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Language in early childhood

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LANGUAGE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

In her study the author attempts to contribute to a theory on the acquisition of lexical and grammatical structure in Czech-speaking children. Czech, a synthetic language with highly developed inflections and relatively high flexibility of word-order offers – in the author's opinion – good ground for such a study. It is hoped some rules of general validity for the child's behaviour in mastering the language system can be drawn.

Viewed from the point that inflection plays a very important role in adult language, one would expect its early emergence in children. And yet, the very young speaker of Czech does not make use of the morphological device of inflections, sticking, on the other hand, to a specific word-order. In other words, the child evidently starts with unmarked classes even in highly inflected languages. To the extent that the word-order in early child language differs from that of mature language suggests the probability that the former represents a basic order of semantic representation while inflections are to be considered as secondary elements and appear at later developmental stage. Moreover, when comparing the degree of semantic definiteness as well as another essential factor of the semantic nucleus, i. e. that of implication which is an important prerequisite of the exact delimitation of the concerned meaning in the child language as opposed to adult language, the author maintains that the naming units of the former are semantically vaguer than their adult equivalents. And this lesser semantic definiteness as well as wide range of applicability is, in the author's opinion, one of the very important markers to show that the child does not acquire all the richness of the meaning in a naming unit at once, or, to put it differently, that its mastering represents a long-lasting process, at the beginning of which just ad hoc – and in many respect simplifying features – enter into the content of a naming unit.

The emergence of inflections requires a very important operating principle in the child, namely, that phonological forms of naming units may be more or less systematically modified. There are numerous indications in child behaviour which reveal that long before the young speaker acknowledges the role of a change as a grammatical law, he comes

to be aware of the fact that he can alter the words in order to reach a change in qualification or emotional evaluation within the naming unit and therefore adopts various forms which enable him to achieve the desired situation. The Czech children — similarly as children of other nationalities — start experimenting by adding various suffixes, often in combination with infixes, thus showing that it is the end of the word which he takes to be bearer of the function.

In Czech — and the same seems hold good about languages which provide inflectional diminutive or affectionate forms — such inflections are among the first to emerge. Next come the usage of other affixes, such as those denoting contrast in negativeness and positiveness, difference in number, gender, tense, mood, verbal aspect and so forth. Their function is roughly analogous to that of adult language, their frequency and — in many respect multiplied applicability — is far higher in the child.

Many of the early inflections being unconventional in the sense that they have no equivalents in the adult speech, bring, in the author's opinion, first evidence of the fact that the child's grammar is generated, not imitated. From the finite elements and rules before him he creates for himself his own grammatical system through trial and error. The faulty, nevertheless highly logical, constructions are the best positive indication that the child has assimilated the system, internalized the rules and has started generating constructions independently from he adult system. His first rules are derived and applied with broadest generalization and greatest distribution on the one hand while inferring from particulars and exceptional forms on the other hand.

The comparison of ways in which derivations are effected in the child language on the one hand and the standard usage on the other hand reveals some interesting differences:

The wide combinability of word-bases with affixes is one of the specific features in children. To arrive at the desired form the child takes practically any word-basis of which many are not used for this purpose in adults.

The very loose connection of the derivative affixes with the word-basis in the child language is the next feature. The child's ready apposing the suffixes and infixes (and the same holds good with prefixes in later developmental stages) to the word-bases and their deleting with the same ease is proof of the fact that affixes in Czech children are not as closely connected with the word-bases as they are in Standard Czech. As a consequence of this phenomenon is the fact that the child's vocabulary is abounding with naming units which are absent from the common wordstock. Many an illogism in the child is the consequence of deleting the syllable which he — because of its identical structure — misinterprets as a prefix.

The third difference between child-language and adult-language derivations is the non-respecting hybridity. However rare the foreign words in the child's vocabulary are, they are treated as domestic as far as the adding of affixes is concerned.

The most outstanding aspect in the child is, nevertheless, his tendency to regularize and generalize. Analogical formations and over-extension of regular rules appear within any of the inflected category. The author offers many examples to show that — at early stages of language development — the child resorts to regular declension in substantives and adjectives, regular conjugation in verbs and regular comparison in adjectives and adverbs while irregularities in any form or any word category are, as less productive phenomena, ignored.

The high degree of grammaticality is the next aspect typical of the language system in the child. The best illustration is shown in the child's predilection for diminutives, that is the onomaziological category which brings into actuality the demands of this principle almost unexceptionally, cf. the unification of the suffixes with the -k- marker, the lucid categorization as for gender, plural, noun class, non-differentiating between animate versus inanimate, hard versus soft and so forth. Hence follows also the primacy in the usage of phonologically unique forms endowed with acoustically salient endings as compared to forms which are either homonymous or marked by zero ending.

The semantic contrasts go hand in hand with a child's liking for antithetical statements in the field of word-formations as well as morphology. Many an illogism in the child language is due to his belief that

- every substantive has a diminutive, resp. augmentative form as its counterpart;
 - every neutral naming unit has an emotional correlate;
 - each singular form has its plural form and vice versa;
 - each positive has its negative correlate, be it in substantives, verbs, adjectives or adverbs;
 - each verb has perfective, imperfective and iterative aspect
- to sum up at least those operating principles which seem universal in Czech-speaking children.

What has been sketched out in the present resumé is but a rough outline of the process in which the Czech child acquires the language. As in all of cognitive development, the acquisition process involves the assimilation of information to existing structures and the accommodation of these structures to the new input. The speech perception strategies engender the formation of rules for speech production. Linguistic structures change with age as computation and storage space increase. As the vocabulary grows, each item needs to embrace less and less semantic territory; or, vice versa, as meanings become more sharply defined, more and more naming units are needed to express the meanings now excluded

from the semantic sway of words in the earlier, limited vocabulary. Growth of the vocabulary and reductions of individual semantic complexes are two facets of one process. Both are features of the progressive mastering of the standard model without the proper knowledge of the existing norm. At early stages of language development, rough classification suffice. With advancing maturity, finer subdivisions are needed and new words are learned to satisfy the urge for expressing them. The process is parallel, in its general outlines, to the learning of phonemes, grammatical forms and syntactical constructions. The material is taken over in an organization which reproduces at first only the crudest contours of the standard organization. Step by step, more precise classifications of adult language are recognized and reproduced. The outlines of the areas to which each word is applicable become more and more distinct until it coincides with standard practice. And while there can be disagreement about the extent to which this process requires an innate linguistic faculty, there can be no doubt that the process requires highly structured and active child mind in mastering the language.