

Problems of Conducting Language Acquisition Research on Different Languages and in Different Societies

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Abstract

Different languages are studied in terms of intra-genealogical and inter-genealogical studies. The key feature in an intra-genealogical study is that the same method of analyzing longitudinal data is used in all languages. In inter-genealogical studies, features are investigated independent of language families. Studies of this type range from small-scale studies including two languages to larger studies with a number of languages. Such typological studies provide in-depth insights into how children acquiring different languages are compared in the acquisition of a specific feature. A key characteristic here is the justification for the choice of languages. The choice of languages depends on the variables researchers in the realm of language acquisition are interested in. The related question is the problems of language acquisition research on different languages and in different societies by locating the difficulty in this field regarding different languages and in some part endangered languages. It is concluded that the problems related to this field can be minimized by considering variations across languages such as phonological systems, words, verb morphology, variation in contexts, and methods for investigating language acquisition.

Keywords: typological languages, cross-linguistic language acquisition research, intra-genealogical studies, inter-genealogical studies.

I. INTRODUCTION

Human language is the only communication system with extensive variation in form and meaning across the groups of its users. Human language comes in a great many varieties, and the structures of grammars will be found in individual languages and the way meanings are expressed vary to an impressive degree. Currently, there are about 6,000–7,000 spoken languages. For only about half of these we have some kind of basic grammatical description

and for only about 10 per cent do we have good and elaborate analyses. Yet in-depth description of the adult language is a prerequisite for any acquisition study. Even though in the last forty years a lot of cross-linguistic language acquisition research has been conducted, it is still for only about 2 per cent of the world's languages that we have at least one acquisition study. For even these 2 per cent, however, we may only have acquisition studies devoted to one individual feature or aspect of language development. Furthermore, this small sample is heavily biased toward Indo-European languages of Western Europe with the bulk of research still concentrated on English. This bias manifests itself even in the titles of works on language acquisition. English is the default case: if there is a title about the acquisition of language or some feature of language without naming the language, then we can assume the work is on English; if the work bears on any other language, that language is normally named in the title (Bavin, 2009, p. 89).

Thus a substantial part of knowledge about language acquisition is built on specific constructions prominent in languages of Europe that have been well described, but we do not have information about how other, more widespread, constructions are acquired. Generalizing from the acquisition of one or a few languages to language in general is comparable to biologists studying one unusual mammal species, such as whales, and making generalizations from that to all other mammals. It is well known that children learn the language of their environment but languages differ and we need to include in our research the range of features that children may have to acquire. Acquisition studies of less well-documented languages and, in general, a more cross-linguistic perspective on acquisition is a top priority in the field. On the basis of what is stated above, some problems emerge when conducting language acquisition research on different languages and in different societies. So, the main important objective is to pave the way for the researchers to study in the realm of language acquisition without paying attention to the kind of language. The aforesaid problem can be discussed by taking into account cross-linguistic language acquisition research, typological language acquisition, variation across languages, and variation in context. Finally, some viewpoints can be stated to resolve this problem.

II. CROSS-LINGUISTIC LANGUAGE ACQUISITION RESEARCH

Cross-linguistic language acquisition research is usually understood in two different ways. First, and most frequently, the term is used for acquisition studies of languages other than English. Studies of this type of research, for instance, investigate how ergative structures are acquired in Quiche Mayan, or how grammatical morphology is acquired in Turkish. Results of such studies are often used to test theories of language acquisition that are developed on the basis of research on English, or that are informed by general speculation about the nature of grammar. The other type of cross-linguistic research is inherently comparative, and languages for comparison are selected on the basis of typological differences or similarities (Bavin, 2009). The term which is used for this kind is typological language acquisition. But what is typological language acquisition?

