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A CHILD'S POTENTIAL VERB DEVELOPMENT
AS FORM AND FUNCTION
ASPECTS OF INTERLANGUAGE AND EFL

In this paper I shall discuss the functional aspects of a child's verb development in English as a second language, namely, which functions[1] the child was able to perform in coherent and natural communication and what forms the child employed to express these verb functions. Finally, I shall briefly consider the implications of this research for the teaching of English as a foreign language to children.

1) Theoretical framework: basic assumptions

Three basic assumptions underlie the research reported here. Firstly, language learning takes place as we learn to communicate with the other members of the society we live in. (Bruner, 1978) Secondly, L_2 learners actively reorganize the input data and develop a language system as usage and use independently of the mother tongue of the learner or the target language. These developmental stages reflect the learners' transitional competence, what Pit Corder, 1977 calls 'language continua' and Selinker, 1974 'interlanguage' based on a congitive, hypothesis–formulating approach to language learning. Thirdly, meaning in communication is not only a matter of the linguistic forms as they are related to each other in a sentence, but it is also a function of the relationship between utterance (what we want to say, our intention) and situation (physical and social, that is, to whom,

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[1] Functions are here defined in terius of a speaker's ability to use the second/foreigh lauguage to express his/her own intentions our purposes in the context of a social encounter.

when, and where we say it). In other words, the speaker is first confronted with a situation and then decides on what he will say in order to extend the situation and make sense of it. Thus the situation makes clearer the intentions of the speaker as they are expressed through language, whereas the language the speaker has chosen to use makes clearer the situation. The situation is here defined in sociolinguistic terms as the "implementation of rights and duties of a particular role-relationship" where the participants know what to say to whom, when and where, as Hymes, 1971 has argued.

2) The informant

The informant, a native speaker of Greek, was learning English as a second language in the native enviroment. When the child arrived in Lancaster, England, in October, 1976 at the age of four years and three months, she joined the Lancaster University pre-school centre for the fall term. In the spring term the child was transferred to Scotforth Primary School where she stayed till the end of the school year.

The recordings to collect the data were made in February, March and April 1977, when the child was four years and 8 months old to four years and 10 months old. The recordings include conversations of the informant with her mother, and two friends of hers, Nicky an English native speaker and Ashalon a Persian native speaker.

3) Tense and Aspect in English

Time is a universal concept with three dimensions: Past Time – Present Time – Future Time. The concept is universal because the units of time are extra-linguistic; that is, they exist independently of the grammar of any particular language. When we speak we make linguistic references to these extra-linguistic realities by means of the language-specific category of tense. Tense relates verb meaning to the time scale mentioned above and functions as linguistic reference to it. Verbs may refer either to an e v e n t (get, come, leave) or to a s t a t e (be, live, stay, know). This distinction between state and event gives rise to the following basic verb meanings (the examples are from my data),

state	I'm a lady
single event	I ate it
set of repeated events (habits)	I played very very nicely with Ashalon
temporary meaning expressed by the progressive aspect	We are playing shop

A second function of the verb is to indicate aspect. By aspect we refer to the manner in which the verb action is regarded or experienced. The choice of aspect by the speaker is a comment on or a particular view of the action. English has two sets of aspectual contrast: Perfective/Non–Perfective and Progressive/Non–Progressive. Tense and aspect in English can be combined in various ways expressed in different linguistic realizations (cf Leech G. & Svartvik I, 1975 pp 74-75), which serve a variety of functional uses of language in natural communication.

4) Presentation and Discussion of Findings

Analysis of the trascribed data showed that in present time the child could easily handle the following functions in coherent and natural communication: a) present time/definite event, b) present time/definite state and c) present time/events in progress, e.g.

2/2, 12[1]

M[3]: *That goes over here, all right?*

V[4]: *Mummy, is that goes over here?*

M: *Doesn't it look like that?*   -

V: *Yes, it look like that, silly billy.*

3/2, 16

V: *Mummy, I want change with that with Nicky.*
   Mummy, I want play with pushing chair.

