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## ON THE ONTOGENESIS OF SPEECH ACTS

Psycholinguistic research into spoken language comprehension and phonetic research into the process of acoustic-phonetic analysis are both, in principle, part of the same general domain of inquiry. Both disciplines are concerned with aspects of the process whereby the child listener maps from sound onto meaning. This implies, therefore, a close dependence between them. In the past however, there has been little direct contact between the two disciplines. Research in phonetics tends to pay not much attention to the wider functional context within which the process of acoustic-phonetic analysis presumably operate. Conversely, psycholinguists — even those working on spoken word-recognition — tend to neglect the complexities of the acoustic-phonetic input to the processes they are studying. We can take for granted that psycholinguists should pay more attention to acoustic-phonetic issues. The claim that phoneticians should pay more attention to psycholinguistic issues, is less straightforward. This is, however, what we will try to establish here. We will do so with particular reference to the relationship between the acoustic-phonetic analysis of the speech signal and the perception and identification of spoken words.

Three questions will be examined here. First, *what does the child know when he knows a language?* Second, *how does he use his knowledge when producing or comprehending speech?* Third, *how does he acquire the knowledge about language and the ability to use it?*

1. What is the knowledge that is possessed by the child who can speak a language?

It is generally acknowledged that the child is responsive to speech sounds he hears long before he begins to produce them. But there appears to be a change in the child's perception of speech occurring at about the same time he begins to produce speech (for details, cf. Shvachkin, 1973, 69). The fact that there are simultaneous changes in both perception and production suggests that — at about the age of 12 months — the child discovers something of language competence. Much remains to be said of the nature of this discovery. It seems likely, however, that it is related to the child's emerging ability to conceptualize objects. His early nouns

most often refer to things with which the child can interact; generally the child's early vocabulary also includes a few words related to actions that are on-going or just have completed and words that refer to attributes of objects, states or locations. Absent are function words such as prepositions, conjunctions, auxiliaries etc. But what about the meaning of the child's early words? Should we infer that the child when uttering e.g. „*páli*“ (= it is hot) is saying what an adult would say with a full sentence, i.e. '*the soup is hot*'? This is just the kind of inference adults are likely to make about young children's utterances. The question is whether this inference is justified. Inferring that a single word expresses the meaning of a full sentence requires, in our opinion, at least two assumptions: first, that the child has conceptualized a relationship between an object (*the soup*) and a property of that object (*its hotness*); second, that the child is unable to produce a full sentence to express the relations. A possible reason for such an inability is that the child does not yet know all the words for the full sentence, or that there is some kind of limit on his language production ability such that in the process of encoding the relationship into the utterance every word but one is lost.

McNeill (1970, 23) has proposed that — already at one-word stage — the child knows a great deal about the grammatical relations which simple sentences convey. The part of a sentence most likely to be expressed in one-word utterance is its predicate. The remainder remains unexpressed because of the child's limited ability to plan utterances for production and to execute the plans. As his production planning and execution capacities increase, less and less of the content of his sentence is lost during production and more and more is overtly expressed in his utterances. This hypothesis attributes to the young child a considerable knowledge of language and its grammatical categories and syntactic relationships. The fragmentary character of his utterances is due to his limited ability to express what he knows.

Greenfield and Smith (1976) have proposed a modification of this hypothesis. They note that adults use the situation contexts in which children's utterances occur as a guide to interpreting them. They suggest that the context can be viewed as providing the rest of the child's utterances the part that are not expressed linguistically. It is the relationship between the utterance and its context that provides what for adults is provided by the relationship between the parts of an utterance. Children do not know much about language *per se*, i.e. about the syntax by which the language expresses relationships. Rather, the child's knowledge is better characterized as semantic or conceptual. The utterance '*daddy*' said when the child hears someone coming, expresses the relationship of an agent to the action in which the agent is involved. Not all to the relationships are present from the beginnings of one-word stage. Rather, the relationships emerge in a regular sequence up to the time the child begins to combine words to form longer utterances. Thus, the child's one-word utterances, taken in context, are expressing the kinds of semantic relationships that underlie simple sentences. There is, however, a more direct relationship between utterances and concepts than will be the case later. In this sense, the child's cognitive development is in

advance of his linguistic development, in other words, his utterances are primitive expressions of the conceptual relationships he has discovered.