A. Typological Language Acquisition

Typological universals are principles that hold for all the world's languages. They are found empirically, by surveying different languages and deducing which aspects of them could be universal; these aspects are then checked against other languages to verify the findings (VanPatten & Benati, 2010, p. 161). The goal of typological language acquisition is to systematically explore commonalities and differences in the acquisition of specific linguistic features across different languages. Languages are grouped typologically on the basis of shared features. For example, word order has often been used to define types of languages; English has a predominantly subject– verb–object pattern (SVO), whereas Welsh has a predominantly VSO order and Japanese has a SOV order. A variety of features is used to classify languages into typologies, for example case marking. Some languages are classified as Ergative–Absolutive while others are Nominative– Accusative, identified on the pattern of case marking used. A language with ergative case marking typically treats the subject of an intransitive sentence like the object of a transitive sentence while the subject of a transitive sentence is distinct. However, according to Van Valin (1992), there is variation within this general pattern (Bavin, 2009, 91). The advantage of the ‘typological language acquisition research’ approach is that a range of cross-linguistic variation is covered. Despite this, most research – even when on less well-studied languages – still focuses on one language; typological acquisition research is relatively rare. The use of different data sets, different methods or different criteria for coding makes it difficult to compare across languages. This complicates post hoc comparisons and meta-analyses and creates a considerable challenge to a full-scale typological approach (Bavin, 2009).

III. VARIATION ACROSS LANGUAGES

Variation across languages includes the following parts:

A. Some Theoretical Views

In approaches to language acquisition which adopt a nativist perspective, linguistic diversity and variation originally played a marginal role. Within nativist approaches explanations of how children deal with variation range from performance factors to the assumption of innate mechanisms. In contrast, the cognitive, constructivist or usage-based theories assume that children construct their languages from a small set of item-specific and low-scope constructions. For usage-based approaches, cross-linguistic variation is of key importance because item-specific constructions are necessarily also language-specific, and the variation in linguistic structure is likely to have an impact on how individual constructions are learned (Slobin, 1985).

B. Conceptualization and Linguistic Relativity

A large body of research suggests that language is tightly connected with the conceptualization of the world (Slobin, 1996). Linguistic relativity states that the grammar and the lexicon of a language systematically influence how a speaker of this language

perceives and conceptualizes the world around. Even concepts like time and space have been shown to be conceptualized differently across languages and cultures.

C. Phonological Systems

Children need to learn individual sounds and their phonological contrasts. There are approximately 3,000 categorically distinct sounds used in living languages and there are quite a few more that would in principle be possible– the IPA generates over 50,000 possible symbol combinations. In their first year, babies build up language-specific phonetic prototypes which help to organize sounds into categories (Kuhl et al., 1992). Languages differ in the number of phonemes in their sound system.

D. Words

There are different types of words, phonological and grammatical words, and their structure and identification differ from language to language. Words are language-specific constructions and generalizations are difficult to make without taking a wide range of factors into consideration.

E. Verb Morphology

A considerable challenge to acquisition is posed by morphology. Some languages have a lot of morphology such as for instance Mohawk (Iroquoian, United States, Canada); other languages such as English or Mandarin Chinese have very little morphology and Vietnamese has none (Bavin, 2009, p. 96).

Verb forms in morphologically rich languages are more variable and the child has to master many more forms and combinations of forms and the appropriate contexts of use.

IV. VARIATION IN CONTEXT

From the early days of the discipline researchers have also acknowledged that social aspects play an important role (Ellis, 1997, p.37). There have been many different approaches to sociolinguistic study of language acquisition. Common to each of these approaches, however, is a rejection of language as a purely psychological phenomenon; instead, sociolinguistic research views the social context in which language is learned as essential for a proper understanding of the acquisition process (Gass & Selinker, 2008).

Children learn their language from their environment, and there is much descriptive work on the input that children receive. There is not only variation in the structures that children have to learn, but also in their cultural and linguistic contexts (Lieven, 1994; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). Studying the linguistic environment of children can help answer two important questions. First, are there any commonalities of qualitative changes made by the caretakers when talking to the child, in other words do all cultures somehow facilitate their

speech when talking to children (not necessarily in the same way)? Second, does the input influence development; that is, do we find correlations between certain features in the input and the language development of the child? Input and the social setting of language acquisition are *external* factors that so called learner variables.

