

On First Language Acquisition

— Dominique Grows Up in Language —

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1. Introduction

Why and how do young children learn to speak? How do they learn to produce and recognize the sound system of their native tongue? How do they acquire knowledge of the entire complex system of grammar? These are the questions language development researchers have been trying to answer for many decades, and out of their attempt came many theories of first language acquisition. The author had a valuable and pleasant experience to live close to his granddaughter Dominique for twelve months. This one year marked a very important milestone in her growth language-wise, because it is an accepted theory that “children in every part of the world, regardless of the degree of grammatical or phonological complexity, acquire the major components of their native language by the time they are three or four years old. By the time they are of school age..., they already can vary their speech to suit the social and communicative nature of age situation, they know the meaning and pronunciation of literally thousand of words, and they use quite correctly ...grammatical forms...” (Gleason, Jean Berko: *The Development of Language: An Overview and a Preview* Allyn and Bacon (1997) p.1)

Dominique goes to preschool three times a week. She is a four-and-a-

half-year-old girl (as of June 1999) born of a Caucasian/American father Scott See and a Japanese-born mother Meggie who is the writer's daughter and whose advice, suggestions and help he appreciates very much as he prepares this draft. The language spoken within their family circle is English except occasional Japanese.

The writer was a visiting scholar/researcher at the Department of Applied Linguistics, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon, April 1, 1998 through March 31, 1999, during which period he and his wife lived in Hood River, Oregon approximately forty-minutes' drive from the See residence up in the hills of White Salmon, Washington, across the great Columbia River.

Dominique visited her grandparents as often as her own daily/weekly schedule and her parents' convenience permitted; she attended preschool three mornings a week besides often going to her daycare except on weekends. She and her grandparents communicated mostly in English, but Japanese was also spoken and taught as often as an opportunity arose. Dominique understood a greater part of Japanese she heard; she too tried speaking it herself. She learned quickly.

This paper is a result of the writer's one-year-long observation of Dominique, as incomplete as it is linguistics-wise, as she grew up in the use of English and in the language-related activities and behavior. Some of her language development phenomena may not agree with the currently accepted theories of first language acquisition. The author's observation is limited to a very small circle of young children: Dominique, her closest friend Taniya and her other friends and classmates at preschool and other

places. It may therefore be far from objective; nevertheless, the observed and reported facts would be a subject of still greater interest because of their likely disagreement with accepted theories of first language acquisition.

2. Phonological Development

a. Vocalization: Use of Voice Producing Motor System

The writer noticed that little Dominique, as she breathed and spoke, and so did Taniya, employed the abdominal breathing method without ever being taught, by pushing down the diaphragm to expand the lung capacity, instead of the chest breathing method many Japanese women and children use by pulling up their shoulder bones to increase the lung capacity. The abdominal breathing helps produce a deeper chest voice, while the chest breathing tends to produce a high-pitched head voice. It would be interesting to know that a deep chest-resonant voice, often a booming voice in males, is preferred in the United States and other occidental nations, whereas a high-pitched, almost shrill voice seems to be preferred by Japanese and other orientals. People working in mass media in these two spheres present a marked contrast as they are listened to. This different preference of voice quality might be innate or peculiar to individual ethnic traits. A professional singer trained in European-developed classical music learns to practice the abdominal breathing. Interestingly likewise, American children usually speak in a deeper voice than Japanese children do at any and every age level.

b. Mastery of English Sound System

(1) Suprasegmental Features

It appears that the intonation and stress-timing system is learned before other phonological systems. Perfectly learned suprasegmental features are very much in evidence even in early mono-syllabic utterances as well as in longer utterances produced by children as they grow up rapidly language-wise. Fundamental suprasegmental features are essential to a native speaker's accent.

(2) Vowels

It is observed that the mastery of the vowel system comes before that of consonants in Dominique's case, possibly different from many other children's since:

"The general statements about the order of acquisition of particular segments also have to be made in probabilistic terms; the order varies across the children, and the actual age of acquisition varies even more." (Men, Lise: *Phonological Development* *ibid.* p.92) This statement is in disagreement with the Nativist theory that "all children should show essentially the same order of acquisition of phonemic contrasts and that the earliest contrasts developed by the individual should be those that are most common in the languages of the world." (*ibid.* p.93)

Dominique, for instance, learned to pronounce beautifully the vowel 'hooked schwa' or *schwa*+*r* before she was four. Rarely does misunderstanding occur because of imperfect vowels, which are few, among little children of her age group.

