

The Psycholinguistic Study of Language Acquisition and Communicative Processes

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For many years the essence of human mind has been the most accessible and the most inaccessible object of study. It is really so as the structures and the processes which underlie language and thought are subconscious. And that is why in the sphere of human mind and its expression there are so many issues for a psycholinguist to ponder.

Psycholinguists are among those specialists who are interested in the mental processes that are involved in using language and in learning to speak. In order to study these processes, one must bring together theoretical and empirical tools of both psychology and linguistics. Linguists are engaged in the formal description of an important segment of human knowledge – the structure of language. Psychologists clarify how linguistic structures are acquired by children, and how they are used in the processes of speaking, understanding and remembering. Psycholinguists are more specifically interested in the knowledge and abilities which people must have in order to use a foreign language and to learn to use language in childhood. In order to carry on meaningful conversations in English, for example, one must be familiar with English grammar, phonology, syntax and semantics, as well as the physical and social worlds in which English is spoken. All this knowledge is put to use in the process of speaking and understanding. Thus, one of the tasks of psycholinguists is to construct models of processes that make “moment-to-moment” use of stored knowledge. The relation between knowledge and use brings to complex many-leveled questions which have not been resolved completely.

Psycholinguistics represents an empirical attempt to characterize what one must know about language in order to use it. Talking more specifically, it can be stated that psycholinguistic research has moved from early attempts to verify the existence of underlying grammatical structures to studies of how linguistic knowledge is used in the processes of speaking and understanding.

Communication relies on shared knowledge – knowledge of the language and also knowledge of the world. World knowledge allows ambiguous sentences to be taken for granted. But it is not very often easy to examine these two aspects apart. If we take, for example, such a seemingly simple sentence as “*Close the window.*”, in spite of the agent’s absence, we will recognize it as imperative. The speaker in this very case is also implicit and all we have on the “surface” of the sentence is the word *close*. In reality, a whole “network” of separate meaningful statements /or propositions/ implicitly underlies this and every other utterance. In this case a variety of surface constructions can communicate the meaning of the above mentioned sentence: “*I wonder if you could close the window.*”, “*It is cold here.*”, “*Don’t you know I have caught a cold so you should close the window?*” etc. Without the shortcuts made possible by grammar and shared world knowledge, it would be impossible to realize human communication. The use of

grammar, thus, brings to efficient communication.

Because we are able to use this or that language in certain social interactions both grammatically and meaningfully correct, our knowledge of language must also include pragmatic rules. A full psycholinguistic theory must specify how such knowledge is put to use in linguistic performance. It will have to account for language competence and language performance.

Communication theorists, sociologists, psycholinguists, discourse analysts and others do not take the same view of what communication processes actually are. The nature of the account is taken off from a variety of sources such as psycholinguistic accounts of sentence production and reading, models of language constructed by linguistic theorists, studies of interpersonal language behaviour and investigations of the role of pragmatics in communication. Psycholinguists claim that whatever is done in behaviour is assumed to originate in mental activities in which the factors described have played their role. The mental activities are referred to as plans and strategies.

The full description of the communicative process should begin with the account of the operations involved in speech production. Any speech act should begin with the existence of some kind of an intention on the part of the speaker. The intention may perform one or even more speech acts with the aim of having an impact on the person addressed. Planning the speech act involves deciding (unfortunately, not often consciously) both what is to be said and how it is to be said. The content of the utterance is often decided after the beginning of the utterance, so it is natural that the form of it is not fully determined. Both the content and the form of the utterance may depend on the speech situation where the feedback provided by the speaker's performance and by the perception of the interlocutor's reactions (Rubin 1987).

The situational factors of speech are so relevant that the speaker must decide how much of what he wishes to say must be explicit and how much can be left unsaid. In other words, he should decide what should be the degree of redundancy, brevity, economy, simplicity be. This is when the speaker needs to select certain contextual variables that fit the social relationship with the person addressed.

It is supposed that the selection or at least consideration of those lexical forms should be done earlier. However, there is no one sentence form to express a given content. Lexical choice may be affected by the previously used lexical items. The utterance will need to show continuity with the topic of preceding utterances. The syntactic form of a complex message is probably built up by phrasal units. Within such units semantic and grammatical choices affect the form of individual words. The phonological shape must be given to the words and this, in its turn, can be interpreted phonetically. In spite of all this complexity, the speech act is performed spontaneously and with effective synchronisation of all the above mentioned decisions made. Still, it is very rare that conscious attention is given to lower level skills involved.

