

Re: Do children learn language more easily?

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- *From:* Mike Wright <news@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>
 - *Date:* Sun, 03 Dec 2006 18:11:22 -0600
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Nathan Sanders wrote:

In article <18iswmvi0ffwh\$.1s422rvpno3p4.dlg@xxxxxxxxxxx>, "Brian M. Scott" <b.scott@xxxxxxxxxxx> wrote:

On Sun, 03 Dec 2006 00:15:40 -0500, Nathan Sanders <nsanders@xxxxxxxxxxx> wrote in <news:nsanders-B743A6.00154003122006@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx> in sci.lang:

[...]

From child to child, language to language, there are developmental milestones that they achieve in a particular order.

At the gross level, certainly. Probably at a more detailed level, if you allow for the occasional exception.

When comparing billions of samples taken from the same population, some variation is mathematically expected. Once we accept natural statistical variation, we can get pretty detailed in the order and nature of developmental milestones.

Babies are just less developed human adults, not completely alien creatures. Without direct evidence to the contrary, it is quite safe to assume that their needs are a proper subset of adult needs.

No, but it **is** safe to assume that the two sets have a very large intersection.

I should have said something like "(largely?) a proper subset", but at the time I wrote it, I couldn't think of anything to justify the hedge.

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In the end, babies still just want food, rest, physical comfort, health, etc. Nothing out of the ordinary for humans (or animals in general, for that matter). Throw in some social and emotional factors like happiness, companionship, creative expression, occasional periods of solitude, etc., and we still haven't even pushed the envelope of adult needs.

Certainly, some child-specific needs exist, such as stimuli for normal development of various organs and systems (vision, hearing, balance, memory, etc.), but I doubt children are consciously aware of these needs to the degree required to properly account for Rosenfelder's idea of an active, need-based, motivational model of language acquisition, especially since the critical periods for most types of stimulus-driven development end well before children achieve adult linguistic competency (i.e., their language continues to progress long after their stimuli needs have been met).

(I shouldn't write like this on a full stomach, with all the blood drained from my brain, but it makes me reckless, as well as stupid, so here goes.)

I think that it might be a mistake not to argue the *drive* to acquire language separately from the *ability* to acquire language.

That is, children may be so good at deriving language from their environments that they don't require any more impetus than their normal socialization needs. (I guess that this is the "it's easy for kids" argument, but not necessarily the "it's easier for kids" argument.)

Changes in success at different ages probably depend on a variety of factors.

For example, socialization itself may be subject to a "critical age" effect. I've seen several references to the age 10 being a cutoff for ease of socialization. (For dogs, it's commonly given as about 16 weeks.) This may affect the drive—making later language study less appealing—without affecting the actual ability to learn.

On the other hand, there definitely seem to be developmental factors that affect raw language-acquisition ability. The question is whether the child's abilities—as opposed to its desires—really imply a language-specific ability. Do any other learning abilities or general cognitive functions diminish (or otherwise change) at about the same time and pace as language-learning abilities?

Shouldn't a study distinguish changes in socialization needs from changes in raw ability? How would you demonstrate the difference between a child losing the ability to learn at the native speaker level vs. just losing interest in doing so?

To me, music ability seems to work on a similar timeline. The situation is not identical—especially since intensive musical training is sometimes provided in ways that language training seldom is. I know a fair number of instrumentalists and one vocalist who began training almost as soon as they could walk.

Three of them (not related) were playing cello on-stage by the age of 5. All three of them have a depth of technical ability and taste that far outweighs anything I've seen from musicians who, like me, began instrument training in early adulthood. None of them are limited to cello, either. They do just as well with guitar, mandolin, fiddle, and banjo. Some people think that I play guitar pretty well, but these guys all approach music in a way that reminds me of how native speakers approach their languages—they seldom seem to even be aware of the details, but only of their communication goals.

Music listening was a big part of my childhood. My father loved jazz and conjunto music, and my mother

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played piano. I had a brief brush with scales on the piano, but nothing came of it. I didn't start on the guitar until I was 17. I'm pretty sure I missed some kind of developmental cutoff that has required continued effort on my part just to be half as good as my friends who started early.

Another friend started the clarinet in junior high school. Put a piece of music in front of him, and he could play it—just like that. However, he couldn't play by ear, and he couldn't improvise two notes in a row. The music seemed to go into his eyes and out of his fingers, but he had no other way to process it. (This same guy had a great ear for language, although his brain would shut down if you uttered words like "stative verb" or "postposition". His spoken Mandarin and Japanese were about as good as I've ever heard from a non-native speaker.) I think this all implies something interesting, but I don't know what.

It's obvious that more experimentation is needed. A friend of mine had young twins, and when I suggested that we could do some really nice experiments by isolating one of them, she got all hostile. Some people just aren't willing to support science!

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Mike Wright

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