M: *Now, let Nicky play with it for a while.*

V: *No, mummy, I want to play with pusging chair. I want to change it.*

M: *Why don't you let Nicky play for a while?*

V: *No, I want it.*

3/2, 17

V: *Take that hat for your dolly.*
   Is not goes. It's for my dolly, that hat.
   She is crying the dolly.
   Don't cry
   Don't go to be quickly, Nicky, I don't like it.
   If you not playing you going to your house.
   Mummy, is Nicky staying longer over here?

4/1, 6

V: *This enough, Whatd' xou want?*

M: *I want this one.*

V: Are you want this one?
M: No, you can keep that.
6/1, 5
A⁵: Give that book.
V: No. It's mine.
A: Look (inaudible)
V: Mummy, Ashalon wants that to write.
M: No, Ashalon.

Although the child is exposed to natural language in the native environment, and is cognitively mature through her mother tongue, it seems that she could handle productively in context only three functions. She was able to express her personal likes and dislikes through verbs such as I want, I know how, I like, and so on, and she could talk about events that go on in the 'here and now' around her such as 'I am playing,' 'the dolly is sleeping', and so on, that refer to her immediate experiences.

The child was able to communicate effectively and naturally inspite of the errors she made in the linguistic forms proper. Notice,for instance, how the development of the third person singular inflection in declarative sentences started with zero morpheme -s and moved to -s morpheme at the end,
e.g.
2/2, 12²
V: Yes, it look like that, silly billy.
3/2, 23
V: She wants to sleep on the table.
6/1, 5
V: Mummy, Ashalon wants that to write.

Similarly, the development of the third person singular in negative sentences started with instances, such as
3/2, 17
V: Is not goes. (where the child has substituted the auxilliary do with the
                    auxilliary be)
3/2, 22
V: Ashalon he don't like the porter
untill she finally learned the correct linguistic form,
4/2, 15
V: It doesn't work. It doesn't work the little pencil.

I shall now procede to examine form and function in past time over the period of these three months. The analysis of the data indicates that the child has had difficulties in matching the form with the function to express tense and aspect in the past. However, in spite of the inaccuracy of the forms, the child managed to convey her intentions, that is, what she wanted to say, and negotiate meanings with the listener, her partner in the conversation, e.g.

2/1, 13
M: Who made it?
V: I make it.

4/1, 12
(V pretends to be a teacher)
V: Mrs. Taylor, can you do that for me.
M: Sure.
V: I have to go. Jane's fallen down.
    But she is not very, very ill.
    She is not blowing [i.e. bleeding]

4/2, 9
A: What is this?
V: Ambulance.
A: What is this?
V: My mother has break it. I put it over here and she be bang like that.

4/2, 10
V: Are you very, very cross?
A: Yeah, yeah.
V: Why? We break that?
A: Yeah.

4/2, 28
A: I must see something. Have you got anything new?
V: I can show you. I bought a car. Where is it?
    I can't find it.

5/1, 13
A: We'll play the baker.
V: I'm the baker now.
A: I'm the baker.
V: You been all the time the baker.
A: You've been the baker.
V: You been.

In past time the child could handle the following functions in English: a) past time/definite event, b) past time/definite state and c) present perfect/state up to present time. In order to express past tense/definite event and definite state linguistically, the child extended use of present tense forms,

e.g.

2/1, 13

V: I make it.

2/1, 24

V: I leave it over here and you break it.

4/2, 10

V: Why? We break that?

On the other hand, the child could handle present perfect/state up to present time using part of the correct linguistic form,

e.g.

5/1, 13

V: You been all the time the baker.

7/1, 4

V: Ashalon, all the time you been silly.

Gradually the child started learning the appropriate forms to express herself in past time. She first learned to express past tense irregular verbs correctly as native-speaker children do, e.g. I put it over here; I bought a car; etc. Later on she learned to express the regular -ed form past tense verbs correctly, although there are but a few instances in the data collected over the period of these three months, e.g. V: I finished my milk. (7/1, 15).

