NATIVE LANGUAGE AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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SOCIAL PROCESS IN FIRST- AND SECOND-LANGUAGE LEARNING *

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TRANSFER

What is the relationship between first- and second-language learning? When we say they are alike, or not alike, what is it that we compare? The most common comparisons are between outcomes, such as errors, or orders of acquisition in which certain skills reach a criterion of correctness. Since the order of acquisition is a complex outcome of many factors, all must be alike to generate identical orders. A second domain of comparison might be conditions for successful learning. These might be such factors as those discussed in the research on mother-tongue acquisition—such as hearing the target language while the meaning is made clear by the context, hearing it in reduced input forms, hearing enough repetition to allow discovery of patterns. A third topic of comparison might be inferred cognitive strategies, such as those discussed by Slobin as “operating principles.” It is quite possible that the strategies could be the same, and yet the outcomes not be the same because of the intervention of prior knowledge to accelerate some learning in the case of second language.

There is no reason to believe that the language-acquisition system that is effective in mother-tongue development suddenly atrophies; indeed, recent data suggest that adolescents learn extremely rapidly. To test, however, whether there is any specific effect of prior learning requires focused and specific studies. For example, one of Slobin’s operating principles proposes “pay attention to the ends of words” and hunt for meaning correlates. This principle derives from the finding that simple suffix information for case, not confused by gender or other “noise,” is acquired extremely quickly and almost without error by Turkish children, more quickly than even case information indicated by word order in English. If the same principle applies in second-language learning, we would predict that regardless of first language, Turkish case suffixes should be learned rapidly.

But even the strongest advocate of a common language-acquisition system for both first and second language would have to admit that the starting points are not the same. Learners of second languages, for example, already know how to converse, and they know how to classify.

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A baby learning language has to learn what to talk about. A baby has to learn the categories that words represent. The baby has to learn how to participate in conversational turns, what to do with language to symbolize and change the world. But a second-language learner already knows how to do these things. In the simplest sense, the second-language learner could be said to be learning new forms for old conversational uses and ideas.

**SEMANTICS**

Mother-tongue learners spend a fair amount of time sorting out categories, learning names and boundaries. In the texts we have, children are told that superheroes are not dolls in toy stores, that coats are not jackets. In each of these cases, the learner has extended a frequent name to represent a larger category. In each case the correction supplies not the name of the larger category but the taxonomic contrast, creating a new boundary.

We know that second-language learners already have preorganized categories. The second-language learner relabels at first, retaining the well-structured system of categories for things, actions, attributes, relations, and abstractions. We would be quite surprised if a Spanish speaker learning English kept referring to both dogs and cats as “cats” without discomfort, on occasions when the norms of usage are specificity. Yet older learners, with their well-developed semantic system, have a significant advantage if there is a good cultural match.

But of course we know that cultures don’t always have the same categories, and that new boundaries sometimes must be learned.\(^4\)** Categories learned by verbal context or dependent on social assumptions are the most different between cultures, the slowest to be changed, and the most common in adult speech. Renegotiation of meaning will be the easiest for the observable referents, if they are talked about. Youngsters can alter their semantic system readily because of the frequency of these here-and-now referents, and the directive and expressive words of play.

Particularly problematic for older learners are the general semantic orientations made obligatory by certain languages. These appear to be difficult to restructure after childhood—definiteness, aspect, gender, arbitrary classifiers. Whether this is a critical period of linguistic or cognitive development is unknown.

**CONVERSATIONAL ROUTINES**

Semantic mismatches and relearning have been discussed in the classic linguistic studies of bilingual interference. Less familiar is the analogous domain of sociolinguistic knowledge and conversational structure. Conversation and discourse also involve latent structure, categories, background assumptions. As in semantic development, the change in conversational skills between ages two and five is very great. Even those rudimentary skills of a two-year-old to attract attention, establish a topic, respond to check questions, state what is wanted, are realized at a later age by more elaborate and varied tactics. The ability to create and sustain elaborate role playing is absent at two but by five reveals stylistic subtlety and range.\(^5\) The intricate web of relevance, allowing focused elliptical replies and extensions of the partner’s speech, grows greatly at four and five.

