Volume 13 Issue 8
Originally issued as G2

Global Journal of human social sciences
Linguistics & Education
Volume 13 Issue 2 Version 1.0 Year 2013
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals Inc. (USA)
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

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GJHSS-G Classification : *FOR Code : 950202, 209999p*



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Language Acquisition: from Notion to Expression

Zhongxin Dai [α] & Jun Liu [σ]

Abstract - This paper discusses language acquisition from a perspective of a dichotomy between the communicative notion and its expression. The communicative notion refers to what the speaker intends to communicate with the person or listener that he wants to address and the expression is the realization of the communicative notion by means of language. The authors first introduced Vygotsky's theory on the relation between thought and language, then discussed the mechanisms of the communicative notion acting as the starting point of language acquisition through the analysis of the description of a child learning to say the word "doll", provided by Bloomfield, and finally explained how expression develops on the basis of the communicative notion.

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I. Introduction

Just as Kozulin (2012:xii) observed, the theme of evolutionary and ontogenetic origins of human thinking and speech discussed by Vygotsky acquired a new context in the work of Tomasello (1999) and his colleagues. Vygotsky (1986) adopted a "tool-mediate" methodological analysis of the inter-functional relation between thought and speech. This "tool-mediate" phenomenon of the formation and development of verbal thinking, i.e. the association of thought and language through frequently repeated practice of verbal communication, can be clearly seen from a daily situation of verbal expression, described by Vygotsky (1986:251):

> Thought, unlike speech, does not consist of separate units. When I wish to communicate the thought that today I saw a barefoot boy in a blue shirt running down the street, I do not see every item separately: the boy, the shirt, its blue color, his running, the absence of shoes. I conceive of all this in one thought, but put it into separate words. Speaker often takes several minutes to disclose one thought. In his mind the whole thought is present at once, but in speech it has to be developed successively. A thought may be compared to a cloud shedding a shower of words. Precisely because thought does not have its automatic counterpart in words, the transition from thought to word leads through meaning. In our speech, there is always the hidden thought, the subtext. Because a direct transition from thought to word is impossible, there have always been laments about the inexpressibility of thought.

Vygotsky (1986) discussed two prerequisite domains in regard to the origin and development of human language: the abilities of intellectual problem-solving and the abilities of human social and verbal communication. Non-human primates have both communicative abilities and some intellectual problem-solving abilities, but these two domains remain disassociated in them. Problem solving in a human interactional context entails not only the solving of the problem itself, but communication with people. "Problem" discussed in this context refers to anything that a person intends to respond to or concern himself with. If you saw "a barefoot boy in a blue shirt running down a street" and want to tell someone about it, this may be considered as a problem to be solved if you want to convey the idea to other people. In Vygotsky's (1986) work *Thought and Language,* we can see how the development of thought is laced with the development of language. His research suggests that the development of speech is always paired with the development of thought. In other words, thought is always present when language is being acquired, and in a language-mediated society, language is often present when thought is being developed. Once verbal thought has been formed and developed, thought can be automatically expressed verbally and speech can be automatically understood meaningfully.

In order to scrutinize the acquisition and development of language in a communicative and language-mediated society, we would like to introduce in this article two terms: notion and expression. "Notion" refers to what the speaker intends to communicate with the person or listener who he wants to address and "expression" is the realization of the speaker's notion by means of language. In the above Vygotsky's description, the thought that today I saw a barefoot boy in a blue shirt running down the street is the notion that I have in mind, which serves as something that is intended to be expressed. Language functions, as it were, as a tool, without which the notion cannot be conveyed to the listener. Notion has its own structure and logic, and the structure of language is created and invented through the perception of the structure of the notion. The language acquisition and developmental process of children centers around this communicative notion.

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II. Notion: the Starting Point of Language Acquisition

Language acquisition research cannot be adequately conducted without adequate consideration given to the mechanisms of human communication, especially linguistic communication, and the mechanisms of the formation and development of the communicative notion and linguistic expression. A survey to the words children first learn to say shows that they tend to be those which refer to prominent, everyday objects, and usually things that can be manipulated by children, e.g. "mama" and "dada", and "doggie", "kitty", "milk", "cookie" and "sock" (Scovel, 1998:11). Why? Because these are the only things upon which children can form communicative notions. The following is a language acquisition story made up by the famous American linguist Bloomfield (1933, 29-31). The citation of the story is intended to show how the communicative notion becomes the starting point of language acquisition.

