

Neologisms in Child Language: A Case Study of a Bilingual Child

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Abstract

Surprising parallels with Schizophrenia and Jargonaphasia were found on a linguistic analysis of the neologistic utterances encountered in a normal 3+ year old bilingual child. The analysis in terms of phonological, semantic, grammatical, as well as a few paralinguistic features including mortality and awareness of these neologisms uttered by the normal bilingual child revealed similarities with those of schizophrenics and jargonaphasics reported in literature. This speech sample was also compared with the abnormal utterances of normal speakers. A need for both qualitative and quantitative assessment, in addition to obtaining a total picture of communication was felt in order to categorize a speaker as abnormal or pathological. It is also speculated that bilingual children may undergo such transitory phases of neologistic utterances in their language(s) acquisition process because of the very nature of bilingual / multilingual exposure.

Key Words: Neologisms, Bilingual, Child language

It is recognized that children undergo stages of free vocalization, babbling jargon, echolalia and similar processes leading on to meaningful speech. Additionally, there may also be a stage beyond these elementary ones, beyond the first word stage where in the children exhibit a tendency to coin new words that bear little or no resemblance to the words in the adult language, a tendency to talk at free will irrespective of the stimulus provided or the questions put across, to talk out of context, to talk inappropriately with regards to the stimulus and to show incoherence of thought and language in their speech, thus revealing a certain deviance or abnormality. This raises questions about the present concepts of "normality" and "abnormality". Child language as it appears, stands for both normal and abnormal language. It is normal since all human beings pass through a similar process and abnormal because the child language deviates from or is different from the standard language of reference, that of the adults. It may also be pointed out that there could be similarities between the language of the adult abnormal (which may or may not be pathological) and some of the stages of language acquisition by normal children. This paper highlights and describes the characteristics of child language vis-à-vis the language of the abnormal adult exploiting the neologisms found in child language acquisition. The neologism are those words which deviate from adult language which the child has formed either by derivation, compounding or using a completely new sequence of phonemes (Virittaja, Lehti, & Hakemistot, 1998). The neologisms uttered by a normal 3 years and 3 months old Kannada-Kodava bilingual girl are analyzed as to their phonological, syntactic and semantic features.

Method

Subject

Subject was a normal, intelligent girl of 3:3 – 3:10 years at the time of this study. Her DQ was 4 years as assessed in psychology department and language age was 4 years on RELT at AIISH. Her comprehension and production of utterances both in Kannada and Kodava were good. Her parents spoke to her each in their respective languages (father was a native Kannada speaker and mother was a native Kodava speaker).

Definition of Neologism: We define a neologism as a phonological form not found in the adult lexicon of the languages (either Kannada, Kodava or even English as generally spoken in Mysore). We also term the words found in child's language as neologisms when they are employed with a new or deficient semantic charge based on the position adapted by Chaika (1974).

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The Data

The Data for this paper was actually an accidental sample obtained in the process of recording spontaneous, narrative and imitative speech (recorded in interaction with parents, peers, investigator, servants at home) recorded for the investigation of the simultaneous acquisition process in Kannada and Kodava used by the bilingual child. The sample constituted a total of 12 hours of speech recorded across a month in the initial period of data collection (3:3 – 3:4) and another in the latter period (3:9 to 3:10) [For a detailed study of the child's bilingual behaviour refer Thirumalai and Chengappa (1988)]. The data constituted roughly one and a half hour's sample a week. This total speech sample contained roughly about 421 utterances, which were transcribed and analyzed.

Analysis

The 421 neologistic utterances (including repetitions) analyzed were found to be of two types:

Type I Neologisms: These 228 utterances were lexical items not found to occur in Kannada, Kodava or English. This category also included perseverations or repetitions of whole or part of the utterance. These types of neologisms are illustrated below since the whole list cannot be cited due to lack of space and time.

a:libans comic	gatito	jakki			
ball	da:ru	Itta:s	inni		
Segmental repetitions across several stretches of utterance					
na:be	akalla	a:	sade:	na:be	akalla a:
sabe:	l:	sade:	a:	sade	

Type II Neologisms: These 193 utterances were recognizable and acceptable lexical items in the languages of the child, but the relations between the words in the stretches of utterances were anomalous and therefore the strings of utterances appeared absurd or empty. This type of utterances did not carry the same semantic content as in the normal adult lexicon and therefore meaningless to the analyst. If they were meaningful to the child, these meanings were not deciphered based on the contextual appraisal by the analyst or when sentences were meaningful they were inappropriate to the given context. Some of these are illustrated below:

1.	mammi	bae : le	mammi bae:le
	mother	dal (red gram)	mother dal
	mammi na: le	rail:lu	ka: ru
	mother	tomorrow	train car

Discussion

The data analyzed revealed several types of deviant language segments in child language acquisition that are on par with those reported in the literature to be present in schizophrenia and jargon aphasia.

