

Chapter 15

Typical language development

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Abstract

Acquiring language is a major developmental feat that all typical, healthy children achieve during the first years of their lives. The ease and speed with which they acquire their native language(s) has puzzled parents, scholars, and the general public alike. The last five decades have brought about a spectacular increase in our knowledge of how young infants acquire their mother tongues. Sophisticated behavioral, corpus-based, and brain imaging techniques have been developed to query young learners' journey into language. This chapter summarizes what we currently know of typical language development during the first years of life. It starts out by reviewing the existing theoretical accounts of language development. It then presents the most important empirical findings about speech perception and language acquisition grouped by different subdomains, such as newborns' speech perception abilities, phoneme perception, word learning, and the early acquisition of grammar, focusing mainly on the first 3 years of life, an age by which the major milestones of language development are typically accomplished. Differences between monolingual and multilingual development are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Acquiring language is a major developmental feat that all typical, healthy children achieve during the first years of their lives. The ability to name objects, express complex thoughts, and communicate with others emerges just as young children are learning to walk and discover the physical and social world around them. The ease and speed with which they acquire their native language(s) has puzzled parents, scholars, and the general public alike.

The last 5 decades have brought about a spectacular increase in our knowledge of how young infants acquire their mother tongues. Sophisticated methods testing young children's behavior and brain, as well as linguistic databases (corpora) of speech produced by and addressed to children have been developed to query young learners' journey into language. This chapter starts out by reviewing the existing theoretical positions regarding language development. It then presents the most important empirical findings about speech perception and language acquisition grouped by different subdomains, focusing

mainly on the first 3 years of life, an age by which the major milestones of language development are typically accomplished.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Two alternative theories have been proposed to account for language acquisition. The nativist approach (Chomsky, 1959; Pinker, 1984; Marcus et al., 1999) views language development as an example of a learning problem that cannot be solved inductively. Infinitely many grammars can be constructed on the basis of the finite dataset the learner encounters. Consequently, proponents of this theory argue that learning must be constrained by innate linguistic knowledge, which allows language development to proceed through productive generalizations.

Empiricist approaches, by contrast, claim that assuming innate language-specific mental contents is unnecessary, as different domain-general learning mechanisms as

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