This hypothesis is, in our opinion, more acceptable than that of McNeill. There is some independent evidence that the appropriate kinds of conceptual relationships are developing during this period. But there is little evidence to justify the existence of syntactic relationships like subject and predicate of a sentence, direct object of a verb etc. In other words, the above mentioned example 'páli' may indicate nothing more than that there is some relationship between the word, viz *the soup* (or *tea, stoves* and their possible *hotness*) and the child's painful experience with such things. If so, we are not justified in characterizing one word utterances either as words or as parts of sentences.

2. How does a child use his knowledge when comprehending or producing speech?

This is a question about how he functions when he is thinking, listening and talking. The closer observation of the child's behaviour reveals that his use of words is not haphazard. There is generally a sensible relationship between the things the child refers to by a word and the word's appropriate referent. For this reason, the child's extended usage of words can be characterized as overgeneralization. That is, the child is generalizing the use of a word from situations in which he has heard it to other, similar situations. Some generalizations are appropriate (a child, e.g. generalizes 'doggie' from the particular dogs he has heard called that to *other dogs, pictures of dogs, toy dogs* etc.). Other generalizations are inappropriate (a child, e.g. generalizes 'doggie' to *cats, pictures of cows, fur cap* etc.) — in these cases the child is overgeneralizing. Aitchison (1976, 105) has the following example: her daughter says 'ba' when she is in *the bath*, when given a mug of *milk* and with reference to *kitchen taps*. How are we to interpret this? There are at least four possible explanations. The simplest possibility is that the child is naming the objects to prove he knows them. That he has learned the name 'ba' for *bath* and has wrongly assumed that it can apply to anything which contains *liquid*. Nevertheless, this plain overgeneralization interpretation may be too simple in view of what is happening when the child says 'ba'.

An alternative explanation has been proposed by Vygotsky (1962, 70). He suggests that when children overgeneralize they do so in a quite confusing way. They appear to focus attention on one aspect of an object at a time. One much-quoted example concerns a child who uses the word 'qua' to refer to *a duck, milk, a coin* and *a teddy-bear's eye*. 'Qua' was originally *a duck on a pond*. Then the child incorporated *the pond* into the meaning, and by focussing attention on *the liquid element*, 'qua' was generalized to *milk*. But the duck was not forgotten, since 'qua' was used to refer to *a coin with an eagle* on it. Then with *the coin* in mind, the child applied 'qua' to *any round coin-like object*, such as *teddy-bear's eye*. Let us compare this example with the behaviour of a Czech-speaking boy: he called 'bow-vow' *any dog, real or toy* or *a dog in picture*. Then, getting his *fur coat*, he said 'bow-vow' too. One can hardly expect that *the dog* and *the coat* were identical objects for him. Rother, we have to take for granted that he has up to that time extended his knowledge to the fact

that dogs not only bark but also have other attributes, one of them being the possession of *fur*. Hence the usage of an onomatopoeic cry in a most unusual situation. But there were even more far-fetched associations. The boy pointed at the shelf where his picture books were kept and said 'bow-vow'. Strange however it may seem the child's intention was evident: he wanted his favourite Čapek's '*Dášeňka, The Life of a Puppy*' which was full of photos of this puppy. Vygotsky called such phenomenon 'a chain complex' because a chain of items is formed, all linked by the same name. Yet even this interpretation seems oversimple.

A third point of view is that of McNeill (1970, 24). He argues that one-word utterances show a linguistic sophistication which goes beyond the actual sound spoken. The child is not merely involved in naming exercises, but is uttering holophrases, where a single word stands for the whole sentence. E.g. 'ba' might mean '*I am in my bath*' or '*Mummy has fallen in the bath*'. He justifies his viewpoint by claiming that misuse of words shows evidence of grammatical relationships which the child understands but cannot yet express. E.g., a child said 'ha' when something hot was in front him. Later he said 'ha' to *an empty coffee* and *turned-off stove*. Why did he do this? McNeill suggests that by misusing the word the child showed that 'hot' was not merely the label of *hot objects* but was also something said of objects that could be hot. It asserted *the property*. McNeill's claim is, in our opinion, over-imaginative. His ideas, however, encapsulate a modicum of truth — the idea that single-word utterances may be more than mere labels.

