

Sociolinguistics comparison of language acquisition between healthy and feral children

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Abstract: It is a common fact that sociolinguistics is one of the most interesting branches of linguistics which takes a language as an aspect of a society or even a tool which expresses and showcases the societies' beliefs, traditions, lifestyle and values. The process of language acquisition is a complex issue which requires several years or even dozens of years of deep research and variety of social experiments. Many linguists take a detailed look at facts and at researches that are done in previous generations and make an attempt to compare and find out what has changed and are there any alterations in habits, language and beliefs of societies. The tool, undoubtedly, is a language that people utilize and change. And this change can be clearly seen between young children who are still in process of language acquisition. This article will explore the comparison of healthy children's language capabilities and capabilities of feral children who were isolated from the society thus their language learning process changed irretrievably.

Keywords: Sociology, feral children, language acquisition, healthy children, development, sociolinguistics, comparison.

Introduction: Sociolinguistic process of language acquisition

When we talk about the process of language acquisition in social context, it is inevitable not to discuss what sociolinguistics really means. Generally speaking, most linguists agree on the idea that sociolinguistics deals with language in social context, and they can't be separated from each other. For example, one of the most successful linguists, Ronald Wardhaugh [5], is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Toronto. He is the author of a number of books, including *Proper English* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1998), *Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2014) [6], and many more. Wardhaugh and Fuller (2014) claim that sociolinguistics is the study of language in our daily lives, including how it functions in informal interactions, the media we consume, and the existence of language-related laws, regulations, and social conventions. Sociolinguistics also explores how language is used to express social identity, power dynamics, and cultural norms within a society. This field of study helps us understand the complex relationship

between language and society. Personally, it seemed to me to be one of the briefest and clearly expressed statements among all others. By saying "language in everyday lives," Wardhaugh and Fuller emphasize the importance of ordinary people who are the main language carriers with their everyday lifestyle, habits, values, and attitudes. Human beings make the language alive by changing it and utilizing it in different social contexts. These contexts are the main factors that utterly impact language acquisition and the learning process. The dynamic nature of language allows for constant evolution and adaptation to new environments and situations. This highlights the crucial role that social interactions play in shaping language development and usage. Another linguist, according to Danesi (2000: 214) [2], states that sociolinguistics is a branch of linguistics that studies how language is used in society. Sociolinguists examine how language usage varies based on age, class, gender, and other social variables. By stating all of that, it is meant that society plays an immense role in emergencies, forming and developing the language starting from the first days of the birth of a physically healthy child. Society acts as a role model for a child on how to speak, how to

articulate, and when to say what we say in particular situations. Therefore, sociolinguistics is crucial in understanding the intricate relationship between language and society, as it sheds light on the social factors that influence language development and usage. It also highlights the importance of societal norms and values in shaping linguistic behavior.

Language acquisition of physically healthy children

Language acquisition in healthy children usually begins around the age of one, when they start to chatter and mimic sounds they hear. By the age of three, most youngsters can make short phrases and hold basic discussions with others. This period is critical for further development of speech and linguistic abilities of children. It is assumed by many scholars that there is a critical period of language acquisition, which is called the “critical period hypothesis” by Noam Chomsky. Being called a father of linguistics, Noam Chomsky made enormous contributions to the science of language and language development. He claimed that there is a precise period in early development when language acquisition is most successful. This theory has been extensively researched and contested in the field of linguistics. Chomsky believed and assumed that children's linguistic agility is supported by what he refers to as the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) (Wen, 2013, p.151) [7]. Chomsky's theory suggests that there is a biological basis for language acquisition, with the LAD being a key component in children's ability to learn language effortlessly during the critical period. Research continues to explore the implications of Chomsky's hypothesis on language development and education. Language acquisition is a slow-going process which requires detailed observation of a child in the first place and people around one in the second place. How parents express their thoughts to the child, how they communicate their ideas and the amount of time of such kind of interaction and even whether this interaction was of high quality or not are all impacting aspects to the child's first language acquisition. By saying interaction quality, it is basically what language parents use while communicating with a child. It is a common behavior of parents and any adult speaker to baby talk with a child. In the research which was carried out recently by NPR online website article (2022) by Michel Martin [4], Gabriel J. Sánchez, it was found out that baby talk is a global phenomenon. As stated in the article: “... it turns out, the features of baby talk — softer tone, higher pitch, almost unintelligible vocabulary — are global”. Whereas, this kind of speech might seem more child-friendly, the majority of scientists assume that baby talk or babbling, indeed, might have side-effects too. Instead, the term of ‘parentese’ is included into research vocabulary which

means parents’ speech which is grammatically structured, well organized but simplified, with slower pace and more melodious, clear. This kind of speech is intended to develop cognitive and linguistic abilities and to enhance communication skills as well.