What happens when a beginner enters a conversational exchange? Is there a transfer of conversational skills fleshed out with the available linguistic resources? or must the learner start over? This is the principle issue of this section, going further with some arguments in the important work of Linnakylä.\(^6\)

Let us take a simple example. A newcomer to France readily notices the words spoken at greetings and farewells: *salut, bonjour, au revoir*. If these words alone were mapped onto the English *hi, goodbye, so long*, the result would be defective, since address terms are obligatory in polite greetings to adult strangers or superiors, not optional as in English. In addition, French friends shake hands at meetings and farewells, all around the group. Teenage girls exchange cheek pecks, boys handshakes with face averted. These gestural exchanges are learned very rapidly by newcomers.

What can we learn from this example? (a) Greetings and farewells are among the earliest, most transparent social-exchange events, among the first learned by children even in the first year, since their cue is the arrival or departure of a person. (b) Reciprocal forms are easier to learn than adjacency pairs that are complementary, since they can be acquired by repetition and initiated by a native speaker who provides a model. (c) Invariant parts of formulae are easier to produce than variants requiring semantic choice—in this example, the address term that calls on the complex structure of the social rules of address. (d) Optional items in first-language structures that are obligatory and invariant in the second language will be learned idiomatically as part of the second-language formula. Optional items that are variable (such as the address term) will be regarded as optional by learners. Exceptions will be situation-specific cases like “bonjour madame” to the teacher, which will generalize to similar adults.

The parallel to first-language learning is clear: obviousness of the appropriate situation, ease of reciprocal forms and gestures, semantic decision in address terms. But the transfer of the optionality of address is a specifically second-language issue. And there are latent issues of transfer in whom and when to greet, in who initiates, and certainly in the semantics of address.

**A GENERAL FRAMEWORK**

Let us step back for a moment. In examining the conversational basis of mother-tongue acquisition, we need to take into account (a) the learner’s interaction network—to whom the learner listens and talks; (b) the speech
activities and genres in which the learner participates; (c) local discourse structure—relations between nearby utterances; (d) social variation to which the learner is exposed, such as bilingualism and dialect or register contrast; and (e) beliefs, explicit teaching, and prescriptive attitudes about language. But if we turn to second-language acquisition, we find exactly the same set of considerations to be fundamental to understanding acquisition. While individual and cultural variations in the development of the mother tongue have been noted increasingly, it appears that second-language learning is even more varied. The reason lies in the greater diversity in interaction networks and speech activities of second-language learners—with whom, how often, and for what purpose the target language is depended on uniquely for understanding of what is happening. A timid second-language learner, especially one out of school, may avoid even hearing the second language. An infant may be silent, but with rare exceptions can’t help hearing the mother tongue in obvious and repetitive circumstances.

**LOCAL DISCOURSE**

Children must learn to get into and maintain interaction if they want to play effectively. Local discourse development in novice second-language learners, as pointed out by Hatch, is strikingly parallel to early mother-tongue use. We find child second-language learners using calls or attention getters within the first month to establish talk. The means are names, lookt, hey, French regardé, ict. Strage and I found the French examples within the first month of learning. Fillmore found the English examples in the first month for four out of five Spanish speakers; the fifth did not initiate interaction until the second month, when he used these forms.

Repairs are more interesting, because mother-tongue learners respond to repetition requests early, though in my data, four children did not initiate repair requests until near the end of the third year. Yet Fillmore, in her second-language sample of five-year-olds, found repetition requests in the first month: “Huh? What? What you say?” And later, clarification requests, as in the following: †

1. Spanish 6 years old, 8 months in English:
   T: Well, hurry up, cause we’re gonna have to go.
   Put these things up, right away.
   Sp: Now?

† To be discussed in Reference 21.

‡ In the examples, Spanish 6 years, 7 months in English (N) means that child N is a Spanish-speaking 6-year-old with 7 months of school English. In the dialogue, S: and E: refer to the speaker’s dominant language, T: to an adult at school.