L. Bloom (1973, 140) has put forward yet another view of one-word utterances. She suggests that there is no simple answer to the problem of interpretation because the meaning of one-word utterance varies according to the age of the child. E.g. when her daughter said '*Mummy*' at the age of sixteen months, she seemed to mean, simply, '*that is Mummy*'. But at the age of nineteenth months she appeared to be trying to express some kind of *interaction* between *Mummy* and *the surrounding environment*, as when she pointed to *her mother's cup* and said '*Mummy*'. Bloom herself, however, was unable to tell exactly what kind of interaction was intended. Did the girl mean '*That's Mummy's cup*' or '*Mummy is drinking from a cup, too*'? Because of this intrinsic ambiguity, Bloom is cautious over assigning specific meaning to 'ba'-type words which relates either to objects or to interactions between objects. She is more optimistic about the interpretation of words such as 'no', 'more' in which conceptual notions are so conveniently tied to the actual words in the child's speech.

E. Clark (1973) has reviewed the evidence of children early overgeneralizations and has concluded that most of them occur for referents that look like the word's appropriate referents; in other words, overgeneralization has a perceptual basis. Thus 'ball' tends to be used to refer to other things that have spherical shapes. Clark hypothesizes that children overgeneralize because they first associate with the word only a few of the semantic features which specify the adult's meaning. Thus, the first meaning that children are likely to associate with

'dog' may be something like 'four-legged animal', and it is only gradually that they learn the additional features that distinguish the meaning of dog from that of cat, cow etc. Clark's partial meaning hypothesis is an appealing account of the manner in which children learn meanings for words, suggesting that learning involves adding a semantic feature at a time until the child's meaning corresponds to the adult. However, the facts about children's overgeneralizations are, in our opinion, more complicated than the partial meaning hypothesis would suggest. One of its greatest drawback is the following: it is taken for granted that children's concepts during this period of development are functional concepts, i.e. objects are conceptualized primarily in terms of what they do or what the child can do with them. Yet, as Clark correctly notes, the overgeneralizations are mostly based on perceptual characteristics of objects. How could it be that the child's concepts of objects are functional but their meanings for the words associated with these objects are in terms of perceptual features?

K. E. Nelson has, in her 1973 and 1974 studies, suggested an answer to this question which implies that overgeneralizations occur for a different reason. She has found that whether children overgeneralize on a perceptual basis depends upon the amount of experience the children have had with the objects. Initially, they generalize on a perceptual basis. But with increased experience with particular objects they tend to shift to generalizing on a functional basis. Overgeneralizations occur because children do not know, without experience, whether an object that looks like a ball is an object that they can use like a ball rather because they know only a part of the ball's meaning. Thus, it appears that the meanings that young children associate with words are different from those of adults. The difference, however, is not simply that the child's meaning is a part of the adult's meaning: the relationship is more complex. Overgeneralizations seem to imply that the relationships between words and objects are vague and not yet well formulated. Many studies of early child language suggest that the child's tendency to overgeneralize decreases markedly at the time he begins producing utterances longer than one word. Our data confirm this suggestion. Both of these changes coincide with the beginnings of a change in the child's cognitive process. The cognitive change is a complex one, but it appears to be a change from dealing with objects and events as global, undifferentiated wholes to dealing with them as collections of the properties, i.e., the child is beginning to analyse objects, actions etc. into properties of which they are composed and to be able to attend to individual properties. This is the change referred to as the transition from the sensory-motor stage of development to the preoperational stage (for details, cf. J. H. Flavell, 1977).

