



**NOTICING PRAGMATIC DIFFERENCES BETWEEN L1 AND L2  
COMMUNICATION**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reviews the literature on similarities and differences between first and second language lexical acquisition. After a brief discussion of differences in input, we go on to early lexical development, considering both the speed of acquisition as well as possible reasons for more efficient lexical learning in first language acquisition as compared to second language acquisition. We discuss the role of phonological representations in facilitating the extraction of units from incoming speech. We continue with a discussion of unanalyzed units, arguing that their role as a stepping stone into language is much the same in first and second language acquisition. Finally, we review methods for investigating the first and second language lexicons.

**Keywords:** lexical acquisition, L1 & L2 similarities and differences, input, methods, usage-based theory, chunking, phonological representation, constraints.

### **Introduction**

It is relatively easy to list the differences between the acquisition of first and second languages. In the first language, acquisition children are acquiring knowledge about the world at the same time that they are acquiring language. Second language





learners bring knowledge of the world to the task of learning new ways to talk about the world. Exposure to the target language for second language learners varies, both in quantity and in quality, depending upon whether the learner is a child in a multilingual family, a pupil in a classroom, an immigrant at a workplace, a spouse in a new country or a student in a foreign university, etc. Children are predisposed to become native speakers of the language(s) spoken around them. The outcome of second language learning depends on a myriad of factors – age, input, L1 and L2 proximity or distance, motivation, individual differences in memory, in personality, etc. However, both first and second language learners are faced with the same problem – how to map form and function to produce meaningful utterances based upon their language experiences, which, for an L2 learner are diverse depending both upon the individual learner and the learning situation<sup>1</sup>. Recent accounts of language learning have emphasized that learners build language based upon ‘usage events’ - particular utterances in particular contexts. Nativist views of language acquisition propose that learners bring innate abstract grammatical knowledge (Universal Grammar) to the task of language learning. In contrast, usage-based approaches argue that it is only after considerable exposure and practice with language that abstract grammatical representations emerge. The change in theoretical perspective from positing that abstract grammatical knowledge is innate to positing that abstract grammatical knowledge emerges from language use has enriched the interaction between researchers in first and second language learning. In the overview of the literature comparing the acquisition of first and second languages, we are particularly interested in the lexicon. It has been an established fact for years that the size of vocabulary is a major predictor of language proficiency in first language acquisition. In the 50s and 60s lexical development was widely studied in second language acquisition. However, with the impact of rule-driven grammars and a major paradigm shift in linguistics, introduced by Noam Chomsky, the interest in second language lexicons decreased. Over the last decades and with the influence of usage-based learning models, the boundary between the lexicon and syntax has weakened, and the lexicon has been attributed a major role in determining language proficiency.

Lexical specifications include not only the meaning of words, but also information concerning the constructions in which the word can be used. L2 age of onset in particular is reputed to play a role on L2 proficiency attainment. This approach has resulted in a resurgence of research concerning vocabulary in both first and second language acquisition (Hilton 2007) and its role as a foundation for subsequent language development. We will begin with a brief discussion of the differences in input for learners of first and second languages. We then go on to discuss early lexical





development, considering both the speed of acquisition as well as the possible reasons for more efficient lexical learning in first language (L1) acquisition as compared to second language (L2) acquisition. In particular we will highlight the role of phonological representations as a major milestone in both L1 and L2 learning. Phonological representations have been argued to facilitate the extraction of units from incoming speech – be they a word or a multi-word sequence. We will continue with a discussion of the role of unanalysed units arguing that they provide a foundation for subsequent development and for facilitating language processing. Finally, we will discuss methods for investigating L1 and L2 lexical learning.

### **Differences in input**

Differences between input for L1 and L2 learners are quite numerous and concern both quantity and quality. It has been estimated that a 2- to 3-year-old child in an English speaking environment is exposed to about 5,000 to 7,000 utterances a day (Cameron-Faulkner, Lieven & Tomasello 2003). Pearson, Fernández, Lewedeg & Oller (1997) were able to establish clear correlations between amount of language exposure and lexical development in bilingual children. Quantity of input differs, but so does quality of input. Child-directed speech (CDS) is highly repetitive and filled with child-centred questions and comments. CDS, in comparison to adult-directed speech, is described as being syntactically simpler, more grammatical, limited in vocabulary as well as in complexity, more fluent, fine tuned and geared to the child's particular interests. Although variability is observed across languages and cultures for L1 learners (Ochs & Schieffelin 1994), this variability is not as important as it is for L2 learners whose learning environments are extremely diverse, depending upon, for example, whether the learner is immersed in the target language environment or is learning in a classroom or alone with a book or a computer. After a period of little interest in the study of CDS initiated by Chomsky's (1965) argument of the poverty of the stimulus, many studies have examined the quality of CDS. The impact of CDS on language acquisition has undergone considerable scrutiny. In particular, frequencies of items and of structures are hypothesised to influence what is learned by children. For example, Chenu & Jisa, using naturalistic data of 2 French-speaking mother-child dyads, showed an important correlation between verbs used by the mothers and the first verbs produced by their children. In addition their study reveals a specificity in CDS by comparing frequencies of different verbs in their mother-child data with those obtained from the Gougenheim corpus. Verbs that are significantly used more by the mothers as compared to GC are also those which are produced frequently by the