*** Identifies overlaps or interruptions.

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Adjacent pairs refer to utterances that are yoked, often next to each other, but sometimes separated by clarification requests or other disruptions. Examples are question-answer, order-acknowledgment, permission request-permission, summons-reply. Questions and replies were found within the first month formulæ of all of the children in Fillmore’s study of five-year-olds, for instance: “what happen?” “I know,” “I dunno,” “all right,” “wait.” All the children knew “I dunno.”

Patsy Lightbown compared first- and second-language acquisition. She pointed out that first-language research—such as the studies of Ervin-Tripp and Tyack and Ingram—had shown that locative, person, and thing answers (as to where, who, and what questions) preceded time, manner, and cause replies. She found no such order in second-language comprehension, implying that the result is based on cognitive development. This finding fits well with the similar result for Genie, the child who learned English as a first language during adolescence.

On the other hand, Lightbown reports that the order in production was similar in the second language, that is, questions of place and thing were first. Questions of who, then why, then when and how emerged after. Swain and Felix found similar orders. Lightbown noted that while the words used were acquired in this order, conceptually the children sometimes tried to express the more advanced category with the question-word vocabulary already at hand. What we see, then, is semantic and functional transfer from the knowledge the child already has, but a slow formal development as vocabulary is acquired to express what the child knows.

2. Two anglophone six-year-olds playing memory, matching pairs in scrambled cards with face down.
   a. Ça, c'est quoi? Ah. Ça c'est pas ça. (turns card)
   [This one? It's what? Ah. This, it's not it.]

3. Anglophone playing teacher. 7 years 2 months. (N)
   a. C'est quoi, le nom à toi? (It's what, the name of yours?)
   b. French: Pourquoi? E: Parce que . . . (Because . . .)
   c. Spanish 5 years old, 7 months in English. (M)
   *Dat whistle, what is for?*

   In Fillmore and Strage’s studies, questions of surprising length appeared within the first two or three months. Some were restricted situationally, like “Hey, what a your name” and “What time you my house,” which can’t be used repeatedly. Others were important in keeping the conversation moving, like “What happened” and “Whatsa matter.” In the first months, there were “What do you think,” “Hey, what’s going on here,” and “How do you do these.” And by seven months in English, we can find not only complex questions but complex inferred replies:

4. Where'd you find it? (M)
   Sp: Ah, Vera give it to me.
SPEECH ACTS

The most dramatic contrast in the first- and second-language conversations can be seen in the wider range of interpersonal functions in the older second-language-learning children. Because they are aware of more complex ways to interact, because they are familiar with the structure of games, and because many play cues are nonverbal, these children can discover the meaning of the many forms they hear repeated during play, as in (21) and (22) below.\footnote{After his first few weeks in a French school, my six-year-old described (in English) to me a complex new playground game involving many conditionals. Since his French contained only a few isolated words and formulas, and I assumed such learning was through verbal instruction, I was very puzzled. The French semiotician, Greimas, pointed out that games are structurally alike, so that on the basis of relatively little observation my child could have induced the system. This knowledge not only permitted him to play, but also to learn the relevant language. Now, after a year of taping language learning in this age group during games, I understand what Greimas meant. The game structure has to be induced, but it then becomes available as a here-and-now referent for talk. Besides, an active learner can negotiate the game structure if the group is small enough.}

In first-language learners between two and two-and-a-half years of age, we can find examples in which children point out, name, state, describe, deny, comment about their own ongoing activity, and mark completion of acts (there!). They express wants and commands; they boast, claim, offer, prohibit, reject, and refuse. They request, correct, question names and places, and acknowledge. As their speech develops, the acts become more varied both in type and in expression. In addition to all of these acts, in the second-language texts for the first seven months, we also find more complicated acts than would occur in children of two. They 

persuade:

(5) Spanish 5 years, 7 months in English. (Sy)
S: (E is getting into doctor kit) Don't get it.
E: Mine
S: OK, you get one. Oh, getta glasses.
E: No, I need em.
S: I need em, too.
E: Both need em.

In such conversations, the English- and Spanish-speaking partners appear well matched in the level of play and talk, probably in part because of accommodation to the new learner.

The children can joke:

(6) Spanish 6 years old, 8 months in English. (R)
S: My name is Elba (giggles)
E: My name is Sabrina! (giggles) (has switched their names)
T: Y'all are just making fun now.

