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Acquisition

Acquisition of a language refers to learning enough about it to understand what speakers mean. A language used in late childhood for inner speech and abstraction can survive in memory the rest of life, as we see in the last speakers of dying languages. What's acquired is knowledge of the sound system of an oral language, syntax, vocabulary or lexical system, semantics underlying both, and the pragmatic or sociolinguistic system that relates language to conditions of use.

Three conditions are necessary for acquisition: capacity, access, and motive. Language requires the capacity to form classes of classes, an ability only humans have. There must also be a peripheral system—touch, vision, or sound. Both cognitive and social development in children affect the order of acquisition. The increase in capacity, as well as transfer from first language, explains why second languages are acquired so fast in late childhood. On the other hand, after puberty, a first language has never been learned successfully, and attaining the skill of a native speaker of a second language is variable.

Second, there must be access to exchanges with others in which language forms co-occur with information about meanings. This is necessary for semantic mapping to forms. What is learned about forms from access includes what forms occur together, what is happening physically and socially at the time, who is speaking, and so on. Where there is a regular, distinctive co-occurrence of any of these events with linguistic form, the information may be stored. Language is acquired readily from siblings and older play partners because they are likely to provide frequent and easy conditions for mapping.

Third, there has to be a motive to attend to or to speak a language. While not an issue for dependent infants, if speakers of a variety aren't valued, listeners may not get enough access to come to understand new vocabulary, styles, dialects, or languages, and they may be even more unwilling to be heard speaking in other varieties. This is a place where social ideology has

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an impact on acquisition. In relaxed informal speech, phonetic choices, vocabulary, and other aspects of style reflect the speech of valued others, usually of childhood peers. However, we know that children have heard and stored a great variety of detailed information about who talks, and how, because we see it if four-year-olds do role-playing, as demonstrated by Elaine Andersen.

All the components of language are being developed simultaneously, but those aspects that reach their relatively mature state first are the phonological system, core syntax, and probably some basic aspects of the semantic system for the first language. Vocabulary growth is very sensitive to the physical and social environment, since it is a form of mapping of objects and concepts, as well as changes throughout life. It has three facets: the representation of the form of the word, its grammatical properties, and its denotation, connotations, and social implications. Taboo words and insults provide a clear case where the child often acquires these features separately.

Vocabulary development is both affected by and affects the semantic and cognitive organization of the child, so it can be a focus for socialization. The semantic system reflects those features that the syntax and vocabulary single out for marking, so it varies for different languages—for instance, differentiating tight and loose fit for some Korean prepositions, identifying shapes of objects for Navajo verbs, identifying sources of information for Turkish (which has evidential markers), and identifying age and status in Korean.

The structure of first sentences is sensitive to the context of language used for and by children. Two-year-olds' speech is usually brief—telegraphic—and often includes only the core information. In one language there may at first be much more naming of things, in another more naming of actions, or of changes of location or state. As children's capacity increases, they complicate syntax by including several types of information at once, such as place and action. They start to add formal features demanded by their particular language. If they speak a language that requires coding the gender of a speaker or the relative time an event occurred in every utterance, they begin adding that, though they may still have omissions at the age of three or four. Both complexity and ease of marking affect order; markers that are at the ends of turns are acquired earlier than those in the middle, just because of salience.

Traditionally, studies of acquisition focused most on the development of reference and ideational communication, but speech is also organized as to turn participation, speech actions, social relations marking, register or variety, speech genres like joking or narration, and speech events like weddings or trials. Children mark turn organization very early; by three they have replies with linguistic features showing dialog skill. In English we find "I can too" or "Because he does," and some topical coherence across turns. Infants first learn the speech acts, such as greeting rituals, that have similar turns to mimic. They use an increasing variety of kinds of acts during childhood—requesting, challenging, justifying, apologies, and so on. Linguistic forms that mark important or salient social acts are candidates for early acquisition, so they vary culturally. Complex genres and their situating in larger speech events can continue acquisition throughout life.

Social indices in speech range from address terms, to mitigating or aggravating of speech acts by tone of voice or explicit formal choices, to selection of registers or styles in which multiple choices must be made. Register variation appears before two—in whispering, for instance—but by four includes variation in subtle features like the discourse markers "well" or "uh." By four there is very clear mitigating when a child is imposing, as in requests. Children with access to more than one variety learn from the beginning some of the constraints on use, varying language with addressee or place, for instance. Such rules of use may be explicitly taught or—as with the rest of language—acquired from adequate access to observation.

(See also *body, brain, endangered, genre, particle, register, socialization, style, turn*)

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