3. How does the child acquire the knowledge about language and the ability to use it?

Certainly a child must be exposed to a language in order to acquire it. But beyond the mere fact of exposure to a language is there anything about how children interact with adult language users that is im-

portant for their acquiring the adult's language? Several processes are frequently mentioned in this context. D. Foss and D. F. Hakes (1978) analyse the following three: reinforcement, imitation and expansion.

As for the first, viz. reinforcement, the children's behaviour itself clearly show that it not the central part of language development. The most striking example of an incorrect prediction following from the reinforcement proposal is found in the way which children take in mastering the grammatical categories, cf. the following example: the correct irregular forms in nouns, verbs and adjectives occur at the earliest stage of language development. Since they are correct, they are likely candidates for reinforcement. But despite of this, they disappear and are replaced by incorrect forms for which children have no model and for which they are unlikely to be reinforced. What is wrong is that the reinforcement proposal cannot account for what children are acquiring in learning to produce utterances. It is utterances that are being reinforced but is is not utterances per se that children are acquiring. Instead they are acquiring rules for the formation of utterances. At the time children are producing correct irregular forms, they have acquired only a few particular word forms. The change correct to incorrect forms occurs because they have discovered that there is a general rule for forming e.g. the plural and this rule is now applied to all nouns. What they must still acquire is the fact that there are exceptions to the general rule. In spite of what has been said here, reinforcement has in our opinion, an important effect on children's inclination to talk and this, in turn, may have indirect effect on their language development. Children discouraged from talking talk less than those continually encouraged to do so. But encouraging children to talk is not the same as teaching them, how to talk.

As to imitation, the question of interest here is not whether children imitate utterances they hear. Clearly they do. Our problem is, rather, whether imitation has an effect upon language development. There is one evidence that imitating utterances is not a necessary condition for language development. Occasionally children are born who, because of disorders of speech production mechanisms, are unable to produce the sounds of human speech. But they show essentially normal development of the ability to understand language (for details, cf. E. H. Lennberg, 1962, 419 ff.). Thus, being able to produce speech and hence being able to imitate is not essential for progress in other aspects of language development. The question then is whether or not imitating utterances facilitates language development. In thinking about this, it is important to be clear about the nature of the issues involved. Imitation involves a kind of social interaction in which someone says something to a child. The child, either immediately or after a short delay says something which reproduces at least a part of the adult's utterance. The adult's utterance — whether the child imitates this or not — provides a model of the adult form for a particular utterance, but the effect of such models are separate from the effects of imitation. These are only the additional effects on the child's later linguistic performance of this producing an imitative utterance. In

other words, imitating has no other effects beyond those of merely hearing a model of utterance.

We have stated above that children imitate adults. It should be, however, stated that adults imitate children, too, with one difference: while a child's imitations of an adult are likely to be reductions of the adult's utterances, the adult's imitations of the child are likely to be expansions, taking the child's incomplete utterances and expanding them into appropriate full sentences, cf. the two versions: *'baby pram'* — *'yes, the baby is in the pram'*. Sometimes, the adult's utterance confirms what the child has intended to say. More often, though, expansion occurs for a different reason. It is frequently unclear what the child's fragmentary utterances mean. Expanding such utterances is one way an adult has of finding out whether the child's meaning has been understood correctly. But regardless of the adult's intention, expansions provide the child with models of the correct adult way of saying what the child may have expressed in an incomplete form. The model provided by an expansion is of a special sort, for it occurs when the child is actually trying to produce an utterance expressing the meaning more perfectly expressed by the expansion. In this sense, expansions are contingent models — the form and content of the adult's utterance are contingent upon what the child is trying to say and provide therefore the child with a particularly useful kind of model — a model that shows him the relationship between the meaning he is trying to express and the correct form for expressing it. As such, contingent models do appear to have greater effect than does either reinforcement or imitation. Nevertheless, it seems likely that this is only a facilitating role, not one of the major causes of language development.

To summarize from the data that are so far available, we may conclude that none of the factors, viz reinforcement, imitation and expansion has a very important influence on what children acquire or how they acquire it. It appears that the nature of the language itself and the semantic concept and relationships which the language expresses are far more important determinants of language development than any other of the characteristics of child-adult interactions.