Bloomfield admitted that it is not known exactly how children learn to speak, but he assumed that the process of language acquisition seems to be something like this: (1) The child seems to have an inherited trait of learning to utter and repeat vocal sounds under various stimuli. (2) Some person, say the mother utters in the child's presence a sound which resembles one of the child's babbling syllables. For instance, she says *doll*. When these sounds strike the child's ear, his habit comes into play and he utters his nearest babbling syllable, *da*. We say that he is beginning to "imitate." Grown-ups seem to have observed this everywhere, for every language seems to contain certain nursery-words which resemble a child's babbling --- words like *mama, dada:* doubtless these got their vogue because children easily learn to repeat them. (3) The mother, of course, uses her words when the appropriate stimulus is present. She says *doll* when she is actually showing or giving the infant his doll. The sight and handling of the doll and the hearing and saying of the word *doll* (that is, *da*) occur repeatedly together, until the child forms a new habit: the sight and feel of the doll suffice to make him say *da*. He has now the use of a word. To the adults it may not sound like any of their words, but this is due merely to its imperfection. It is not likely that children ever invent a word. (4) The habit of saying *da* at the sight of the doll gives rise to further habits. Suppose, for instance, that day after day the child is given his doll (and says *da, da, da*) immediately after his bath. He has now a habit of saying *da, da* after his bath; that is, if one day the mother forgets to give him the doll, he may nevertheless cry *da, da* after his bath. "He is asking for his doll," says the mother, and she is right, since doubtless an adult's "asking for" or "wanting" things is only a more complicated type of the same situation. The child has now embarked upon *abstract* or *displaced* speech: he names a thing even when that thing is not present. (5) The child's speech is perfected by its results. If he says *da, da* well enough, his elders understand him; that is, they give him his doll. When this happens, the sight and the feel of the doll act as an additional stimulus, and the child repeats and practises his successful version of the word. On the other hand, if he says his *da, da* imperfectly ---that is, at great variance from the adults' conventional form *doll* --- then his elders are not stimulated to give him the doll. Instead of getting the added stimulus of seeing and handling the doll, the child is now subject to other distracting stimuli, or perhaps, in the unaccustomed situation of having no doll after his bath, he goes into a tantrum which disorders his recent impression. In short, his more perfect attempts at speech are likely to be fortified by repetition, and his failures to be wiped out in confusion. This process never stops. At a much later stage, if he says *Daddy bringed it,* he merely gets a disappointing answer such as *No! You must say "Daddy brought it";* but if he says *Daddy brought it,* he is likely to hear the form over again: *Yes, Daddy brought it,* and to get favorable practical response.

Though Bloomfield, in his academic milieu, was unable to conduct any cognitive and sociocultural analysis of the language acquisition process, his behaviorist view in the above description and discussion reveals part of the actual fact of a child learning his mother tongue. Firstly, the actual experience of the doll has become the boy's personal experience, and the meaning of the doll to the boy is what the doll means to him after his bath --- the "doll" thing in the situation plus his sight and feel of the doll. Before the infant learns to say "da", he could see the doll and keep the thing in his mind. Next time he sees it, he must feel familiar with it. Frequent contact with the doll after the bath enables the boy to remember it, and when the situation comes again, the "doll" immediately occurs to his mind. Because the "doll" has been strongly associated with "da", then "da, da, da …" becomes the boy's expression of asking for the "doll". Repetition is needed in language learning because the frequency of experience contributes to the strength of the association between the situation, the communicative notion and the expression, in the above case, the association between the bath circumstance and the notion of the doll, and the linguistic expression of "da".

Secondly, linguistic communication originates from the "notion" that the child needs to communicate with his mother. The child says "da" only because the bath event at this moment reminds the child of the "da" thing. It is the notion in the child mind that causes him to say "da". If at this moment the mother gives the child something else different from the doll, it is quite possible that the child is able to compare the doll with the "doll" in his mind and notice the difference. Therefore, when the child cries "da, da", he is actually saying "I want the

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doll". He is asking for the very doll that he has seen and touched after the bath. Bloomfield is right when he says that the child's crying for the doll after his bath means that he is asking for his doll. The communicative notion of "asking for the doll" is the very origin and starting point of language acquisition, but this origin and starting point must be set in a Sociocultural circumstance where the mother serves as the whole thing that reveals the sociolcultural phenomenon to the child.