(3) Consonants

Slight difficulty is noticed of consonants, specifically fortis stops which require the building-up of breath in the mouth cavity before it is released. The writer was once puzzled as he was requested to get Dominique a 'goat' for her to put on, by which she meant a 'coat.' This is one of many instances of the voicing of voiceless fortis stops such as: cookie /kuki/-[guki], top /tap/-[dap], pipe /pajp/-[bajp], toad /towd/-[dowd], etc.

Dominique was also observed to omit one sound out of a consonant cluster such as in: school /skul/-[kul],[sul]; blue /blu/-[bu], etc. This phenomenon lasted but briefly.

Cf. Consonant Cluster Reduction:

"Consonant clusters such as [spr-] at the beginning of the word *spring* and [-lps] at the end of *helps* are usually acquired relatively late. Some children are capable of producing the individual phonemes within a cluster, but not of putting them together in a sequence. Thus, the /s/ of *see* and the /n/ of *no* could be pronounced correctly whereas the /sn-/ combination in *snow* would be produced with the omission of the /s/." (*ibid.* p.106)

(4) Allophones or Phonemes?

Little children seem to have their own phonemic system different from that of adults which is transcribed by the English writing system. Take for instance, the /t/ phoneme composed of various allophones which may drop upon a foreign ear as more different than alike. Little children have no or very little access to the writing system which suggests the proximity of the speech sounds denoted by the letter 't'.

To Dominique's ear as yet untainted by the writing system, it seems, the single flap [t] as in *water* and the voiced [t] as in *bottle* sound as two distinctive phonemes. The writer made an experiment:

Dominique asked him for a glass of water, saying, "Grandpa, I *wanna water* (pronounced [wa^hæ]), please." He asked back: "Do you *want water*?" replacing the single flap with an aspirated [t]. She then replied: "No, I *wanna water* (again pronounced with the single flap)."

The author made another similar experiment with the voiced [t]:

Dominique said, "Can you help me, Grandpa? I *wanna go potty* (pronounced [padI]). He asked back: "Did you say 'you *want to go potty*'?" again using an aspirated [t]. She replied, "No, I *wanna go poddy*."

The above incidents evidently show the kind of idea Dominique holds of the so-called English /t/ phoneme. They also seem to point to an apparent discrepancy between American English phonemics and the current English orthography. The former might as well be re-examined and revised from phonetic views of speech sounds.

3. Grammatical Morphemes

Suggested average order of acquisition of fourteen grammatical morphemes as observed of three sample children:

1. present progressive (singing; playing)
- 2/3. prepositions (in the cup; on the floor)
4. plural (books; dolls)

She learned to use *7* as in: “This *is* my cookie,” and “This *is* mine,” as she asserted her possession and/or territory. She seems to have learned quickly to use the first person singular as in: ‘*I, my, mine, me*’ in contrast with ‘*you, your, yours, you*’ in her identity confirmation process. This instance shows that language learning is in close connection with one’s mental and intellectual growth.

4. Coordination

- a. Phrasal coordination as in: “I want this *and* this,” etc.
- b. Sentential coordination as in: “I want this *and* I want that, too,” etc.

Dominique began by saying: “I wanna this. I wanna this,” in reference to two different objects. Then she went to b above, and then to a. There seems to be no strict order of acquisition for these two forms.

5. Complex Structures

A few relative clauses and complex structures were observed in Dominique’s language, although children ‘do not develop the full knowledge of this construction (relative clause) until they reach school.’ (Tager-Flusberg: *ibid.* p.193)

“This is *what I want.*”

“I know *how to do it.*”

A passage quoted from the writer’s Christmas letter 1998:

“Toshi (the writer) once deplored his advancing age in Dominique’s presence. She then remarked: ‘Don’t worry, Grandpa. I’ll kiss you, *so* you won’t get old.’ And she kissed him.”