In view of the evidence we have considered so far, the children's creativity seems to be the most relevant feature in language acquisition; many students in this field have noticed an active approach of the child in mastering his language, cf. e.g. Jakobson's thesis *'Das Kind schafft indem es entlehnt'* (1962, 329), Gvozdev's idea that *'The keenness of the child's observations and artist's clarity of childish words are very close to the linguistic creation of literary artists'* (1949, 187) Chukovskiy's comment *'Poistine rebenok estb veličajšij umstvennyj truženik našej planety kotoryj, k ščasťju, daže ne podozrevaet ob etom'*. (1962, 23), Slama Cazacu's observation *'L'enfant s'approprie la language d'un manière active, il opère une sélection'* (1957, 7) or that of Slobin *'The process in language acquisition requires a richly structured and highly active child's mind'*, to mention at least the judgements quoted most frequently. Of the theories, accounting for language acquisition on the basis of the child's creativity, the 'little linguist's theory' (Chomsky, 1965, McNeill, 1966, 70) is perhaps the most



outstanding. Essentially, this account of language development proposes that children begin by noticing how a semantic concept or relationship is expressed in the utterances they hear. Taking this evidence as a starting point, they formulate a hypothesis about the syntactic structures and rules for that concept or relationship. The set of hypotheses they develop for different concepts and relationships is their grammar. They use this grammar both as a basis for understanding the utterances they hear from other speakers and for formulating their own utterances. Since these hypotheses are formed on the basis of only few utterances they have heard, they are often wrong. Their further language development consists of discovering the errors and correcting them — by forming new rules and additional hypotheses for additional syntactic structures. Thus the rules of the child's grammar gradually move towards those of the adult's grammar. In making these hypotheses, children are — in Chomsky's view — guided by an inbuilt knowledge of language universals. These provide a blue-print for language, so that the child knows in outline what a possible language looks like. This involves, firstly, information about the building blocks of language, such as the set of possible sounds, secondly, it entails information about the way in which the components of a grammar are related to one another, and, thirdly, the child must be equipped with an evaluation procedure which will allow him to choose between a number of possible grammars. To sum up, according to Chomsky, the three elements, viz., linguistic universals, a hypothesis making device and evaluation procedure, constitute an innately endowed 'Language Acquisition Device' and with the aid of this any child can learn any language with relative ease and, conversely, without such an endowment, language acquisition would be impossible.

This rich innate scheme certainly contrasts strongly with the point of view generally held earlier — that children are born with blank sheets proposal is criticized as novelty, set out to shock the world. Chomsky, however, denies this, pointing out that he is following in the footsteps of the eighteenth-century rationalist philosophers who believed in the existence of 'innate ideas' (1965, 48).

Nevertheless, even if we would accept the above mentioned rich innate scheme, the whole of language acquisition is by far not explained. Further information is needed, in particular, how children develop language ability so efficiently and why it is that they follow such remarkably similar paths in the development of their language.

Two types of explanation have been put forward to account for these questions. Firstly, there is Chomsky's content approach. Secondly, an alternative process approach has been proposed by Slobin. The first type postulates that a child's brain naturally contains a considerable amount of specific information about language. The second, on the other hand, suggests that children have inbuilt puzzle-solving equipment which enables them to process the linguistic data they come across. Chomsky's content approach has the following claims:

- children know that all sentences have deep and surface structure;
- this knowledge enables them to infer abstract deep structures;
- children know universal constraints on linguistic rules.

Process approach claims that:

— *instead of possessing advance information, children are born with some sort of process mechanism which enables them to analyse linguistic data* (Derwing, 1973, Slobin, 1971);

— *not the grammatical system itself is given as innate knowledge but the child has innate means of processing information and forming internal structures and when these capacities are applied to the speech he hears, he succeeds in construction of a grammar of his native language* (Slobin, 1971, 56).