children, including verbs used to establish joint attention, to negotiate intentions and activities and verbs encoding motion and caused motion. Even if some L2 learners may receive as much input as L1 learners, the quality is very different, given that it does not directly address the learner's communicative goals and intentions. Hatch (1978), for example, compares interactions between L1 learners and adults with interactions between L2 learners and adults, and finds that in the second type of interaction exchanges are initiated overwhelmingly by the native speaker adult, and thus challenge the L2 learner with identification of the topic). This is very different from child-mother dyads in which most topics are child-initiated. CDS is not uniform across cultures, but generally speaking a child is more likely to have access to specifically tailored input than is an adult L2 learner. An L1 learner has an advantage in the quality of input, but an L2 learner also has an advantage in that s/he brings considerable linguistic and nonlinguistic knowledge to the learning task.

### **Early lexical development**

Children's early lexical development is relatively slow in the beginning. In general, first words are acquired by the end of the first year of life and, over the course of several months, the pace at which new words enter the toddler's repertoire is slow, but steady until the size of the lexicon reaches about 50 items. Subsequently, for most children, a lexical spurt is observed. The lexical spurt has a long history in L1 literature and is characterized by an increase in the rate of word acquisition. It has been greatly documented for English, but has been reported on for a variety of other languages. Some discrepancy is reported concerning the age at which children show a lexical spurt, e.g. at approximately 17 to 19 months for English speaking children (Nelson 1973; Benedict 1979; at about 25 months for French-speaking children. Differences have also been observed in the types of words observed. Considerable L1 literature has also highlighted major differences depending upon whether or not comprehension as well as production is measured. And, it should be mentioned that some studies question the existence of such a spurt in children. To our knowledge, a lexical spurt has not been reported for adult L2 learners but has been observed in early L2 acquisition. Instead, the literature in L2 concerning adolescents and adults mentions successive plateaux and spurts in lexical growth. In a study of French as a foreign language Milton suggests that, even for the best learners, a period of stagnation in vocabulary growth can last several years. Why do children learn words so quickly? As Gayraud & Kern point out, different types of explanations have been advanced to account for the lexical spurt. It has been associated with the emergence of categorization abilities and the awareness





that these categories bear names. It has also been suggested that the word spurt could result from an increase in short term memory capacity and from phonetic and phonological development. Development of communicative skills during an intense period of socialization in the young child's life could result in an increased motivation to learn labels. And finally, a vast body of research focuses on the discovery of constraints on word learning, the result of which is 'fast mapping' isolate word-forms in the input, 2) induct their meanings, and 3) map those meanings onto word-forms and then store that association. 'Fast mapping' refers to the fact that a human being can establish a correspondence between word form and the meaning that the word encodes based upon very few if not only one single exposure(s). Children as young as 18 months give evidence for fast 22 Florence CHENU & Harriet JISA mapping and since the capacity to rapidly establish sound-meaning correspondences occurs around the time of the lexical spurt, the capacity for fast mapping is proposed as a prerequisite for the lexical spurt. A major issue that has been identified revolves around the 'induction problem' (Quine 1960) i.e., given the multitude of possibilities for a word's meaning, how does the child manage to select the appropriate one? In an attempt to resolve this problem, Markman and her collaborators postulate three lexical principles which guide early word learning: the whole object assumption, the mutual exclusivity assumption and the taxonomic assumption. On the basis of the whole object assumption children would tend to associate labels to whole objects rather than to parts of objects. The mutual exclusivity assumption would lead children to assign one label to one object. And on the basis of this assumption, if a novel word-form is encountered, the child would prefer to associate it to an object for which he has no name yet. Finally, the taxonomic assumption would guide children to label with the same word-form objects of like kind, i.e. to focus on taxonomic rather than thematic relations for labelling. However there is not a general consensus concerning the role of such constraints in L1 lexical acquisition. Approaches that emphasize the role of social interaction such as Clark & Wong show that the adult speech directed to six English-speaking children contains considerable violations of the constraints. For example, in contradiction to the mutual exclusivity constraint, adults use many different words to refer to the same object i.e. dog, pet, animal, or Rover. In addition, when adults talk to children they provide pragmatic directions for word usage. In answer to a child's utterance That's a snake the mother repairs with It looks like a snake, doesn't it? It's called an eel. It's like a snake only it lives in the water. Clark & Wong argue that « analyses of the content of child-directed speech strongly suggest that pragmatic directions about language use play a critical role in getting lexical learning off the ground in the earliest stages of acquisition. L1 adult discourse directed to children is very rich in feedback concerning





appropriateness of word usage and moreover children learn from adult reformulations . Some studies have shown that L2 interlocutors tend not to correct L2 learner errors but this would seem subject to great variation depending upon the conversational situation, the status of the interlocutors, the culture, etc.