Phonologically, all the phonemes used were those found in the phonological inventories of the languages as also were the phonemic sequences. There were normal intonation and stress patterns (no formal tests were used, though) seen except when there were instances of rhyming which, in turn, were found quite often in the sample of neologisms.

There were several characteristics attached to those neologisms, single or whole stretches; contextual indices gave no clue as to the appropriateness and occurrence of most of these neologism as well as stretches of neologistic utterances; there were some neologisms which were consistently used with the same semantic charge and also those which were not repeated; there were stretches of neologistic utterances interspersed with recognizable words neologisms were, in majority, nouns or content words; neologisms had partial or no resemblance to the actual words in the language lexicons; some neologisms were words that were part of the language inventories but were given in appropriate usage and hence are termed neologistic (since one is not sure whether the child had any message at all or if she had the intended message did not conform to those in the language repertoires), the language specificity could not be determined because of the inconsistent and unexpected occurrences of the neologisms. However, two observations to this effect could be made:

- (a) Some neologisms occurred in contexts exclusively belonging to one or the other of languages and some occurred in both the languages.
- (b) Some neologisms had partial resemblance to a specific language rather than to the other (as in the use of phonological variables or case endings, to name two instances) and some had no resemblance to either of the languages.

Neologisms were uttered in the course of expository (conversational) speech, during the repetition programmes (conducted by the investigator), and as imitations of reading (read by the investigator).

Neologisms were uttered regardless of whether the appropriate words were known or not known, and no pauses or hesitations were noticeable prior to the utterance of neologisms to account for the child's inability to retrieve. It was felt that a failure to restrict, an inclination to indulge in verbal play, lack of inhibition in speaking at free will might have led to the picture of incoherence sighted in the neologistic utterances of the child.

The most important feature of such neologistic utterances is the high mortality rate of the words across the duration of six months. These utterances were abundant in the speech of the child at the age of 3:3 (or one could say 3 plus since it was highly possible that they existed before the period of elicitation of the sample) and disappeared by the age of 3:10. This points to the transitoriness or the temporary nature of such verbal performances.

Chaika (1974) highlighted the significance of neologisms and gibberish in schizophrenic speech. She observed three varieties of neologisms: single utterances, stretches of neologistic utterances constituting gibberish, and a third phenomenon of assigning wrong or insufficient semantic features to recognized words in the vocabularies. All these three types of neologisms have been noticed in our study of a child in the process of language acquisition. However, Chaika remarks that such neologisms were used due to a disruption in the ability to match semantic features to actual words in the lexicon which was a part of the general disability in ordering linguistic elements into meaningful structures while in our study it was more a case of inadequate ability to process the structures (inadequate learning) rather than a disruption. The highlight of Chaika's study was an analysis of discourses the results of which are also on par with those of the present study. Lack of a consistent subject matter, the absence of discourse markers that orient the listeners to the topic lack of markers that show connections characterizing schizophrenic discourse were seen to characterize our data collected from a normal child. The topic and the selective attention that should be paid only to those semantic features that are pertinent to the context, were both found violated in the case of our normal child's speech sample as it did in Chaika's schizophrenic cases. Chaika (1974) also remarked that normal individuals would never utter stretches of gibberish, rhymed or free-associated or misused common words as the schizophrenics did. But surprisingly, we found that this was just our normal child did, revealing the similarities in language use by schizophrenics and young children in the process of language acquisition.

Patients with schizophrenia often display language impairments, Covington et al. (2005) survey their language level by level, from phonetics through phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Phonetics, is often abnormal but phonology structure, morphology and syntax are normal or nearly normal.

One could speculate, perhaps not too wildly, that this phase, one abundant with neologistic utterances is a stage which almost all the children pass through as they do with babbling and other stages. However, this stage is beyond the stage of first word, beyond a stage where a child is well on the way of mastering language with a good work able vocabulary for functional purposes. This phase could be hypothetically placed around the age of 3 years (as supported by an observation of two more children of similar set up) although it needs further strengthening before it is specified. One could also speculate, not without reasons, that this phase is especially true of children who are subjected to bilingual or multilingual exposure from birth. This would be appropriate considering that this situation, simultaneous bilingual acquisition, would offer more freedom to the child in terms of formation and use of words. This would mean that, because of the loose attachment of sound and meaning (form, structure and functions of linguistic elements), as seen in the exposure to two lexical equivalents for a single concept (as against that of a single language exposure), the child learns to be more creative and innovative. Thus, there is a stage of experimentation and hence, the neologistic utterances. These neologisms would continue to dominate the child's linguistic performance only till the time when there is a negative reinforcement for such utterances by the social milieu and an eradication of such utterances is enforced. Even then, some neologisms would continue to exist in the child's repertoire, with a semantic charge (not common to the dialect of the child's community) with a tolerance and the acceptance of the term and with it its semantic notion by the social milieu.

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