We very often think that the processes taking place in the receiver's mind are a simple reverse of the productive processes. This is not so as the listener and the speaker are not dependent on a strict decoding process. As D. Wilkins states, the hearer has a great deal of relevant knowledge which enables him to make predictions at any point in the

speaker's utterance either exactly, or within a limited range of probabilities how the utterance will continue (Wilkins 1985). The hearer actually has got an enormous store of knowledge which may assist his predictions. But he must interpret the speaker's intentions and relate them to his own perceptions and frames of reference. The speaker's intentions are determined on a number of levels. It is presumed that a simple linguistic decoding is enough for clarification of lexical and syntactic features of a sentence, but all kinds of ambiguities can be resolved only with the help of contextual information attained.

The hearer must actually relate the utterance to a "frame of reference" which is presupposed by the speaker. What is understood must correspond to what has been intended, otherwise communication will not have taken place successfully. Anyway, it should be stated that as the hearer may not attach the same significance to what the speaker has said as the speaker himself, it may not be incorporated in his frame of reference in the same way.

The processes that have been sketched assume the participants to be fully competent speakers of the language. The characteristics of individuals using a second language is that they do not have full competence of language. More specifically, their lexical and syntactic competence will be somehow restricted. Besides, the absence of shared cultural experience with native speakers means that they will operate with different frames of reference. All of this may actually lead to communicative breakdown. Unfamiliar social norms may also bring to negative effect on the communicative process. The speaker will have restricted expressive and interpretive skills which will bring to misunderstanding. Anyway, we can assume that the individual's own perception of the source of his communicative difficulties will focus on the inadequacy of his lexical and syntactic competence. This is when he will start using such devices as code-switching, word-coinage or the use of non-linguistic resources.

The history of the attempts to answer the question how people learn foreign languages has shown that we need to be quite careful about the answers that could be given. However, in the field of first and second language acquisition there have been worked out a number of theoretical advances which have not been fully put into practice so that their validity could be checked. It can be stated that there are too many theories of language acquisition. But most of them come to the idea that what learners do in learning languages is perhaps only the small part of what they can do. The learner can learn in a variety of ways; most learners only use a selection of these to complete the task aimed.

If summarized, it can be stated that recently there have been five main answers to the question how people learn foreign languages. Those are: by practice, by problem-solving, creative construction, monitoring and personality development.

The oldest of these answers is the belief that practice at speaking and hearing the language leads to mastery of the language structures. The audio-lingual and audio-visual theorists borrowed the results of earlier psychological work by E.Thorndike and C.Hull arguing that "drilling" produced learning raises the response strength of language habits. This assumption was criticized by W.Rivers using evidence both from psychology and

language teaching.

The raise of interest in the ideas of problem-solving and concept attainment as a clue to language learning was raised in the 1960s and 1970s. In this regard E.Chastain has claimed that languages are learned by conscious inductive process of rule formulation. His version of problem-solving idea emphasized conscious mastery of given rules before their application to fluent performance.

The creative construction process was suggested originally by Dulay and Burt as an explanation for the appearance of what looked like a “natural order” of acquisition of grammatical morphemes. The nature of this process has not been widely explored as it seems to be sufficient to assume that it is the re-activation of the process by which the first language is acquired.

One of the most popular theories of second language development is S.Krashen’s Monitor Model which consists of five basic assumptions such as learning is distinct from acquisition, the Natural Order hypothesis, the Monitor hypothesis, the Input hypothesis, the Affective Filter hypothesis (Krashen 1981). The claim that language learning and language acquisition are distinct processes can not be denied today as “the acquisition leads to intuitions of grammatical correctness while learning leads to rule-formulation”.

Acquisition is a result of creative construction of grammars from exposure to the language; learning can only take place in formal learning contexts where there is rule isolation by syllabus and feedback to the student on his success. In most teaching contexts elements of both formal and informal teaching are present.

The Monitor hypothesis suggests that learning contributes a consciously constructed set of rules about language which can only act as an output filter on the predictions of the unconsciously acquired language system. The process of monitoring is not unfamiliar: in one sense we do it all the time when speaking and in another we often encourage our students to check what they have written and review what they are saying for considerations of formal accuracy. The question of whether monitoring is dependent on teacher’s explicit training of student’s learning strategies needs further investigation.

The Input hypothesis is the claim that students’ acquisition processes work only on “comprehensible input”. The idea is actually borrowed from the first language acquisition field, one part of which has been concerned with the adaptation of parents’ language when talking to their children so as to use structures, vocabulary and ways of expression which are “roughly tuned” for the child’s presumed level of competence. In the second language case, it suggests two important principles. Firstly, acquisition is dependant on the so-called quality of the available input, that is how well the teacher and other suppliers of language can use the initially rather narrow band of language which the learners can understand.

The other principle in Krashen’s theory is the Affective Filter. This is essentially E.Stevick’s idea that there are defensive and receptive learners. Receptive learners do not have to learn or acquire as if through a barrier, while defensive learners find the learning situation threatening and try to control it. Despite the criticism demands further research, the Monitor Model is the best elaborated theory of second language

development.