## **REVIEWING SOME SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN L1 AND L2 LEXICAL DEVELOPMENT**

Whereas L1 learners are acquiring words and knowledge about the world simultaneously, the links between words and the world for L2 learners are largely a function of the age of the learner. L2 language learners can potentially take two paths. On the one hand L2 learners can associate the new word directly to the intended referent just as one would in L1 learning. And on the other hand, L2 learners can establish translation equivalents between L1 and L2. MacWhinney (2008) argues that in early stages adult L2 learners simply treat a word in their second language, such as chien, as another way of saying dog in their first language. Thus, it has been argued that the lexicon in early L2 acquisition has no separate conceptual structure. Establishing translation equivalents, of course, can be very useful for languages with many cognates. However, going beyond the names for concrete objects, such as chair and chaise, can be problematic. For example, the English verb know corresponds to two verbs in French, savoir . French apprendre corresponds to English teach and learn. It is easier to relabel, or to merge two existing categories, as is the case for exact cognates) than to create an L2 category with no L1 equivalent.

### **Methods of lexical assessment**

In L1 studies one can distinguish between two major types of methods for the assessment of early vocabulary development: parental questionnaires and the analysis of spontaneous speech. The advantage of parental questionnaires over spontaneous speech is that the lexical items observed do not depend on one particular moment in a child's life. On the other hand, spontaneous data avoid bias related to parents' subjectivity and are more ecological in the sense that they allow the analysis of linguistic items in their linguistic and extralinguistic environments. Spontaneous data, then, provide more information about the knowledge of particular items a child uses. Few studies have actually documented the reliability of parental reports by systematically comparing results obtained by parental reports with those observed in spontaneous data .The few studies that do exist, however, report high reliability. Parental reports are used essentially in the investigation of very early language





development. For children over 3 years of age, spontaneous speech is analysed and vocabulary is assessed through measures of lexical density or lexical diversity. The most reliable calculation method recognized for lexical diversity is the VOCD .A number of experimental paradigms have also been developed to examine lexical learning abilities in young children .Despite considerable efforts to gather data under ecological conditions (Perdue 1984), research in naturalistic/spontaneous L2 lexical acquisition is still in its infancy. Assessment methods in adult L2 focus on vocabulary size, as this measure has been recognized as a reliable indicator of language proficiency. Two major approaches can be identified: questionnaires or analyses of lexical diversity in elicited text production. The methods for measuring lexical diversity in L1 and L2 research are essentially the same. Methods for studying vocabulary size, however, differ. To evaluate vocabulary size in L2, two types of techniques have been widely used: multiple choice questionnaires and lexical decision tasks, the latter being argued as more reliable given that the number of items presented in one session can be increased. Kempe & MacWhinney report on Anderson & Freebody) who compare the results obtained using a lexical decision task in which L1 subjects were asked whether a word was familiar or not with those obtained using a multiple choice vocabulary test in which subjects were asked to choose between different meanings. The authors report a strong correlation between the two tests and show that subjects were more likely to really know the meaning of words which were indicated as familiar in the lexical decision test than they were to know the meanings of words for which they selected the correct alternative in the multiple choice test. Meara, Milton and collaborators (been developing similar vocabulary assessment instruments for L2. Most of the instruments available for assessing L2 lexicons in teenagers and adults are based on the written form of words but some attempts have been made to take into account the spoken modality .30 Florence CHENU & Harriet JISA A major issue in lexical assessment is how to measure depth of vocabulary knowledge. There is much more about a word to acquire than just the association of a form to a meaning, including for example, knowledge about morphological inflexions and derivations, syntactic function, syntactic construction, register, as well as knowledge about how to use the word appropriately. Initiatives have been conducted to test the depth of vocabulary knowledge, but there is much less consensus concerning the assessment of depth than there is concerning the assessment of vocabulary size. There is, however, a general agreement concerning the fact that one cannot test all aspects of word knowledge. Some of the tests proposed are built upon the concept of word associations: L2 learners are given a target word and six or eight other words (half of them are semantically or collocationally related to the target word and are





asked to associate them. Other measures of deep word knowledge combine self-evaluation as well as word knowledge evidenced by synonyms or use in a sentence

## **Conclusion**

Our comparison of lexical acquisition in L1 and L2 learners has attempted to outline how language learning is the same or different in the two situations. L1 learners are obliged to discover the world at the same time as they are discovering how to talk about the world. In this respect, adult L2 learners have a cognitive advantage in that they know what languages and grammars do and they know how their first language maps out the world. L2 learners, however, must discover the specificities of how the target language maps meaning onto words, which can either correspond or not to the L1. Infant L1 learners begin the process of extraction of word forms from an ongoing speech signal without initially searching for meaning. L2 learners search for meaning from the beginning. Infant L1 learners set the features which are relevant for prosodic bootstrapping into their language based on countless hours of exposure. L2 learners not only have to discover the features relevant for segmenting the target language but they also have to inhibit the prosodic bootstrapping mechanisms set by their first language based on much less auditory experience. However, both L1 and L2 learners build language based on particular utterances in particular contexts. Usage-based approaches to language development offer new and interesting questions that we hope will inspire more collaboration between research in L1 and L2 acquisition. The authors wish to thank three anonymous reviewers for their useful and enriching comments and questions.

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