

How Are Languages Learned?

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As we go about our daily lives, most people don't often ponder the origin of our ability to communicate. One doesn't usually consider how without any special effort a child living anywhere on the planet if exposed to a language is able to learn that language to total fluency. An amazing feat seen by the scientific community "as one of the many utterly unexplainable mysteries that besets us in our daily lives" (Galasso, n. d., para. 1) It would suggest that humans have an innate capacity to acquire a language. The focus of this paper is on the much-debated question as to whether this innate capacity continues when one acquires a second language (L2). One could easily assume that it does not continue due to the overall success rate of second language learners. "Very few L2 learners appear to be fully successful in the way that native speakers are" (Towell & Hawkins, 1994, p. 14). This paper will argue that second language is acquired on the same universal innate principles that govern first language (L1) acquisition, which is why one finds the same stages of development. It contends that even if the L2 learner is not successful, it is the result of various other intervening variables and not the absence of innate capacities. The first part of the paper will look critically at the main question in recent studies of L1 acquisition which involves finding out what in language is inborn, we say hard-wired, into the infant's brain structure and what is learned through experience. It will compare the three main perspectives of L1 acquisition. The second part of the paper will then discuss to what extent is L2 acquisition guided by the same language learning mechanism that L1 acquisition is. To approach this, the paper will consider some of the similarities and differences in child L1 acquisition and adult L2 acquisition. The paper examines two areas of contention: the critical period hypothesis and developmental stages in learner language. The last section will deal with the various intervening variables such as, learning conditions, motivation, and egocentrism, which could account for the difference in outcomes of L1 and L2 learners.

Slobin (as cited in Fromkin et al, p. 341) states: "The capacity to learn language is deeply ingrained in us as a species, just as the capacity to walk, to grasp objects, to recognize faces." Exactly what is innate and what is the result of experience? Although this question hasn't been answered to anyone's complete satisfaction, "it seems clear that

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the basic capacity to learn language is innate, while the particular form/meaning connections of individual languages are acquired through prolonged exposure to a specific speech community.” (Linguistics 201, n. d., p. 2). There are three main theories to child language acquisition; all of them have merit but none can fully explain the phenomenon of L1 acquisition.

The ‘behaviorist’ approach believes that language learning is simply a matter of imitation and habit formation. Children imitate the sounds and patterns, which they hear around them and receive positive reinforcement for doing so. Thus encouraged by their environment, they continue to imitate and practice these sounds and patterns until they form ‘habits’ of correct language use (Lightbown & Spada, 1993). However, imitation alone cannot possibly account for all language acquisition. Children often make grammatical mistakes they couldn’t have possibly heard: *He goed to the store*. Furthermore, parents often don’t correct and when they do, it is usually incorrect pronunciation or incorrect reporting of facts. “It is truth value not syntactic well-formedness that chiefly governs explicit verbal reinforcement by parents” (Brown, 1973, p. 330). In fact, attempts to correct often fail. While imitation can offer a partial explanation of L1 acquisition i.e. routine formulas such as greetings, it doesn’t really take into account a child’s innate learning capacity and therefore, has trouble justifying some of the more complex aspects of language (Lightbown & Spada, 1993).

Next, the innatist approach looks at ways to go beyond the behaviorist view. Noam Chomsky, whose writings the innatist view is based on, originally theorized that children were born with a hard-wired language acquisition device (LAD) in their brains (Cook, 1988). He later expanded this idea into that of Universal Grammar (UG) a set of innate principles and adjustable parameters that are common to all human languages. It is assumed that something about the structure of our brain causes languages to be somewhat limited in how they can differ syntactically. This built in limitation aids the child in acquiring the language by narrowing down the possible patterns to a few (Cook, 1988). A problem with the theory of innateness is identifying the UG, what constraints or structural features are hard-wired in the mind. It must be more than general intelligence. And yet so far, there doesn’t seem to be any structural property or set of properties found in all languages that would allow us to identify any purely linguistic skill that is separate from human intelligence. Chomsky maintains that children couldn’t figure out the language structure from the highly irregular language that they hear (Lightbown & Spada, 1993). However, studies by Bellugi and Brown, 1964; Landes, 1975; Moerk, 1985 (as cited in Brown, 1995) have found that the language a child hears is highly structured and this structure plays a role in language acquisition. The innatist theory deals with the forms of language, but doesn’t account for the deeper functional levels of meaning constructed from social interaction.