Thirdly, Language acquisition is an incremental process. The "da, da, da" produced by the child does not refer to the doll, but the whole communicative notion --- "I want the doll." Language learning is compelled by this intention of expressing the notion. A child first learns the meaning of the social language by integrating the social form of the language and the individual meaning from his personal experience. The child's communicative notion is gradually becoming associated with the phonological sound "da", and his expression grows towards full and conventional expression of adults. The superficial stages of language development seems to be the one-word stage, the tow-word stage (or telegraphic speech), and finally the full expression. Language acquisition researchers sometimes miss the point and keep their research at these superficial phenomena of language development. For instance, in psycholinguistics, the development of native language acquisition is always divided into stages like babbling, one-word stage, two-word stage, telegraphic language, etc. The question that we would like to ask here is whether there is any difference between the communicative notion when a child says one word, say, "sock" and that when he utters two words, like "my sock". We can hardly see any great difference between them. There is no difference between the communicative notion that causes the child to cry and the notion that compels an adult to say "I want the doll". The only difference, if there is any, which can be academically scrutinized, is that the communicative notion of an adult is conceptualized and verbalized. Just as Thomas Scovel (1998: 13) says, even well over a century ago, parents noticed that their children seemed to use single words as sentences. In 1877 Charles Darwin, for example, recorded in the journal that he kept on his son's acquisition of language that the single word "milk" could sometimes be a statement or a request, or, if his son had accidentally dropped his glass, an exclamation. If children are using single-word sentences, exactly as adults often do in conversation, "Milk?" meaning "I'd like some milk?" and if there is no difference between the communicative notions behind the different stages, then language acquisition should be viewed as an incremental process, always with the communicative notion on the scene for the perfection of the linguistic expression towards the social convention of language.

Fourthly, the term "verbal thinking" or "verbal thought" that Vygotsky (1986) coined to indicate the spontaneous concurrence of the notion and the expression is actually the association formed and developed between the communicative notion and the linguistic expression. In the "da" story, the child has formed and developed the association between the thing, that is *doll*, and the word, that is "da". Through repetition, the association has become so strong that whenever the thing appears (or appears in the notion) it excites the mental association. One's parole comes from the langue of the peaking community. The development of one's speech entails the perfection of his articulation and the complicated structure of the expression that matches the complicated structure of the communicative notion. This is quite typical of children's language acquisition and of adults' language production in real communication. In various situations, an adult may say "The doll" when he has a complete communicative notion in mind, but others may not understand. It is often the case that he is asked "What about the doll?" or "What happened to the doll?" In Vygotsky's example, an adult may say "The boy." In his mind, he has the communicative notion of "Today I saw a barefoot boy in a blue shirt running down the street." This communicative notion can be realized in speech in various ways. For instance, "I saw a boy running in the street today. He had no shoes, and wore a blue shirt." Or "I saw a boy in the street. He was barefoot, and had a blue shirt. He was running down the street." No matter how the speech is worded, the meaning is the same because the communicative notion is the same. Grammatically correct sentences are the result of a long-term endeavor to perfect language expression towards the convention of language.

III. Expression: a Linguistic Tool for the Notion

Language functions as a tool to express the communicative notion. Just as Vygotsky observed, notion, unlike speech, does not consist of separate units. Notion is the consciousness, the intentionality, the idea or feeling that a speaker has in mind when he wants to express. Expression, when referred to as the expressing process of the notion, serves as a tool or a way to convey what is intended to mean. As consciousness or intentionality, notion occurs all of sudden to the mind of the speaker. If this is the case, then the notion behind the single word "da" or "milk" or "sock" comes to the boy's mind at once. The single word expresses the whole notion. If the single word "da" expresses the notion "I want the doll", then the child's language acquisition is definitely and steadily directed and developed towards the convention of the language being learned.

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As a linguistic tool for the notion, expression is the realization of the notion. In other words, how to express depends upon the communicative notion. According to Chomsky (1965), the actual sentence that the speaker has uttered in a real situation of communication is his performance; the ability to mentally form grammatically correct sentences is his competence. The uttered sentence is the surface level of language, and the notion is the deep level of language. The grammar of the language that the speaker happens to pick up is the particular grammar, and the structure of the notion is the universal grammar.