The importance of the learner's own strategies for learning and the individual differences should be underlined specifically when talking about the essence of communicative processes.

The possible relation between first and second language acquisition has long captured the imagination of second language researchers. Mostly models of second language acquisition are, in fact, based on some (usually implicit) assumption regarding the similarity or difference between first and second language acquisition.

This assumption is critical to the nature of explanation that is developed for second language acquisition. If the two are the same, then we need look no further than models of first language acquisition for a complete explanation of second language acquisition. If the two are different, then we must explain the mechanism of second language acquisition differently.

Some early theories of second language acquisition differed in this regard. The contrastive analysis hypothesis advanced by Lado (1957), for example, claimed that second language acquisition involved replacing the habits acquired during first language acquisition: acquiring a second language was thus not at all like acquiring the first. Later, the creative construction hypothesis advocated by Dulay and Burt (1975) claimed that second language learners begin again in the same way as young children learning their first language. Whatever happened during first language acquisition happens again when someone learns a second language. Second language acquisition is first language acquisition revisited. In reality second language acquisition is both the same and different from first language acquisition. The paradigm for first language acquisition cannot be imported directly into accounts of second language acquisition, but neither can they be ignored.

The solution is to consider three approaches to language learning research: the neurolinguistic, linguistic and psycholinguistic traditions.

The study of language acquisition, both first and second, has always included an interest in finding the relation between the neurological structures that provide the material location for language learning and the behavioural indices of that learning. An application of neurological research concerns the localization of language functions in the brain. According to Albert and Obler (1978), for example, bilingual brains are more bilateral and less fixed with respect to cerebral dominance than are those of monolinguals. Such kind of claims have strong implications for theories of acquisition.

The second issue taken up by the neurolinguistic approach is the search for evidence that the development of the brain constrains the acquisition of language. This possibility was most clearly formulated by Lennenberg, who argued that changes occurring in the brain at around puberty make it more difficult to learn a language after that time. But the thing is that if there are some maturational constraints on language acquisition, then they would most probably apply to the learning of both first and second languages. Biological constraints do not guarantee a particular developmental form or a special timetable. The problem of evaluating them basically refers to the areas of language proficiency that appear to be governed by those constraints and the time period during which this

biological influence is most prominent.

Linguistic theories are not typically or necessarily theories of acquisition, but each linguistic theory has implications for the kind of cognitive or psycholinguistic acquisition theory that is compatible with it. Two categories of acquisition theory make different assumptions about language structure. Connectionist theories, on the one hand, take an empiricist approach to acquisition: language structure is determined by the linguistic environment. Each type of theory will explain language acquisition differently, but the nature of acquisition and that it contributes to an integrated explanation will be similar.

The premise of psycholinguistic approaches is that features of the learner's mental processes, or changes in the processes that are available, are responsible for the acquisition of language. Here, the explanation is an internal description of cognitive resources. There are two problems that psycholinguistic approaches to second language acquisition can address. The first is the relation between meaning and language and how these meanings are learned, the second is the nature of linguistic representation and the way in which two languages are related in such a representation.

Psycholinguists think that it is the balance between the biological and cognitive influences on the development that distinguishes between first and second language learning. For children learning their first language, most of the variance is left to the innate biological factors. Some reorganization of it is necessary to represent the syntactic system, but a considerable part of that structure is under the influence of innate constructs. Very little cognitive effort is required for phonology.

In general, first and second language learning are the same processes but have different expressions in development. Each has a task with a different set of abilities, and, therefore, a different set of advantages. For this reason, first language acquisition and second language learning appear to be more different than they are: the stages and course of development can be quite different. For this reason, too, it is impossible to claim that one group is more privileged than the other.

References:

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**Լեզվի յուրացման և հաղորդակցական գործընթացի
հոգելեզվաբանական ուսումնասիրություն**

Մույն հոդվածում քննության են առնվում լեզվի յուրացման և հաղորդակցական գործընթացի հոգելեզվաբանական առանձնահատկությունները: Այս նպատակով, նախ և առաջ քննարկվում են այնպիսի հարցեր, ինչպիսիք են խոսքի արտաբերման բնականոն ընթացքը և դրանում հատկապես կարևորվող խոսքային մտադրության ձևավորման դերը, խոսքային գործունեության իրադրային գործոնները, ինչպես նաև օտար լեզվի յուրացման առանձնահատկություններն ընդգծող տարբեր տեսությունները: Հատուկ ուշադրությամբ են դիտարկվում լեզվի յուրացման գործընթացը նկարագրող նյարդալեզվաբանական, լեզվաբանական և հոգելեզվաբանական մոտեցումները: Հատկապես ընդգծվում է տվյալ հարցի վերաբերյալ տեսական ընդհանրացումներ անելու պարագայում հոգելեզվաբանական ուսումնասիրությունների տվյալների հաշվառման անհրաժեշտությունը: