mastered passively and an adult is likely to speak error free language all the time.

# FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION, SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND BI-AND MULTILINGUALISM

- **FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION**
- First language acquisition refers to the acquisition of the mother tongue. It is the process perhaps faster than second language acquisition.
- **SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION**
- This is the acquisition of a second language after the mother tongue has been (largely) acquired. Usually refers to acquisition which begins after puberty, i.e. typically adult language acquisition.



# BI-AND MULTILINGUALISM

- This is the acquisition of two or more languages from birth or at least together in early childhood.
- The ideal situation where all languages are equally represented in the child's surroundings and where the child has an impartial relationship to each is hardly to be found in reality so that of two or more languages one is bound to be dominant.