

## CHILD LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Linguists have taken a continuing interest in how children learn to speak and gain language competency. Parents are often amazed at how, in the space of just a few months, their children go from apparently meaningless babble to beaking able to express just about whatever is on their mind. Psychologists and linguists explain that children's language acquisition proceeds in stages: at first children must learn about their environment, and later, by the age of three to four, they develop full language competence. Barring disability, all children learn to speak their mother language at a very young age, regardless of social status, ethnicity, or different environmental conditions. Infants are able to recognize their mother's voice within three days after birth, and prefer the sound of their own mothers' voices over those of other women (Decasper and Fifer 1980). This remarkable competency may be associated with the greater nurturing affect of the mother's voice when speaking to her baby, as compared to others; mothers are perhaps better able to sense what their infants desire, and the emotive expression of the speaker and listener is directed at the listener.

From the moment they are born, children are surrounded by new and unfamiliar phenomena. Very soon after birth they begin to define the specific meanings of different sounds. Even though they are receptive to a variety of complex communicative meanings, infants may associate multiple meanings with a single word. For example, an infant might associate the word for “mother” with her mother's way of dealing with her child, or with the feelings that arise when the infant sees her mother walk by, for instance the desire for something—such as food or nurturing—that the mother usually provides.

Infants learn to make use of vowel sounds in the first two months after birth, and pay attention to the facial expressions, mouths, and lips of people who are speaking to them. Infants' initial ability to understand language is tied to the phonetic composition of language. At five months of age, children are capable not only of recognizing their own names, but also a variety of words in everyday use. In a sense, the infant's “speech” begins with crying, the simplest form of vocalization. Between four and six months of age children begin to babble—the result of the infant producing a stream of “vowels” and “consonants”—and this generally continues beyond the first words (Werker and Tees 1999). The first parts of speech that children pick up are generally nouns, though speakers of “verb-friendly” languages such as Korean or Japanese tend to learn verbs first. Learners of all languages seem to have greater

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difficulty mapping novel verbs to event categories than novel nouns to object categories unless assisted by elements of the language and the linguistic context (Waxman et al. 2013).

The study of childhood language is not only relevant to the ways that children acquire language, but reflects more broadly on human language acquisition, and by extension the nature of human intelligence. Parents tend to be quite proud of their children if they learn to speak at a relatively young age; but in reality the assumption that early speech acquisition is a sign of superior intelligence is incorrect—Albert Einstein, for example, did not speak at all until the age of four! Despite considerable interest by linguistics in child language acquisition, many of the actual mechanisms of language learning remain unknown. Much research on language acquisition often seems to be guided by dogmatic theoretical assumptions, rather than by empirical knowledge. One of the central debates in this area concerns whether language learning mechanisms are biologically innate, or whether they are learned. While Chomsky's generative grammar has been highly influential in defining linguistic theory since the 1950s, recent critiques suggest that grammar may in fact be substantially created through interactive practices, the role of which may be clarified through research involving social interactionist and functionalist approaches. I suggest that it can be useful to link the specific characteristics of Mongolian language and cultural practices involving social interaction with infants, to determine unique features of language acquisition among Mongolian-language speakers.

The “nature-nurture” debate is neither new, nor limited to the field of linguistics. This debate constitutes a controversy over what have been perceived as mutually-exclusive possibilities: that human qualities are either biologically inherited (“nature”), or that they are learned from one's social surroundings (“nurture”). The Western philosophical heritage of this controversy can be traced to the work of John Locke (1690), who influentially argued that all men are born equal, but are shaped by their education and experience. Charles Darwin (1871, 1872) subsequently articulated the competing hereditarist position, through the argument that evolution (natural selection) favours the inheritance of adaptive traits. Darwin's arguments were drawn upon by his cousin Francis Galton (1875) in promoting eugenic social engineering; Galton coined the still-current term “nature versus nurture” to describe the respective positions in this debate. Recent research has tended to acknowledge the interrelationship of heredity and environmental factors in the development of traits such as physical stature, personality, and intelligence. Current scholars have suggested that nature works “through nurture”, in the sense that biological factors provide predispositions that will be developed to different degrees depending on the social environment (Ridley 2004).

In the field of linguistics, the competing positions in this debate bear directly on the problem of language acquisition through the work of behaviourist (“nurture”) scholars B.F. Skinner, Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner, and nativists (“nature”) scholars following Noam Chomsky's theory of generative grammar.

Skinner (1957) argued that language behaviour is shaped by a combination of environmental constraints and habitual reinforcement, or “operant conditioning” involving learned, repeated responses to specific stimuli. In Skinner's view, language is inseparable from the behavioural contexts in which it is used; children learn language by associating certain utterances with specific contexts or outcomes, including positive or negative (conditioning) responses by their

caregivers.

