



Child Language Acquisition and Development. Second edition. Saxton, M. 2017. SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd.

 **Aliasghar
Ahmadishokouh**

*Department of Applied
Linguistics, Payame Noor
University, Tehran, Iran*

Corresponding Author: Aliasghar
Ahmadishokouh

Phone: +989030742276

e-mail: ahmadishokouhtmu@gmail.
com

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Introduction

There are different approaches to the study of child language, and researchers investigate different aspects of the language acquisition process. For example, some will focus on testing particular theoretical claims; others on developmental, cognitive or social factors in the acquisition process; others on the development of a particular feature of language; and others on what we might learn about language development from studying what goes wrong in particular situations (Bavin, 2009). This volume, *Child Language: Acquisition and Development*, is an indispensable textbook for undergraduate students in Psychology, Linguistics, Education and Childhood studies. The book is carefully and logically organized; it presents a clear, erudite, state-of-the-art account of the complexities of child language. The focus of this book is slightly different to that of other well-known publications in the field of child language, in that, as the author claims in the introductory part, no background knowledge of linguistic theory is assumed and all specialist terms are introduced in clear, non-technical language (p. 17). This book is rare in its balanced presentation of evidence from both sides of the nature-nurture divide. Presented with the latest thinking and research on how children acquire their first language, this new Second Edition helps readers develop the skills to engage with key debates and current research in the field of child language.

The overall content of this book is thematically divided into ten chapters, which are outlined below. To set the scene, the book's opening chapter sheds lights on some appreciation of the challenges facing the newborn infant in the acquisition of language. Major landmarks in language development are presented at each of the following four levels of linguistic analysis: Phonology, vocabulary morphology, and grammar. This chapters also includes some of the philosophical problems facing the child language acquisition. As the author progresses, through the rest of the book, depending on the particular topic under discussion the nature-nurture issue will come in and out of focus.

Chapter 2 deals with the question of whether language is a uniquely human trait. It is started with a definition of language, and goes on to distinguish between three separate concepts – language, talk and communication and, considers some of the key differences between animal communication systems and language. Chapter 3 opens with Eric Lenneberg's hypothesis that there is a critical period for language development. It considers if the human ability to acquire language is confined to a specific period of time early on in development, a so-called critical period. Then, the relative importance of five key features that have been used to define a critical period, namely; period of peak plasticity, cut-off point, occur early in development, brief, and deprivation has permanent and irreversible effects, are discussed in details throughout this chapter.

Another aspect of the child language is tackled in Chapter 4, with an extended discussion of the Child Directed Speech (CDS). This is the special register adopted by adults and older children when talking to young children. This chapter also discusses some appreciation of specific modifications which are made at the levels of phonology, vocabulary, morphology and syntax. The chapter argues for CDS functions to facilitate language development, and discusses how socioeconomic status affects the amount and quality of language children hear, and also, how these differences impact on language development. It also examines the linguistic input that the child encounters and consider its role in facilitating language learning.

Chapter 5 considers how the child gets started on the task of language acquisition. The focus here is on infant speech perception in the first year of life and show how the child breaks the sound barrier to discriminate individual speech sounds and words. It goes on to say that even though the child does not produce much recognizable language, the child's knowledge of language expands enormously in the first year of life.

Chapter 6 looks at the kinds of words that children first learn. It also touches upon a common kind of error – overextension – in which words are used with too wide a scope. Moreover, the chapter talks about the three possible causes of overextensions; a category error (misclassification of an object), a pragmatic error (expediency determines the word chosen), and a memory failure (the wrong word is retrieved) .it also investigate the so-called vocabulary spurt and consider explanations for the speed with which children learn new words.

Chapter 7 moves on to morphology and considers how research has informed our understanding of the representation of language in the mind. It describes three different ways of constructing complex words from morphemes: inflection, derivation, and compounding, and examines how the child acquires these three processes.

Chapter 8 describes the concept of Universal Grammar (UG) and the main arguments in favor of the idea that it is innate. It also discusses the problem of linguistic diversity, and talks about two approaches to this problem: core UG versus peripheral, language-specific aspects of grammar, and parameters: according to which UG does allow for some variation among languages. The chapter develops an awareness that arguments in favor of UG rest largely on the assumption that the child's linguistic environment is impoverished: the information it supplies is too meagre to explain the rich knowledge of grammar that every typical child attains. Furthermore, this chapter describes one of Chomsky's best-known examples of a property of grammar (structure dependence) that we all seem to acquire despite limited experience.

Chapter 9 illustrates what is currently the most prominent non-nativist alternative: Usage-based theory. Human beings are intelligent creatures, capable of acquiring all manner of skills and knowledge. It asserts some of the critical factors in infant social communication that are said to underpin later language development. These include the child's use of pointing and the emergence of collaborative engagement in pursuit of a shared goal. The chapter also evaluates usage-based research on the child's earliest speech output, with its focus on entire utterances, rather than individual words. The syntactic categories witnessed in adult language are said to emerge only gradually, as the result of the child's experience with language. It also touches on the progression towards syntax from early, lexically specific, structures through to broad syntactic generalizations which permit the child to be linguistically productive, and gives a clear picture on the problems raised in explaining child productivity.

Chapter 10 provides the readers with a review of facts and ideas presented in the preceding nine chapters. In so doing, the abiding theme of nature and nurture is adopted as a framework for discussion. It claims that at the end of this chapter the reader will have a good grasp of some of the basic facts of child language acquisition, having organized them on a timeline. It looks at some of the fundamental challenges facing both nativist and non-nativist theories of child language. With regard to the non-nativist position it describes the notion of a domain-general learning mechanism. It is unlikely that any learning mechanism is truly domain general and, moreover, it is likely that several learning mechanisms may be required to help account for language acquisition. In the nativist case, it tells us that language-learning mechanisms are required, irrespective of whether the child is genetically endowed with Universal Grammar.

As mentioned before, a theme running through the book is the nature-nurture debate, rekindled in the modern era by Noam Chomsky, with his belief that the child is born with a rich knowledge of language (Chomsky, 2012). This book is rare in its balanced presentation of evidence from both sides of the nature-nurture divide. Moreover, the reader is encouraged to adopt a critical stance throughout and weigh up the evidence for themselves.

Key features for the student include:

- boxes and exercises to foster an understanding of key concepts in language and linguistics;
- a glossary of key terms; suggestions for further reading;

- a list of useful websites at the end of each chapter;
- discussion points for use in class;
- and separate author and subject indexes.

Any book that goes into a second edition is clearly getting most things right, but it seems to me that several areas touched on in this book invite further clarification. Moreover, the book seeks to cover a lot of grounds, and this presents some challenges. For example, some areas in child language acquisition which are taken for granted in books addressing the child language, are not mentioned in this volume. The notion of modularity, which I think, deserves at least a definition in such books, is totally forgotten. Another area which is not addressed is Piaget developmental growth, which, at least to me, is among the needed parts of every book in the area of first language acquisition. Another untouched area throughout this edition is Vygotsky sociocultural theory and the valuable notions of zone of proximal development and scaffolding. Furthermore, Neurolinguistics and the neurons' behaviors and functions in learning is also not mentioned in this book. Finally, as Friederici and Thierry (2008) put it, in recently published books in the field, both behavioral and electrophysiological measures should be used to investigate early language development, but this topic is not provided in this volume, too.

Nevertheless, this book represents a provocative, wide-ranging, and welcome contribution to the field of first or child language acquisition.

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