All in all, the acquisition process of physically healthy children might process its own intricacies and small but vital details which influence language acquisition process. More or less, these children start having mutually understandable conversations with adults at around the age of 3.

Language acquisition of feral children

The term ‘feral children’ describes a child who was fully socially isolated since birth with the following disorders in linguistic ability, communication skills, and deprivation of social interactions. In brief, these children are neglected, mostly both socially and physically as well. Due to the restrictions in interactions, deprived children fully or partially miss critical learning periods. This lack of exposure to language and social interactions can severely impact their ability to develop communication skills and acquire language. Studies have shown that without proper intervention and support, feral children may struggle to catch up with their peers in terms of language development and social integration. The story of Genie (real name: Susan M. Wiley), who was rescued at 13 years 7 months after being isolated since 20 months of age, is the most well-researched example of a child who is fully linguistically isolated. She was confined to a Los Angeles bedroom, strapped to a child's toilet during the day, and, on the majority of nights, bound inside a crib with her arms and legs immobilized (Curtiss 1977 [2], Rymer 1993 [5]). Since there was no TV or radio in the house, she was not permitted to speak, was not addressed, and could not hear family conversations or any other language being used in the house besides profanity. With the exception of a few isolated words, Genie had not learnt to speak or comprehend any language when she emerged from isolation. Following her rescue, Genie received intense language training. This training helped her develop some language skills, but she never fully caught up to the linguistic abilities of a typical adult. Despite this, Genie's case has provided valuable insights into the critical period hypothesis and the importance of early language exposure for development.

Another famous individual and subject of immense case study was found a long time before Genie's case, who was named as Victor of Aveyron from French in 19th century . Most of the research is based on case studies such as [3] Gabriel, Yiannis. (2017). Victory whose real name is still unknown was a boy abandoned

in the wild and presumably lived away from civilization and social interactions. His case was the first of a kind which was observed and recorded in details over a long period of time. It is stated that Victor of Aveyron lived in wild until the age of 9 when he was found by hunters after which he escaped eight times back to the wildlife. Eventually, he returned by his own will and a young doctor named Jean Marc Gaspard Itard took up the boy's case; he worked with him for five years and gave him the name Victor. Itard was curious to see what Victor could discover. He recorded the boy's progress and came up with methods to teach him words. Itard made groundbreaking contributions to the teaching of individuals with developmental delays, based on his experience with Victor. His work with Victor paved the way for modern special education practices and highlighted the importance of early intervention for children with language delays. Itard's dedication to Victor's progress continues to inspire educators and researchers in the field of developmental psychology.

Despite all the effort and time spent in an attempt to educate and civilize Victor, Jean Marc Gaspard Itard was quite unsuccessful in developing linguistic abilities of Victor. More than that, it was almost impossible for Victor to be integrated back into society and implement human behavior in daily life.

CONCLUSION

Scientific research in the field of sociolinguistics is vast and varied as much as the viewpoints of linguists and scientists who devote themselves in widening the horizons and deepening of sociolinguistic knowledge. It is utterly important to have a brilliant eye on details and hidden connections which, most of the time, make the change and determine the outcome.

In terms of linguistic development, healthy children make use of their language in gradually increasing manner. It can be undoubtedly said that socio-conditions influence greatly to the point that if the child is isolated from it for several years especially in the critical period of development, they might never be able to keep up with their peers at the same level anymore.

To summarize, the process of language acquisition is heavily influenced by both biological and social variables, with sociolinguistics providing vital insights into how language changes in various social settings. Healthy children who participate in frequent social interactions develop language abilities with the supervision and assistance of their caregivers and community. The crucial period concept emphasizes the significance of early exposure to language for optimal development. Feral children, on the other hand, experience considerable difficulty in acquiring language

and integrating into society due to a lack of social connection, illustrating the importance of socializing in language learning. The contrasting experiences of healthy and feral children highlight the tremendous importance of societal influence on linguistic development, reaffirming the notion that language acquisition is both a biological and a social process that requires rich, meaningful connections in order to thrive. Overall, the case of feral children underscores the critical role of social interaction in language acquisition, emphasizing that language is not solely a product of biological predisposition but also heavily influenced by environmental factors. This highlights the need for early and consistent exposure to language in order to foster optimal linguistic development in children.

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