

## SOME ASPECTS OF FOUR YEAR PLUS OLD STAGE IN THE ACQUISITION OF TAMIL PHONOLOGY

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### Introduction

The completion of age four for a child is a very crucial stage in its acquisition of language. It is generally agreed that a large amount of syntax is now known to the child and that though the linguistic development continues long after, this development involves mainly such matters as style and possibly semantics but not apparently syntax (Slobin, 1966 & 1971). In other words, having completed successfully the acquisition of the rudiments of a language, the child is now assumed to be involved in processes of acquisition which would enable him to produce utterances matching adult speech.

There are, in essence, two types of methodology available for the investigation of the acquisition of speech by children. In the first type of investigation, we may identify the progression of structure through a series of descriptions, each of which would describe an independent stage. The totality of the series of these descriptions would present a unified picture of the development of the language in all its segmental and rule structures from the post babbling stage to the full mastery of language. In the second type of investigation we may compare the sets of correspondences between the child's language and the utterances of the adult speech. This analysis will give us information about the structures of child's language, their distribution and other problems which the child is encountering and overcoming at a particular stage. Needless to say that both these methods are a must for a complete understanding of the process of the acquisition of speech.

The basic assumption as far as the acquisition of syntax is concerned, within the framework of Chomsky (1965) and Smith and Miller (1966), is that the combinations we find in the use of words and parts of words in children's speech are systematic rather than random and are productive rather than imitative or rote-learned. It is found that the child language is structured from the start, that its structure takes on a hierarchical form and that it tends to be regular. The contribution of the study of acquisition of language by children to a general theory of language, and, syntax in particular, has been indeed tremendous. However, the contribution of the analysis of the acquisition of phonology by children to a general theory of phonology has not been particularly impressive even within the above framework. It has been

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demonstrated and agreed as we find in Moskowitz (1970), that the phonetic level is not acquired in a uniform way by all children. It is now visualized that at least on the level of phonological representation there will be a set of constraints on the order of acquisition. The universal and particular forms of these constraints are yet to be sufficiently recognized.

In this note we would present some aspects of the phonology of four year-plus old stage in the acquisition of Tamil, specifically the acquisition of consonants and indicate some areas of acquisition where the child is currently encountering and overcoming difficulties.

At the time of the collection of data, on which the results presented in this note are based, the subject who is a boy had completed four years (exactly four years, four months and five days). His parents use a dialect of Tamil which may be called non-brahim middle class educated Tamil based on the Tirunelveli dialect of Tamil. Their use of Tamil is characterized by a mixture of English words.

*Consonants: Stops.* The subject has acquired all the stop consonants found in the adult Tamil speech. These are k, c, ʃ, t and p. However there is some difference in the phonetic realization of these consonants in the inter-vocal position (that is, in between vowels). In general the subject seems to have acquired more consistently the phonological features of his mother's speech than those of his father's speech.

In the speech of subject's father, the initial phonetic realization of the above consonant sounds in native words is always voiceless. These are marked always by stop quality except in the case of /c/ where [c] and [s] are interchangeable. In the intervocal position, these are marked always by friction except in the case of /t/ where the segment is marked by flap quality. In the intervocal position, again, when stops occur geminated (that is, marked by longer duration in pronunciation) they are retained as stops. When following a nasal consonant, these consonants are realized as stops marked for their voice quality.

The speech of subject's mother is characterized by all the characteristics listed above with the exception that in the intervocal position the consonants namely /k/, /t/ and /p/ are phonetically realized as stops (and not as fricatives) marked for their voice quality.

As stated earlier the analysis of the data collected from the subject indicates that the subject has acquired all the stop consonants found in adult Tamil speech. The phonetic realization of the consonants in the subject's speech seems to follow significantly the phonetic realization found in his mother's speech.

We have already found that the speech of subject's mother differs from that of his father in only one respect, namely the phonetic realization of stop consonants in the intervocal position. The speech of his mother employs voiced stop consonants (except in the case of the consonants /c/ and /t/) in this position whereas his father's

speech employs fricatives in the same position. The data collected from the subject indicate that he has acquired the phonetic realization found in his mother's speech, in this position.