The tendency or inclination that human beings display to seek a tool of expression for the communicative notion is a genetic endowment, which evolved from the sociocultural labor activity in the evolutionary course of human beings. Dai and Liu (2012) explored the origin of human language from the perspective of meditation towards the needs satisfaction of communication. They adopted Engels's (1876) view that labor plays a crucial part in the creation and shaping of man himself and his body parts and also in the creation of language. Labor forced man to meditate on the void left between what he needed and the means to satisfy his needs. Man shifted his meditation from the needs to needs satisfaction, which resulted in the creation of tools, typical representatives of human culture. The ability to shift meditation towards tool making is a prelude to the creation of language. The ability to conduct meditation shifting is what distinguishes man from other animals. This ability has been woven into the genetic structure of man and has become man's innate trait. Language is a human tool for social communication. Understanding the human needs, emotions, and thoughts underlying the creation process of his tools and language will better our appreciation of the nature of language and the operational mechanisms involved in speech and language acquisition. Engels (1876) figured out the situation when the men in the making were collectively creating their language tool for communication. The development of labor necessarily helped to bring the members of society closer together by increasing cases of mutual support and joint activity, and by making clear the advantage of this joint activity to each individual. "In short, men in the making arrived at the point where *they had something to say* to each other."

Investigation into the development of the tool of expression from the compulsion of communication entails the inquiry into the nature and structure of the "something" that the men in the making had to say to each other. Dai (2004) imagined a situation of a black dog running after a hare. He said that both humans and other animals can experience the situation. The experience of the situation does not require language of any kind. On a certain occasion of social communication, the men in the making through social labor are compelled to communicate the communicative notion of a black dog running after a hare. It was then and only then that they had something to say to each other. This communicative notion is the prerequisite for the creation and development of human language. Human experience is the source of his conception of the "black", "dog", "running after" and "hare". The concepts of "black", "dog", "running after" and "hare" represent the elements of the notion and are realized by the phonological words. No matter how a language socially or collectively conventionalizes the structure of the notion, it should be capable of expressing the notion. Hence Dai concluded that the structure of the natural world, the structure of the communicative notion that is formed from the experience within the natural world and the structure of language expression are identical and should be viewed in this logical and sequential order.

It is also quite plausible to conclude that the concepts of "black", "dog", "running after" and "hare" in the communicative notion might eventually be separated from the whole notion through various communicative notions formed on various occasions. On one occasion, the black dog is running after a hare; on another, a hare is grazing on the grass. There is no denying the fact that different languages have developed different conventions not only in the domain of grammar, but in the domain of conception of words. In one culture, the notion of "black dog" may be one compound concept, that is, it may be contained in one word; in another, it may be two. In one language, "black" is placed before "dog"; in another, after "dog". What Chomksy claimed as "universal grammar" is actually the "grammar" of the nature and the "grammar" of the notion, whether it be called "grammar" or "structure" or "logic". A sentence can be divided into a noun phrase and a verb phase not because language is naturally and logically so, but because humans perceive the world in this way, and language is conventionalized accordingly.

A Chinese scholar and linguist named Lin Yutang (1982: 1) observed in as early as the 1930s in the Preface "The Science of Expression " of his *Kaiming English Grammar* that "[i]n everything we say, there are always (1) something to say, and (2) the way of saying it. We shall call the former the notion, the latter the expression of these notions. We must understand that grammar has no meaning for us except to teach us about these notions and the ways of expressing them." Hence he (1982: 7) advocated that to study grammar is "to look at grammar from the inside, and start from the idea we wish to express to its expression, from inner meaning to outer form." What Lin proposed is exactly what has been discussed here. In learning English as a foreign language, the learner should first learn to understand the notion that a certain grammatical structure expresses, and then attempt to imagine a situation where the speaker forms a communicative notion that needs to be expressed by the structure. For

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instance, the subjunctive structure "If … had done something, ….. would have done something." Just imagine that it rained yesterday and you did not have the picnic. It was a pity. Put yourself in the situation and imagine that you are saying to someone "If it hadn't rained yesterday, I would have had the picnic." You will have to direct your thought back to "the rain yesterday" and "the picnic that you did not have." This is the key point to establish the association between a communicative notion and a certain structure to express it. The communicative notion should be there in your mind for the structure to express. Language acquisition is done from the notion to the expression, and this innate nature of human beings creating, learning and using language is there in the domain of foreign language learning. There is no such thing as the "latent psychological structure" assumed by Selinker (1972) or "latent language structure" couched by Lenneberg (1967).

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