They can offer praise:

(7) Spanish 5 years old, 7 months in English. (M)
a. It's pretty things in here!
b. How pretty she look with that! (shoes)

They can give warnings:

(8) English 5 years old, 1 month. (French context) (C)
Attention. Attention, Arthur! (to baby) [Watch out]

They can plan:

(9) Spanish 5 years, 7 months in English. (M)
S: You gonna put it over here?
E: Yeah.
S: And nobody can play. (with play shoes)

They announce intentions:

(10) Chinese 5 years, 7 months in English.
C: Miss Smith, I'm getting out of here. (climbing away from teacher's group)

They solicit more complex information than do two-year-olds:

(11) Spanish 5 years, 7 months in English. (M)
How does shu work? (A toy spring, a Slinky®)
Where you buy all these things? I gunna tell my mom to buy me one of these.

(12) Spanish 5 years, 7 months in English. (Sy)
Who lives in there? (empty cage)

They can ask permission indirectly:

(13) Spanish 5 years, 7 months in English. (M)
Those things are put in there. Those things are yours? Or you put it to play?

They can contradict by questioning assumptions. Keller-Cohen, Chalmer, and Remler provide other examples.\footnote{After his first few weeks in a French school, my six-year-old described (in English) to me a complex new playground game involving many conditionals. Since his French contained only a few isolated words and formulas, and I assumed such learning was through verbal instruction, I was very puzzled. The French semiotician, Greimas, pointed out that games are structurally alike, so that on the basis of relatively little observation my child could have induced the system. This knowledge not only permitted him to play, but also to learn the relevant language. Now, after a year of taping language learning in this age group during games, I understand what Greimas meant. The game structure has to be induced, but it then becomes available as a here-and-now referent for talk. Besides, an active learner can negotiate the game structure if the group is small enough.}

They can give explanations:

(14) Spanish 5, 8 months in English. (Sh)
E: Go on. Here's a place. We could play telephone.
S: No. It's no play telephone.
E: Is this a play telephone?
T: It's not a play telephone. It's real, but there's no plug.

They can give explanations:

(15) Spanish 5 years, 5 months in English. (N)
E: I like your earrings, Nora.
S: Mm, and I, and I, and I, like your hair, because your hair is beautiful. Looky, look here. (twists E's curls)
Spanish 5 years, 5 months in English. (N)
T: Hey, there was a tamalada here at school. Did your mommy come?
S: It was great. My mommy was not there because she don’t like to go.

If they try more complex speech acts, they sometimes cannot carry them out because of lack of linguistic resources. Lighthouse mentioned that in asking temporal questions, children might use where, as in “ou est ton fête?” (Where’s your birthday party?). They rapidly learn the special vocabulary of games. Here is a vivid board game of soccer, full of excitement:

Spanish 6 years, 8 months in English. (R)
T: Is he a good driver?
S: No.
T: Why not?
S: Cause he’s going uh uh uh.
T: Cause why, why isn’t he a good driver?
S: Cause he drink, cause he go boom.
   An cause he cruzo.

Speech Activities and Genres

The most persuasive indicator of the marked difference in the abilities between a young mother-tongue learner and a five-year-old is in the structure of play. The older learners are able to organize play, to negotiate, to set the stage, and to enact a variety of fuller activities, such as teaching a lesson, making a pretend phone call, playing a game, telling a story, playing with a puppet, role playing, or arguing. In enacting these activities, the children’s discourse skills were far more complex than those of children at the comparable level of mother-tongue formal knowledge.

Here is a child organizing a game of doctor-patient:

Spanish 5 years, 7 months in English. (C)
S: Here. Oh, it’s a doctor toy. Look. Hey, look . . .
E: What’s this for?
S: I dunno.
E: What over here.
S: Oh look. Enrique. Hey, lemme see you tongue.
   Lemme see you tongue. Lemme see.
E: (You’re dumb/your tongue)
S: Gimme your feet. (holding hammer)
E: Ouch. Now, lemme do you. (hits S’s knee and both laugh)

The children are able to negotiate roles and claims to objects, an important facet of play for youngsters of three to seven. Strage has other examples too.