The functional theory of L1 acquisition considers language a tool for human communication. It is seen as not so much a move away from innatist theory but rather a

deeper view. In a child's telegraphic speech (two-word speech) it is clear that because the utterances are reduced, the situation plays an important role. The result is that the same two words might convey very different meanings in different situations. Lois Bloom (1970) showed that the utterance 'Mummy sock' could have three different functions: mummy putting the sock on; mummy's sock and mummy sees the sock. The child is making use of an ability to combine items from a limited set, in order to communicate meanings. Halliday (as cited in Littlewood, 1984) suggests that L1 acquisition takes place because the child realizes he can do certain things with language and he learns these different functions in a predictable order. The first function being 'Instrumental' where he uses language to get what he needs. This is followed by the regulatory, interactional, personal and heuristic functions in turn. Work on meaning and functions of children's speech has led many people to play down but not rule out, the role of a specific language acquisition capacity in explaining L1 acquisition. They prefer to account for it more in terms of the child's growing mental capacity and communicative needs. (Littlewood, 1984).

Having examined how the idea of an innate capacity to learn language matches up with the three main theories of L1 acquisition, this paper will now turn its attention to the question of to what extent is L2 acquisition guided by the same language learning mechanism as L1 is. The above examination implies that L1 acquisition cannot solely rely on the input that a child receives plus general cognitive skills, there must be some innate help that they get to succeed at the task of language learning. Whatever this innate help is — can second language learners also use this? This paper proposes that L2 learners have access to this innate capacity but that it partly blocked because of other variables.

The 'critical period hypothesis' (CPH) is the first challenge to this assumption. The CPH claims that the innate knowledge that guides L1 acquisition is only available for a certain time period and then becomes inaccessible (Littlewood, 1984). If there is a certain age at which the innate learning mechanism stops operating, then one might assume that L2 learners starting their acquisition after this time should not be able to access this innate knowledge. There can be doubt cast on the support found for a 'critical period' in L1 acquisition. First, support for CPH often comes from studies of so-called 'wild children' i.e. Victor and Genie where children have been deprived from contact with language and consequently, do not achieve fluency. However, it is difficult to support the CPH with examples from such unusual children because of the unknown factors of their early life (for example, emotional trauma) that might have contributed to their inability to learn language (Lightbown & Spada, 1993). Next, some support for CPH also comes from neurological research associated with brain lateralization, the term used to denote that neurological functions have been assigned to the two halves of the brain. The question of interest is when does the process of lateralization become complete, if it is completed at puberty it would uphold CPH. However, it has *not* been demonstrated that the hypothesized changes take place in the brain at puberty. Much research seems to

suggest that the brains of very young infants already have some areas that are specialized for processing language (Lightbown & Spada, 1993). Finally, experience shows that many adolescents and adults do acquire a high level of proficiency in a L2, which would hardly be possible, if they lacked important learning mechanisms. Given that the direct evidence in support of the CPH is thin, this paper adheres to the notion that the accessibility to the innate capacity for language remains intact for adult L2 learners.

Do child L1 learners and adult L2 learners pass through the same stages of development when learning a language? Children's early speech seems best explained in terms of a developing system with its own interim rules, not simply as imitations of adult sentences (Lightbown & Spada, 1993). Research on L2 acquisition has shown that L2 learners also pass through sequences of development. Many of these sequences are similar to those of L1 learners.