In both the content and process approaches the child is likely to end up with the same set of linguistic universals. But in the second case they are the result of inbuilt analytic procedures. They are not there at the beginning. Because the end be the same in both cases, it is sometimes claimed that the two points of view are virtually indistinguishable and should be regarded as two sides of one coin. Sampson (1975, 129), e.g., has claimed that *'we are dealing with a distinction without difference'*. Nevertheless, the two view-points are not as similar as Sampson suggests because each approach implies different types of universals; while Chomsky's approach presupposes that the universals involved are the so called *'strong linguistic universals'* a set of universal specific to language, and more or less independent of general intelligence, the process approach does not necessarily involve more than *'weak linguistic universals'*, i.e. a set of universals that overlap with reasoning and other cognitive abilities.

Hypotheses proclaimed in the framework of both these approaches are being further elaborated and tested, mostly on basis of language acquisition in English-speaking children. Nevertheless, the validity of most of them has not yet been persuasively verified. On the contrary, serious shortcomings have been revealed mostly from the part of Soviet researchers, e.g. Leontjev and Ter-Minasova (for details, cf. Průcha, 1972, 209—220).

In general, the theory that language development is a process of acquiring strategies for constructing and interpreting words and utterances seems, in our opinion, to account for our data on language acquisition in Czech-speaking children better than Chomsky's content approach. Exactly, what these strategies are, however, is not clear, though some of the suggestions outlined by Slobin (1973, 226—275), viz., *'Pay attention to the end of words'*, *'The Phonological forms can be systematically modified'*, *'Pay attention to the order of words and morphemes'*, *'Avoid interruptions or rearrangement of linguistic units'* and *'Avoid exceptions'* seem to have general applicability. Nevertheless, much remains to be learned.

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## К ОНТОГЕНЕЗУ РЕЧЕВЫХ АКТОВ

Автор в своей статье занимается решением трех вопросов: 1. Какова языковая компетенция ребенка на начальных этапах развития его речи. 2. Каким образом ребенок использует эти знания в процессе образования и восприятия речи. 3. Каким образом он приобретает знания, касающиеся языка, и способность использовать их в процессе коммуникации.

Опираясь на собственное изучение развития речи чешских детей и сопоставляя его с результатами других исследований, автор производит анализ формы, содержания и функций первых детских слов в период т. наз. голофрасисов и подвергает

критической оценке гипотезы, отстаиваемые, в особенности, американскими психолингвистами. Большое внимание автор уделяет обобщающей функции детских выражений в акте наименования, а также усвоению понятий, как длительному процессу, в начале которого составной частью понятия нередко становятся случайные признаки и весьма упрощенные связи. Заключительная глава статьи посвящена рассуждениям о концепциях, в которых центральным действующим лицом оттогеноеза языка выступает ребенок в качестве „миниатюрного лингвиста“, усваивающего шаг за шагом при совместном действии врожденных биологических и внешних общественных факторов — и с присущей ему творческой способностью — коммуникационную систему той среды, в которой он вырастает.

## K ONTOGENEZI ŘEČI

Autorka se ve svém článku zabývá řešením tří otázek: 1. Jaká je jazyková kompetence dítěte v počátcích jeho mluvního vývoje; 2. Jak dítě této znalosti využívá při produkci a percepci řeči; 3. Jakým způsobem si osvojuje znalosti o jazyku a schopnost využívat tyto v komunikačním procesu.

Na podkladě vlastních výzkumů mluvního vývoje českých dětí a v konfrontaci s výsledky bádání na tomto poli provádí analýzy formy, obsahu a funkce prvních dětských slov v období tzv. holofrází. Značnou pozornost věnuje otázkám funkce generalizace dětských výrazů v pojmenovávacím aktu a otázce osvojování pojmu jako dlouhodobého procesu, v němž se zpočátku dostávají do obsahu pojmu nejednou znaky náhodné a souvislosti značně zjednodušené. Poslední kapitola je věnována úvaha o koncepcích, v nichž jako ústřední postava v ontogenezi jazyka vystupuje dítě jako „miniaturní lingvista“, jež si, při spolupůsobení vrozených biologických a vnějších společenských faktorů — a s kreativitou mu vlastní — krok za krokem osvojuje komunikační systém jazykového prostředí, v němž vyrůstá.