Ervin-Tripp: Social Process

English 11 years, 1 month in French. (C)
E: Bravo, très bien, dégage. Oh bravo! Bien joué!
[Bravo, very good, clear. Oh bravo. Well played.]
F: Bon, allez, une touche pour les bleus.
[All right! Go, go! A goal for the blues.]
E: Un zéro pour Marcel et moi.
[A zero for Marcel and me.]
F: Un centre et les rouges qui ont la balle.
[A center and the reds have the ball.]
E: Tout devant.
[You’re ahead.]

At this age, the children are capable of complicated role playing. But role playing usually is highly verbal and depends on linguistic skill and formulaic repertoire:

Spanish 5 years, 7 months in English. (Sy)
S: I get the bowls out.
E: You cook, right? You cook. Where’s the table?
   We need one . . .
S: This is for the food.
E: Oh. This is. This is for cake . . .
E: Coffee.
S: I need a spoon . . . I making egg.
E: Huh?
S: I making egg.
E: Eggs?
S: Eggs. Look the eggs. Hey, you don’t need this.
   You don’t need this. This is for the cake.
E: I know.
S: This is for the eggs.
In example (23) there has been a successful collaboration, ending with a presentation of cake and coffee by S and a discussion about the meal. The correction by E of eg was established by S as a new version of her play assertions. Here we can see how an active learner can get information by engaging peers in play, and getting their help to enlarge their knowledge.

In the following example, a child who had been in France only a few months was able to set up and manage successfully the enactment of a classroom role-playing scene, playing the role of teacher and teaching commutation. The scene ends with physical punishment, which she had seen in the French village school.

(24) English 7 years, 2 months in French. (N)
E: C'est moi la maîtresse. Alors, excusez-moi, tu viens ici . . .
    Derrière les enfants. Tu viens ici. (Giggles, shows seat in
    front of her. She has slate.) Et quoi, C'est quoi, toi.
    C'est quoi, le nom à toi?
    [I'm the teacher then, pardon me, you come here? Behind
    the children. You come here. And what, it's what, you,
    it's what, the name of yours?]
F: Stéphanie . . . (big negotiation on names)
E: Sept. Attends, attends, c'est ça, bon. Mais deux fois sept
    égale—— [Seven. Wait, wait, that's it, good. But two times
    seven equals——]
F: Quatorze. [14]
E: Oui? [Or?]
F: Sept fois sept—— [7×7——]
E: Sept fois deux égale quatorze . . . [7×2=14 . . . ]
E: Mais, tu comprends, eh? [But you understand, huh?]
F: Oui.
E: Non, tu viens là? Tu, tu, tu attends là. Viens par là.
    [No, you come here! You, you, you wait here. Come here
    Stephanie, Stephanie, come quickly. It's your turn. No!]
    (runs after her with a little stick while both laugh)

The child-teacher in (24) already knew a good deal about classroom structure from English. She adopted linking forms comparable to English "okay, now, good" that can initiate new units. She knew eliciting tricks, such as unfinished sentences and rising "Or?" Yet the assembly of these parts is new. As Andersen found, role playing is a combination of stereotyped, imitated, and invented parts.

The bare bones of a sequential structure are revealed in numerous play phone conversations of the five-year-olds:

(25) Spanish 5 years, 7 months in English. (Y)
a. S: Hello.
b. E: What's you doing?

c. S: Fine.
d. E: My mommy told me to go to school.
e. S: Me too . . .
f. E: Okay, bye. I'll call you back tomorrow.
g. S: Okay, bye.

In this conversation, only the rudiments are present: greetings (a); opener (b-c) [two possibilities: adult "How are you?" or "How do you do?—Fine" versus child "What are you doing?" (which has no fixed reply)]; conversation (d-e); and farewell (f-g). While E does more initiating except in the greeting, S clearly knows a set of appropriate replies.

How this structure is taught is revealed in the following from Fillmore:

(26) Spanish 5 years, 5 months in English. (N)
b. E: Who are you?
c. S: Nora
d. E: Nora, you've got to say, "What are you doing?"
e. S: What are you doing?
f. E: Making cookies. What are you doing?
g. S: Making cookies, too.
h. E: Okay, bye.
i. S: Bye.