The analysis of the data collected from the subject indicate further a significant difference between adult Tamil speech and the speech of the subject. In the adult speech the stop consonants following a nasal will be always voiced. However it is found that the subject interchanges between [c] and [j] and [t] and [d] after a nasal. This interchangeability between voiceless and voiced consonants indicates perhaps an area of uncertainty in the phonetic realization of /c/ and /t/ in the speech of the subject. It remains to be seen when and how this uncertainty is resolved and identity with the adult speech is established in this respect.

*Nasals* : The subject has acquired all the six nasal sounds employed in adult Tamil speech. The dental, palatal and velar nasals do not occur initially and intervocally; they are always followed by homorganic consonant sounds. The bilabial and alveolar nasals occur word initially and intervocally. The retroflex nasal occurs intervocally. All these three nasals can be marked also for longer duration in their production.

A notable difference between the subject's speech and that of adults is the interchangeability between the retroflex and alveolar nasals in the intervocal position in several 'words. All these words have retroflex nasals in adult Tamil speech as well as in written Tamil. This interchangeability indicates perhaps that though the difference between alveolar and retroflex nasals have been well established, uncertainty still prevails over the phonological representation of several lexical items in the child's speech.

*Laterals*: The above remark holds good also for the acquisition of laterals in the speech of the subject. In the dialect of subject's parents, two laterals, namely alveolar and retroflex, are clearly distinguished. Another lateral /l/ represented in Tamil script by the letter & is produced through conscious efforts to utter the 'correct' pronunciation of the written word. The data collected from the subject indicate that the subject employs invariably the alveolar lateral sound in words which have alveolar lateral sound in the speech of his parents. In words which have the retroflex lateral sound in his parents' speech, the subject interchanges between alveolar and retroflex laterals. In words which have /l/ in written Tamil, the subject is found to interchange between alveolar and retroflex laterals.

It seems from the above two cases that the subject is not encountering any difficulty in the production of the sounds of the language. His difficulty is to produce them in appropriate environments in which they occur in the adult speech. In other words the child is engaged now in the process of identifying and acquiring for himself the correct underlying lexical representations (of the sort explicated in Chomsky and Halle, 1968) of the adult speech. With reference to the specific data on hand it may

be said that the subject is now engaged in the acquisition of underlying lexical representations involving retroflex nasals and laterals.

*Other consonants* : The analysis of the data shows that the subject interchanges between alveolar lateral and alveolar trill also in all the positions, for those words which have alveolar trill in his parents' speech. Here again only those words which have alveolar lateral in the parents' speech are produced invariably with alveolar lateral. A comparison of the four-plus stage data collected for this note with the casual observations made on the previous occasions shows at least two stages in the emergence of alveolar trill. In the pre-four-plus stage, wherever alveolar trill occurred in the parents' speech, the subject's speech simply deleted the trill and retained the vowel of the syllable. In the four-plus stage we find the emergence of the alveolar trill and also the use of alveolar lateral in its place in several words.

Another difference between adult speech and the subject's speech is the interchangeability between [v] and [b] in atleast one word. It remains to be seen whether this interchangeability is regular or sporadic.

### Summary

To sum up, we suggested two methods in the beginning for the study of acquisition of language by children. The first, one aims at identifying the progression of structure through a series descriptions and the second one, which we followed in this paper, compares the sets of correspondences between the child's language and the utterances of the adult speech at a particular stage. We found that the phonetic realization of the stop consonants in the speech of the four-plus old subject followed the phonetic realization of the same in the speech of his mother. We identified the interchangeability between alveolar and retroflex nasals and also between alveolar and retroflex laterals. We found that this interchangeability in the subject's speech was generally with regard to those words which had retroflex counterpart sounds in the speech of subject's parents. This led us to hypothesise that the subject was not encountering any difficulty in the production of the sounds of the language, that his difficulty was to produce them in appropriate environments and that, in other words, the child was engaged in the process of identifying and acquiring for himself the correct underlying lexical representations of the adult speech.

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