6. Analogical Use of Language

“After they (children) learn regular plurals and pasts, like *nooses* and *heated*, they create some overregularized forms of their own, like *gooses* and *eated*.” (Gleason: *ibid.* p.5)

As was seen in the use of regular/irregular past tense, Dominique was observed to resort to analogy as she developed her use of grammar. She seems to have learned to speak in the negative first as in: “I *don’t* wanna it.” She then learned to speak in the affirmative as in: “I *do* wanna it,” keeping *do* by way of analogy before she dropped it and went on to say: “I wanna it.”

An interesting argument could be made of the way Dominique urged the writer and other people to *look*. She invariably said: “Hey! *Look-at*, Grandpa!” Look at as in look at something is usually pronounced in a cluster [lʊkɪt], so that it may stay in a child’s mind as a word and/or equivalent to other transitive verb such as *eat*, *drink*, *watch*, *etc.* at deep-structure level. The same argument applies to Dominique’s similar utterances: “I *wanna* go,” and “I don’t *wanna* this.”

This raises a question: Is the structure “*look at* something” to be relevantly classified as an intransitive verb plus adverbial phrase structure or a simple transitive-verb phrase? To the writer’s mind, the latter seems the

more reasonable explanation, as he considers Dominique's use of the expression in question. (*cf.* Appendix)

7. Vocabulary and Language in Social Context

“By the time they get to kindergarten, children have amassed a vocabulary of about 8,000 words and almost all of the basic grammatical forms of their language. They can handle questions, negative statements, dependent clauses, compound sentences, and a great variety of other constructions. They have also learned much more than vocabulary and grammar — they have learned to use language in many different social situations. They can, for instance, talk baby talk to babies, be rude to their friends, and act somewhat polite with their grandparents. Their communicative competence is growing.” (Gleason: *ibid.* p.7)

The above is exactly where Dominique stands and this is also where Scott and Meggie can come in to help because:

“During the preschool years, young children learn to express a variety of speech acts, such as polite requests, or clarification of their own utterances. Their parents are particularly eager that they learn to be polite.” (Gleason: *ibid.* p.5)

And because:

“Linguistic competence is not sufficient; speakers must also acquire communicative competence, or the ability to vary their language appropriately in a variety of situations; in other words, it requires knowledge of

pragmatics.” (Gleason: *ibid.* p.6)

Dominique’s parents are as eager as any other parents to guide and direct her in the right path of language use; they are always careful to see Dominique speaks correct English. This is why she tries hard to say, “Excuse me,” “Thank you,” “You’re welcome,” “Please.” etc. in appropriate circumstances so that she may properly speak to and associate with other people.

8. Conclusions

There could be no logical or theoretical conclusion to be reached very quickly of what has been discussed in this paper. It presents no more than mere instigation to still further research into language and language learning. Children offer an infinite store of facts and information yet to be explored and exploited to those engaged in linguistics and other related disciplines, because “there are more things about children than are dreamt of in your linguistics and psychology.”

References:

- Gleason, Jean Berko (Editor): *The Development of Language*, Allyn and Bacon (1997)
- Gleason: *The Development of Language: An Overview and a Preview*
- Menn, Lise: *Phonological Development Learning Sounds and Sound Patterns*
- Tager-Flusberg, Helen: *Putting Words Together: Morphology and Syntax in Preschool Years*

Warren, Amye R.: *Language in Social Context*

APPENDIX

I FAXed the draft of this paper to Meggie, my daughter and Dominique's mother, with a request to look it over and make comments. She has had some training in linguistics and language teaching; she knows what she is talking about. Quoted below is her response almost verbatim. Firsthand information is always impressively persuasive. This makes an enlightening and entertaining addition to this paper. Thank you, Meggie.

FAXED LETTER FROM MEGGIE (6/23/99)

Dear Father:

Your paper was very interesting. We (Meggie and her husband Scott) have been paying a lot of attention to Dominique's language development. Since we have no ability or willingness to find a theory behind her development, this paper will be a valuable record of her earlier life. One day she will read and find it pretty amazing.

The following are what Scott and I have noticed about her language. I am just jotting them down at random.