In this text, Nora moved directly from the greeting into a conversation or even a precloser in (a) without any opener. Her partner corrects her in (d), which allows a successful exchange since the conversation then can be about the reply to (e). The fact that the child opener "What are you doing?" is open allows it to lead to conventional conversational content. I will end with an example that makes clear that the level of skill displayed by the children in English still is restricted by language. After numerous offences, C stole the class crackers and he was undergoing group criticism most of the day, direct and indirect. At the time the first switch from Cantonese to English occurred, there had been a 15-minute dispute in progress.

(27) Chinese 5 years, 8 months in English (3 Chinese speakers,
    KG, KH, WF)
A. I hit you. You don't keep me orange [marker] this time go to
    outside—I hit you.
B. I tell my ma—tonight my father coming. I tell my father hit
    you.
C. My father is mmm. (makes fist)
B. My father is s—
A. ***You father big big big big big! (pretends drinking from
    bottle)
B. (giggles) My father, bigger your father.
The structure of this argument can be compared with the relatively simple and repetitive exchanges of two-year-olds observed by Keenan and those reported by Brenneis and Lein in children at school age. The conceptual difference is obvious, both in terms of complexity and in the culture-relevant content and the reference to specific past events. The syntactic demands in English were for comparatives. The Chinese statements make conditional predictions. Why the language switch? The reasons might be syntactic or they might be rhetorical, the threat of ostracism being more Chinese.

CONCLUSIONS

The argument in this paper is a simple one. New learners gain significant time advantages by assuming semantic and discourse similarity. They come to a new language assuming that they can learn new names for old categories, and that they can carry on the same kinds of activities and the same kinds of conversational exchanges in the new language.

The evidence that the older learners bring their older conversational knowledge to bear, has been a series of examples (but without the examples from two-year-olds, for which there was not enough space). These examples show that the children use more mature speech acts than do two-year-olds and more complex and indirect versions. They reveal that the genres and speech activities that the older children construct are closer to those of their age-mates than to children at the same linguistic stage.

But linguistic constraints must play a role. We need to explore the specific knowledge needed for the activities into which the learners enter. We might find, for instance, that the language needed for a soccer game (or an assembly line) is very limited, that it is sufficiently simple structurally to be learned fast from its match with action, and that its learning has relatively little generalizability. In the argument (27) we saw that constraints on linguistic complexity might shut the learner out from the full expression of intentions, ideas, and feelings. But of course this is precisely the impetus that can drive new learning. The relation between knowledge of social frames, cognitive growth, and the linguistic means that the learner can deploy is what motivates rapid learning in both the first and second languages.

I argued earlier that the basic reason for the great individual difference in success in second-language learning is the wide range in speech activities that different learners enter. It is clear from our examples that the activity structure and the role of language in activity probably change with age. For example, there is a powerful shift in the structure and content of peer

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For further discussion of the relation between language and content in bilinguals see Reference 8, and for rhetorical uses of switching see Reference 11.
interaction at adolescence that may have strong effects on linguistic learning from this source.

The learner's familiarity with complex trajectories of activity and interaction allows recognition of meaning from a few cues, and therefore quick learning of relatively appropriate meanings for complex situated formulae like "what's matter" and "what happened" even within the first month. Peck and Strage have many examples of such learning.17,24

Because the learners know more than two-year-olds do, they are able to guess what is going on. They can guess meanings of phrases and, if they are socially active, will try them out. This participation in turn provides them with replies, which are shaped directly by instruction as in (26) or more commonly through accommodation by the partner, who changes speech and actions towards what the learner seems to know. These relevant, tailored replies are the kind of contingent replies that Cazden found most likely to foster development in young children.5 The learner who launches into age-appropriate exchanges keeps partners, is exposed more quickly to new vocabulary, and negotiates both semantic and pragmatic changes of meaning where old categories and conversational structures don’t fit. Thus knowledge of conversation, like knowledge of semantic systems, can give older learners a significant advantage over the novice in the mother tongue.

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