In the next section, the result of studies of the stages of acquisition for specific grammatical features (morphemes and learning to form negatives, questions and basic sentence patterns) for L1 and L2 language learners are presented. Different studies conducted by Brown and the de Villiers (as cited in Littlewood, 1984) of how children acquire grammatical morphemes suggested that L1 learners acquire 14 of these morphemes in a natural sequence. Bailey, Madden and Krashen (as cited in Littlewood, 1984) conducted a study of morpheme acquisition with adult L2 learners of various mother tongues. It resulted in finding the accuracy order to be very similar. From this they concluded that L2 learners acquire the grammatical morphemes in a natural sequence which is not significantly affected by mother tongue. Larsen-Freeman (as cited in Littlewood, 1984) also found a similar order, using the Bilingual Syntax Measure with 24 adults with four different mother tongues although there was some variation found due to the influence of L2 learners previously learned languages. Krashen studied the morphemes produced by learners in written English. Yet again, a similar order was found. However, there have been doubts expressed over the results of these studies due to the type of study, the method which was used to elicit speech and the way in which the morphemes were categorized (Littlewood, 1984). Despite the many unresolved issues, however, we can say like L1 learners, L2 learners have a strong tendency to acquire a set of English morphemes in a predictable order. Similar types of studies have been done with L1 learners and L2 learners learning to form negatives, to form questions and to form basic sentence structure with the same results. It therefore, can be generally concluded that for both L1 and L2 learners (with some variation due to L1 influences) there are similar sequences in the development of particular structures (Littlewood, 1984).

The final section of the paper explores how the age effects we do observe in L2 acquisition can be accounted for in ways other than claiming that the innate capacity of learning a language becomes unavailable. How can we account for L2 learners lack of

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success? There are both internal and external factors that could attribute to this. One external factor is that children have more favorable learning conditions. Input, specifically the quality and quantity of input, varies a great deal between L1 and L2 learners. The quality of exposure to a target language a child gets is immense compared to the amount the adult receives. They are often exposed to the language for longer periods of time and receive more intensive attention from native speakers. They are exposed to simpler language, which is easier to process and understand (Ellis, 1994). Some internal factors are: children are less likely to hold negative attitudes toward other speech communities or to be aware of other factors (i.e. fear of rejection) which may produce barriers to interaction and learning (Brown, 1993). Children are egocentric. While learning their language they are not afraid to make mistakes and in general, do not feel embarrassed when they are corrected. Adults on the other hand, usually suffer from a fairly large amount of language learning anxiety. Adults often feel frustrated or threatened in the struggle of learning a different language. Mistakes are seen more as failures than as opportunities for growth. The adult learner may feel greatly frustrated for being only able to express their highly complex ideas at a discourse level of an elementary school student (Ellis, 1994). Some other internal factors would include: the adult's tendency to analyze and apply conscious thought to the learning experience which may obstruct some of the natural processing mechanisms through which the new language is internalized (Littlewood, 1984). Motivation is another area that can differ greatly. A child's motivation is simple. In order to communicate and to be a part of family and society the child must master the target language (Ellis, 1994). This motivation is quite weighty, especially when compared to the motivation that adults have, or rather, must find. One can see from the above examples that there are several external and internal factors that can explain why a L2 learner might not enjoy the same success as an L1 learner.

Children and adults acquiring a language have access to the same innate universal principles. The supposed loss of this innate capacity at puberty does not have sufficient support. Studies confirm that the stages of development found for grammatical morphemes, the formation of negatives, questions and basic sentence structure in L1 and L2 learners are very similar. Although the desired outcomes of child L1 acquisition and adult L2 acquisition are exactly the same, many times the actual outcomes are, in reality, quite different. Various intervening variables such as very different learning conditions, motivation and a lack of egocentrism can account for this difference. The innate capacities children are born with are not lost as adults, just obscured.

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