

Ulrike Stange

The Acquisition of Interjections in Early Childhood

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The Acquisition of Interjections in Early Childhood

O Introduction

The question of how and if children acquire language has long been of perennial interest: is language innate or not? If it is, what then is the proto-language? The first phylogenetic¹ “study” was conducted as early as the 7th century BC: pharaoh Psammetich I. undertook to determine what the proto-language is by giving two infants to a foster father who was not allowed to talk to them. After two years of no linguistic input they could only speak one word – “bek” – which was assumed to be the Phrygian word for bread (*bekos*). In the 16th century Akbar the Great initiated the first ontogenetic study. By having two infants raised by a mute woman he proved that children do not learn to speak if they do not hear anyone speak. Since then ample questions concerning first language acquisition have been faced and replied to in detail and at great length. Yet, there are still some left unanswered or even unasked. One of the topics that have not been of great interest so far is the acquisition of interjections not only in first language but also in foreign language learning.

In fact, interjections play an important role in communicative as well as non-communicative contexts, and their actual linguistic value and role were underestimated and misjudged for quite a long time:

Interjections are among the most little studied of language phenomena; as one looks for references to them in the works of linguists, one is struck by the fact that they are very rarely mentioned, and where they are mentioned, it is usually only briefly and cursorily (James 1978: 1).

Only recently have linguists delved into the subject of interjections and discovered that this particular linguistic phenomenon provides in fact ample opportunity for study and research. Moreover, with the interest in interjections the problem arose to determine what actually defines an interjection. As we shall see, opinions on this point differ considerably and attempts at agreeing upon *the* definition of interjections have been unsuccessful so far. Yet, there are some general tendencies which will form the basis for how the term interjection is used in this paper, and discussion of this point will be postponed until part II.

¹ Phylogenetic studies aim at determining the origins of language or what the proto-language is, whereas ontogenetic studies are concerned with the process of language acquisition.

Now, this M.A. thesis aims at gaining an insight into the acquisition of interjections in early childhood. This field has been neglected so far but merits in fact extensive and thorough inspection. This paper consists of three main parts, with the first two parts forming the basis for my study in part III.: in the first part I will provide a brief overview on child language acquisition, focussing particularly on phonological development. The second part consists of a theoretical disquisition on interjections to illustrate what characteristics they have and what peculiarities they show. In the third and final part I will come to my study on the acquisition of interjections in early childhood.

Eine Sprache zu erwerben ist eine komplexe Aufgabe. ... Spracherwerb bedeutet auch zu lernen, wie mit Sprache eigene Gedanken und Gefühle ausgedrückt ... werden können (Klann-Delius 1999: 22).

I. Part I. - Child Language Acquisition

It is essential to roughly outline the process of child language acquisition, for it is directly related to the acquisition of interjections in early childhood. I will focus on phonological development in particular and present the lexical, semantic and grammatical aspects briefly only. A list of works that deal with child language acquisition in detail can be found in the list of references.

I.1 Preliminary Remarks

The question of how children acquire language is of perennial interest. The first section of this concise overview will deal with the subject of language acquisition as such. How come we learn language? What are the motives behind it? Why does the child suddenly produce adult-like sounds approximately six months after birth when he² had mainly been crying before? These questions will be addressed before we enter into the second section of the different aspects in language development, i.e. phonology, grammar, and semantics.

I.1.1 Why Do We Learn to Speak at All?

Children learn language for expressing what cannot otherwise be known and shared with other persons rather than as an instrument for getting things done in the world (Bloom 1993: 11).

As Bloom points out, the aim of language acquisition is the ability to represent mental meanings in the acts of expression and interpretation. From this theoretical point of view three principles can be deduced (Bloom 1993: 15f.): the first principle, the so-called *Principle of Relevance*, states that only those words are learnt by the child which are relevant to what he has in mind. The *Principle of Discrepancy* describes the fact that what the child has in mind becomes more and more different from the input he gets. Therefore, the child needs to learn to express himself in order to share his state of mind with other people. Lastly, the *Principle of Elaboration* maintains that since the contents of mind become increasingly complex and intricate, the child needs language to express what the “elements and relations between elements in [his] intentional states are” (Bloom 1993: 16).

² In the interest of legibility I will not distinguish between genders when talking about children in general. Instead, I will use “he”, always referring to both male and female children.