Dropping "s"(sound)

For a long time she dropped "s." It was quite funny when she ordered "soup" at a restaurant, it sounded like she was ordering "poop." (Two extremes — Author)

Double Negative

“I *don't* see *nothing*.” I *don't* want *no* water.” She has been able to catch her mistakes and correct herself, if we say: “I don't see —,” “I don't want —.”

“Lie, Lay, Lain”

Surprisingly enough, I have never met a single American who uses “*lie*” and “*lay*” correctly. (Scott is one of the best ones, except for occasional mistakes.) Since I am very careful about the usage of “*lie*” and “*lay*,” Dominique is the only kid around here who says, “*Lie* down,” not “*Lay* down.” (I'm proud of you, Dominique. — Author)

Past Tense

Still using “*-ed*” with every verb. When corrected, she repeats the corrected verb with no problem. (A common mistake among kids — Author)

“Her” for “She”:

She uses “*her*” as a subject as in: “*Her* is very beautiful.” She uses “*he*, *you*, *they*” correctly. Her parents don't bother to correct her, hoping she will get it right one of these years.

“Me” Used as a Subject

As is seen in many kids and even some adults, Dominique uses “*me*” as a subject as in: “*Me* and Tania went to the zoo.” If we just begin to correct her, she'll get it right before we can say anything.

Pronouncing “th” as “s”

Fortunately she is not the only one. “*Th*” sound must be one of the most

difficult sounds for the kids. When corrected, Dominique makes a concerted effort to place her tongue against her front upper teeth to make the “*th*” sound, but it’s a struggle for her. When she consciously tries to say “*th*,” she tends to place too much of her tongue against her teeth and her tongue is too flattened out; the sound comes out as excessively plosive. It’s as if she hears “*th*” as a plosive and not as a soft “*th*.” So even when using nearly correct technique, she’s still striving for a plosive “*th*.” “This” comes out like “*dis*.”

Expressions of Her Own Creation

She has made up a few expressions like “your *wedding* husband/wife,” “a *married* dress,” etc. (She seems to be slightly confused about present and past participles. She will hopefully get them right in no time. — Author)

Complex Structures

Her favorite these days is: “Mommy, is it OK *if I go out and play with the dogs?*”

(Dominique appears to be well ahead of her age-group language-wise.)

Polite Expressions

When offering something, she has started using: “*Would you — ?*” Every day she asks me: “Mommy, which shoes *would you* like me to wear?”

“*Mommy, Mama, Mother*”

She uses the above variations quite freely. She calls me *Mother* when she is in her “dramatic mood.” When she is in the “playful mood,” she tends to say *Mama*. Interestingly enough, when she is scared, sad, or clingy, she calls me *Mommy*.

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(True your way of addressing other people depends upon your mood. — Author)

“*Never*”

She uses “*never*” very often as in: “I have *never* read this book.” But what she means is that she hasn’t read this book in a long time. She uses ‘*never*’ to emphasize the action hasn’t been taken for a long time.

Superlatives

She has a problem using *most* with words that have more than two syllables. She usually says like “my *favorist* doll.” (So do some adults. — Author)

“— chan”

It was interesting to see her pronounce “Kitty-*tan*” instead of “Kitty-*chan*.” Somehow “*chan*” was a difficult pronunciation for her as is for most Japanese children. Recently she has overcome the problem.

Colloquial “*Like*”

Dominique uses the word “*like*” in the *filler* sense of the word. It’s as if she picked up this bad habit *like* very subconsciously. In fact, now that I’m trying to construct a sentence with the word “*like*,” I’m completely drawing a blank. But I suspect that were I speak for five minutes, I’d use the word “*like*” several times.

(from Scott)

“*Last Night*”

Anything in the past is “*last night*.” I think she’s just very recently used

another expression for anything in the past, but she still relies on ‘*last night*’ quite a bit.

(from Scott)

One last thing: under # 6. “Analogical Use of Language,” you are talking about Dominique saying: “*Look at, Grandpa!*” Scott and I think she is saying, “*Look it!*” instead of “*Look at!*” I have always wondered why she says it and paid attention to other kids. They say the same. I assume she has picked it up from them.

(The author intends to look further into this question.)

Hope the above observations will be of some help to you. We would love to read your final version and keep it in Dominique’s “treasure box.” Good luck and let me know if there’s anything else we can do for you.

Love,

MEGGIE