

Re: Do children learn language more easily?

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In article <m56tm2t4kofr6chhn9esnud95dshjvu66b@xxxxxxx>, Ruud Harmsen <realemailonsite@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx> wrote:

I think this is important enough to post here. Mark Rosenfelder in <http://www.zompist.com/whylang.html>

Judging from what you've quoted from him, I don't think Mr. Rosenfelder is qualified to make pronouncements about language acquisition.

Why do children learn languages well, when even adults who want to learn them have trouble with them? Innate abilities aside, children have a number of powerful advantages:

They can devote almost their full time to it.

"Full time" for children isn't more than a few hours a day, scattered throughout the day in small chunks. Babies sleep multiple times a day, for multiple hours at a time. They also spend a large portion of their waking time crying, a state that is hardly conducive to learning anything requiring concentration.

Adults consider half an hour's study a day to be onerous.

Even if true (it's not --- my high school and college foreign language classes lasted an hour per day, and homework would be even more than that), this wouldn't explain anything. If half an hour is onerous for adults, it should certainly be onerous for children, who tend to have far less patience and shorter attention spans than adults do.

What needs to be explained is why adults, who can sit alertly through two-hour snoozefests like *Chariots of Fire*, would find it "onerous" to

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spend half an hour learning a language, while children, who can barely play with the same toy for more than five minutes, can somehow manage to magically devote their "full time" to learning language.

Babies, unlike adults, demonstrate no ability at all to focus on any single activity for more than a brief period of time.

Their motivation is intense. Adults rarely have to spend much of their time in the company of people they need to talk to but can't; children can get very little of what they want without learning language(s).

More nonsense. Babies are doted on almost continuously by generally observant and over-protective guardians, and in the vast majority of cases, they can often get what they want rather quickly with nothing more complex than incoherent crying.

Later on, children can get essentially everything they need with simple sentences. Children have absolutely no "need" whatsoever to learn things like relative clauses, island constraints, pied piping, subject-aux inversion, pronouns, etc. And yet they do it anyway, despite their simpler child language being more than sufficient to meet their needs.

Compare this to pidgins: adult speakers of pidgins get essentially everything they need (which is certainly far more comprehensive and complex in nature than children's needs) by using a linguistic system that is typically no more complex than the speech of a five-year-old, and in fact, is often simpler in many ways.

If pidgins work for adult needs, and if language acquisition is driven by need, then we would not expect child language to ever progress in complexity beyond what we see in pidgins. And of course, we find that child language does progress well beyond pidgin-level complexity.

Their peers are nastier. Embarrassment is a prime motivating factor for human beings

Completely irrelevant to the important early stages of language acquisition. Babies learn many properties of language in their first year, before they've uttered a single word. No one can make fun of them for "talking funny" if they aren't even talking yet!

In the next few years (ages 2-3), embarrassment from their peers is also largely irrelevant, since their peers speak in the same one- and two-word utterances. It's hard to make fun of someone's speech when you yourself have just started putting a noun with a verb.

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By the time peer opinion could even be fully expressed (age 4–5), most average children have mastered everything they "need" in their language, and more, lacking only the uncommon, complex, or arcane features of their language that (concoidentally?) adults often have difficulty with.

Further, embarrassment seems to do nothing to alleviate some of the most salient disfluencies a child can have, such as lisps and stuttering, which are mocked far more frequently than other disfluencies like using the wrong preposition. One would think that if embarrassment was this hugely important, all-powerful motivator for learning language, it would fix something as simple as pronouncing /s/ with the tongue only a centimeter out of place. But lisping children often need years of speech therapy to correct it, if they can even correct it at all.

And no amount of embarrassment from pedantic authority figures seems to dissuade the average speaker from ending sentences with prepositions, splitting their infinitives, or getting pronoun case all mixed up inside coordinated NPs.

So if neither peers nor authority figures can successfully embarrass us into changing our language for seemingly minor things that can be altered in straightforward, logical ways, why on earth should we assume it plays any significant role in language acquisition at all?

Nathan

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