Chomsky's work on generative grammar was initially positioned as an argument against Skinner's theory, which he labels "empiricist" (Chomsky 1959). Chomsky argues that Skinner's theory reduces language to conditional training of simple habits or reflexes, much like the training of animals; in reality, language use is very complex and creative, as it is possible to express a virtually infinite number of correct utterances, but correct expressions require knowledge of its rule set (grammar). Since it is impossible for the full range of meanings and syntactic rules of language to be acquired from explicit teaching (as Skinner had argued) or even from the child's own induction, Chomsky concludes that language must be an innate faculty, by which various rules have evolved to be "hard-coded" in the human brain. The attaining of competency in a language, according to Chomsky, involves exposure to "primary linguistic data"—the language heard in early childhood—through which these innate rules are applied to the grammar of the mother language.

Bruner, influenced by the social constructivist theory of Vygotsky—which had remained largely unknown in the West until the 1970s—developed a large-scale program of research working against the Chomskyan model of language acquisition, involving systematic videotaping of interactions between young children and their caregivers in the home (Bruner 1983). Through this research, Bruner and colleagues demonstrated that children learn to use language in creative ways, and in collaboration with adults, through activities that are driven by communicative intent. Other scholars have continued this work in developing Relational Frame Theory, which refines Skinner's notion of "operant conditioning" to study how children learn language through interaction with their environment (Hayes et al. 2001). These "empiricist" approaches, often informed by theories of childhood cognitive development, have attempted to reduce focus on the importance of the innate aspects language and highlight instead its learned and creative elements.

What do these developments signify for Mongolian research on childhood language acquisition? Although we do not presume to have the resources to conduct a large-scale research program, we consider that several interesting problems regarding language development in Mongolia might be of interest to local and international scholars. Given the renewed focus on the social-interactive context of language learning, we consider it would be useful to study the social contexts in which children acquire language, much as Bruner and colleagues did in the late 1970s and early 1980s, through audiovisual documentation of interactions in the specific contexts of the Mongolian family. Whereas Bruner discussed the role of games such as peekaboo or hide-and-seek, or picture-book reading, as transactional language contexts in which the child and mother play ritualized, but creative (and generalizable) roles, it may be useful to contrast specifically Mongolian games and activities. These activities may be expected to be functionally similar, but take different forms, and be situated within a different family structure. It can also be valuable to investigate differences in language learning between rural and urban children in Mongolia, given the differences between the typical social groupings to which young children are likely to be exposed in each case. A further potential area of study involves second-language acquisition—particularly in light of the introduction of a new English-language curriculum for elementary school children in Mongolia. By investigating the social contexts of language learning, we can understand what causes successful language acquisition, and likewise how the development of language

competence is linked, in a possibly contributive role, to childhood socialization.

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### ТОВЧЛОЛ

Хэл шинжлэлчид хүүхэд хэрхэн хэлд орж, хэл ярианы чадвар эзэмшдэгийг урт удаан хугацааны туршид сонирхсоор ирсэн. Гэвч хүүхдийн хэл ярианы онцлогийн тухай асуудал нь хэл шинжлэлийн ухаанд одоо ч шинэ, залуу салбар хэвээр байгаа юм. Хүүхдийн хэл ярианы чадвар нь ерөнхийдөө тэдний танин мэдэхүйн хийгээд мэдлэг эзэмших үйл ажиллагааных нь илрэл, үйл явц, үр дүн нь байдаг. Хэл шинжээчдийн тайлбарласнаар нярай хүүхэд эхний хоёр сартайгаасаа л эгшиг авиануудыг таних

чадвартай байдаг төдийгүй орчин тойрондоо байгаа хүмүүсийн нүүрний хөдөлгөөн, ам, уруулыг харж сонсож, ойлгож чаддаг байна. Тэд таван сартайгаасаа өөрийнх нь нэрийг хэлж, дуудахад таньдаг бөгөөд төрснөөсөө гурав хоногийн дараагаас л эхлэн ээжийнхээ дуу хоолойг таньж эхэлдэг байна (Decasper and Fiber 1980).

Энэ чиглэлийн судалгааг хийх нь монгол хэлшинжлэлд чухал байгаа юм. Монгол хүүхдийн хэл ярианы хөгжил, хэлний боловсрол, түүнийг хөгжүүлэх арга барил, уламжлал, хэл сэтгэцийн оньсыг судлан тайлж, тайлбарлах нь бидний цаашдын судалгааны ажлын гол зорилго болох юм.