For example, in one study by Rod Ellis a learner used both "No look my card" and "Don't look my card" while playing a game of bingo (VanPatten & Benati, 2010, p. 166). A small fraction of variation in interlanguage (an emerging language system in the mind of a second-language learner) is *free variation*, when the learner uses two forms interchangeably. However, most variation is *systemic variation*, variation which depends on the context of utterances the learner makes (Ellis, 1997). Forms can vary depending on linguistic context, such as whether the subject of a sentence is a pronoun or a noun; they can vary depending on social context, such as using formal expressions with superiors and informal expressions with friends; and also, they can vary depending on psycholinguistic context, or in other words, on whether learners have the chance to plan what they are going to say. The causes of variability are a matter of great debate among SLA researchers (VanPatten & Benati, 2010, p. 166).

V. STATED RESULTS RELATED TO LANGUAGE ACQUISITION RESEARCH

According to some studies, the problems related to language acquisition research can be resolved by developing important source of data from a variety of languages which consists of child Language Data Exchange System and typological studies of language acquisition.

A. *child Language Data Exchange System*

An important source of data from a variety of languages was developed in the early 1980s by Brian MacWhinney and Catherine Snow; this is the Child Language Data Exchange System project (CHILDES). CHILDES provides a series of tools to transcribe and analyze data to facilitate empirical language acquisition research. It hosts corpora on about thirty languages (Bavin, 2009). The data available help making cross-linguistic and typological comparisons possible. It is free for researchers to access as are the tools available for analysis.

B. *Typological Studies of Language Acquisition*

On the basis of Bavin (2009, p.102), Slobin (1997) called two major ways of engaging in typological language acquisition studies based on the sampling of languages intra-typological and cross-typological or intra-genealogical studies. Intra-genealogical are studies which compare languages within language families and inter-genealogical studies investigate the acquisition of a feature across language families.

1. Intra-genealogical studies

Since the grammars of closely related languages usually do not differ as strongly as grammars of unrelated languages we can hold several variables constant, which potentially otherwise might influence our results. Intra-genealogical studies also constitute an important basis for inter-genealogical studies. Intra-genealogical studies can reach a high level of precision in testing variables in closely related language (Bavin, 2009, p. 102).

2. Inter-genealogical studies

In inter-genealogical studies, features are investigated independent of language families. Studies of this type range from small-scale studies including two languages to larger studies with a number of languages. Such typological studies provide in-depth insights into how children acquiring different languages compare in the acquisition of a specific feature. A key characteristic here is the justification for the choice of languages. The choice of languages depends on the variables a researcher is interested in.

VI. CONCLUSION

Indeed, one way of achieving a pertinent and suitable research in language acquisition is through providing an important source of data from a variety of languages. CHILED or child language exchange data system can be helpful in this matter.

In fact, the discourse comprehenders CHILDES provides a series of tools to transcribe and analyze data to facilitate empirical language acquisition research. It hosts corpora on about thirty languages. English is the best represented language with several corpora that are morphologically glossed. Three other languages, Irish (Guilfoyle), Sesotho (Demuth) and Indonesian (Gil), are represented by corpora that are translated and morphologically glossed for both child and interactors (Indonesian and Sesotho) and for the child only (Irish). In addition, CHILDES contains corpora of five cross-linguistic approaches to language acquisition 101 languages, which are glossed but not translated, and there are corpora of three languages, which are translated but not glossed. All other corpora of the remaining languages are transcripts only. The data available help in making cross-linguistic and typological comparisons possible. The data is free for researchers to access as are the tools available for analysis.

Also, the two major ways of engaging in typological language acquisition studies are intra-typological and cross-typological sampling of language. In fact, intra-genealogical studies for studies which compare languages within language families and inter-genealogical for studies which investigate the acquisition of a feature across language families.

There has been much debate about exactly how language is learned, and many issues are still unresolved. There are many theories of second-language acquisition, but none are accepted as a complete explanation by all language acquisition researchers.

It is only by conducting such research that our understanding of the diversity of human language and the effect of this diversity on language acquisition can be fully understood (Slobin, 1997).

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