

Unlocking the Secrets of Childhood Speech

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Abstract:

This article talks about the importance of studying children's speech in different cultures and languages, its main directions, field-related methodologies, and environmental factors related to this process in world linguistics. In addition, information is provided about the linguistic environment of children, their speech patterns and ways of forming knowledge of different languages. The topic is analyzed and further enriched by the researches of linguists.

Keywords: children's speech, children's linguistic environment, bilingualism, linguistic and cultural contexts, universality of speech, ontogenetic development.

The study of children's speech has long been a significant area of inquiry within the field of linguistics. It touches on the fundamental questions of how human beings acquire language, how their linguistic environment influences speech development, and how cognitive and social factors come into play as a child moves from simple sound-making to fully communicative speech. The universality of this process, as well as its variation across languages and cultures, makes it a rich field of exploration for linguists worldwide.

Linguists focus on several main aspects when studying children's speech, including the environmental influences on linguistic development, the role of bilingualism in shaping early language skills, and the cultural contexts that inform language acquisition. By understanding how children learn to speak, researchers aim to shed light on broader linguistic phenomena, such as language universals, the nature of human cognition, and the interaction between language and culture.

In this article, we will explore the importance of studying children's speech across different linguistic and cultural contexts, analyzing the major directions in research, methodologies used in the field, and the environmental factors that play a role in language acquisition. We will also provide an overview of the linguistic environments in which children develop, the patterns they

follow in acquiring speech, and how their understanding of different languages is shaped through interaction with caregivers and peers.

The Importance of Studying Children's Speech Across Cultures and Languages

Understanding how children acquire language provides invaluable insight into both the nature of human language itself and the cognitive processes that underlie language learning. Children are exposed to different linguistic environments depending on the cultural and social context they grow up in. These environments vary not only in terms of the specific language or languages spoken but also in terms of interaction patterns, cultural practices related to communication, and the types of stimuli children encounter in their daily lives.

One important question in the study of children's speech is the extent to which language acquisition is universal versus culturally specific. Some linguists argue that the basic process of learning a language is the same for all children, regardless of the language they are exposed to. This perspective is supported by the idea of a universal grammar, which posits that all human languages share a common underlying structure, and that children are born with an innate ability to learn language.

On the other hand, other researchers emphasize the role of cultural and linguistic diversity in shaping the way children acquire language. They argue that the specific features of a language—its sounds, syntax, and vocabulary—are learned in the context of the child's cultural environment, and that language acquisition cannot be fully understood without considering these broader social and cultural factors. For example, in some cultures, caregivers speak directly to infants and toddlers, engaging them in conversation even before the child can respond verbally. In other cultures, children may be less directly addressed, and they learn language primarily through observation and imitation of adult speech.

Both perspectives offer valuable insights into the study of children's speech, and contemporary research often seeks to integrate these approaches. While there may be universal aspects of language acquisition, such as the ability to distinguish between different sounds (phonemes) at an early age, the specific ways in which children develop speech skills are influenced by their linguistic and cultural environment. For instance, the linguistic structure of tone languages, such as Mandarin Chinese, requires infants to develop sensitivity to tonal differences earlier than children learning non-tone languages like English.

Key Directions in the Study of Children's Speech

The study of children's speech has expanded into several major research directions, each focusing on different aspects of linguistic development:

1. **Phonological Development:** This area examines how children learn to produce the sounds of their language. Phonological development typically begins with the babbling phase, where infants experiment with different sounds before they start to form recognizable words. Researchers are particularly interested in how children across different languages learn to distinguish and produce phonemes, and how this process might be influenced by factors such as bilingualism or hearing impairments.
2. **Morphological and Syntactic Development:** As children grow older, they begin to understand and produce more complex word forms and sentence structures. This area of research looks at how children acquire the rules of grammar, including the formation of plurals, verb tenses, and word order. Studies in this domain often compare how children learning different languages develop their understanding of syntax and morphology. For example, researchers might explore whether children learning highly inflected languages like Russian develop an understanding of case markings at a different rate than children learning a less inflected language like English.

3. **Semantic Development:** This research direction focuses on how children learn the meanings of words and how they begin to use language to represent objects, actions, and ideas. Children's early semantic development often involves overgeneralization, where they apply a word to a broader category than adults would. For instance, a child might refer to all four-legged animals as "dogs." Over time, children's understanding of word meanings becomes more nuanced, and researchers are particularly interested in how this process varies across different linguistic and cultural environments.
4. **Pragmatic Development:** Pragmatics refers to the use of language in social contexts, including how meaning is constructed through tone, body language, and context. Children must learn not only how to form correct sentences but also how to use language appropriately in different social situations. This includes understanding how to take turns in conversation, how to express politeness, and how to adjust speech based on the listener's perspective. Pragmatic development is often shaped by cultural norms regarding communication, making this a key area of interest in cross-cultural studies of language acquisition.
5. **Bilingualism and Multilingualism:** The study of bilingualism is a crucial area within the study of children's speech, as many children grow up in environments where multiple languages are spoken. Researchers investigate how children acquire two or more languages simultaneously, and how bilingualism affects cognitive development, linguistic competence, and cultural identity. The timing of language exposure, the dominance of one language over another, and the social status of the languages being learned are all important factors in understanding bilingualism in children. Moreover, some studies look at the phenomenon of code-switching, where bilingual children alternate between languages within a single conversation, and how this reflects their linguistic competence in both languages.

Field-Related Methodologies

Researchers studying children's speech use a variety of methodologies, ranging from observational studies to experimental approaches. Each method offers unique insights into how children acquire language, but it also presents specific challenges, particularly when working with very young children who may have limited ability to participate in structured tasks.

One common method is the naturalistic observation of children in their home or school environments. This approach allows researchers to observe how children use language in real-life situations, interacting with caregivers, peers, and other adults. Naturalistic observation is particularly useful for studying pragmatic development, as it captures how children use language to achieve specific communicative goals in social contexts.

Another key methodology is the elicited production task, where researchers prompt children to produce specific language structures, such as asking them to describe a picture or retell a story. This method is often used to study morphological and syntactic development, as it provides insight into how children form complex sentences and use grammatical markers.

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