I shall now procede to examine form and function in future time over the period of these three months. An analysis of the functions the child could handle effectively in future time indicates that she could perform well in: a) future time/neutral indicating intention, b) future time/ indicating plan and arrangement and c) future time as a matter of course,

e.g.

3/1, 6

V: That's mine.

M: Not all of them.

V: Not I playing first.
     But I have that, not this.

I don't this, you.

3/1, 37

V: *Nicky, I want this doll.*

N[6]: *This is mine.*

V: *Nicky, that is not yours.*

N: *This is not either.*

V: *But you be playing with me you said.*

3/2, 16

V: *Thank you very much Nicky.*
   I change it with you quickly, Nicky.

5/1, 4

V: *Ashalon, shall I close this door?*
   This is be the door. There is/there is the door.

A: *O.K.*

V: *That's the car*

A: *That's the car park.*

7/1, 8

V: *Mummy, can we play this game?*

M: *Yes.*

V: *Look, I'm going to play with mummy.*
   You're going to found it. I am not playing with you.

A: *I'll go to my country. I won't come back again.*

V: *But I will not. If I am not come back again, you can't come and you can't*
   play with me.

A: *I won't play with you.*

As with past time, present tense forms were also employed by the child
to cover her needs in expressing future time. In order to express future
time/neutral indicating intention she started with simple present tense forms,
such as.

3/1, 6

V: *But I have that.*

3/2, 16

V: *I change it with you quickly, Nicky.*

and gradually learned the correct forms

5/1, 3

V: *I'll make this puzzle*

6/1, 1

V: We'll play shopkeeper.

Future time/plan or arrangement which is linguistically expressed in the same form as present progressive also went through developmental stages. The child moved from *V: Not I playing first (3/1, 6)* to *V: I'm not playing with you (7/1,8)*. Although the form itself was familiar to the child because she could handle it in present time to indicate the temporaty progressive aspect, she did not transfer the form to future time use easily, this may be so because the child was learning the language not simply as forms but as forms associated with certain functions. It seems that these functional differences imposed on the child the need to learn them as two different formal entities.

As the data indicate, the child learned the appropriate forms to express future time sooner than the forms to express past time. It seems that certain aspects of present time and future time as events and state are first learned because they are closer to the child's world and experience than events and state referring to past time. Bruner has pointed out that language learning for children takes place in the "here and now" while they are personally involved in the joint activity with a partner (be it a parent or a friend) relevant to their immediate experience. Similarly, in L_2 learning my informant may have first learned to express functions relevant to her cognitive development and the experiences she encountered in activities at school and among her friends. School and her English speaking friends were the native environment from where the child received input data and against which the child put to test her hypotheses about the accuracy and appropriacy of her language in real communication.

5) Implications of findings for foreign language teaching and learning

Now I would like to turn to the implications such research might have for the learning and teaching of English as a foreign language to children where the teacher and the teaching materials are the only sources for input data.

1. The child's verb development indicates that we should not look at foreign language learning and learner performance from the point of view of the teaching materials and native-speaker performance. Teaching materials and native-speaker performance can only show us the end goal of our teaching practice and function as language input data for the learner. As mother tongue and second language learning has shown, learners go through developmental stages where what sometimes were called errors are now

considered as the intermediate stages in the process of language learning. The learner recreates the language he is learning, and, through trial and error, his hypotheses are confirmed as correct or are rejected as incorrect both in terms of accuracy and appropriacy. Errors are inevitable and part of the language learning process. The learning of a language is primarily the job of the learner himself. He will sort out the input data, the language he is learning, from "s c h o o l k n o w l e d g e" offered to him by the teacher and the teaching materials to "a c t i o n k n o w l e d g e" where he will use the foreign language to serve his own purposes and intentions in the context of a social encounter. Emphasis on accuracy through overdrilling and constant error correction at the expence of appropriacy and use of language in free natural communication stifles the learner's interest in the foreign language as a means of communication and results in boredom and lack of interest and motivation. Performance of correct forms, after all, is not an indication that learners also know when and which form to use to make clear their intentions in relation to a situation. It must be stressed, however, that the developmental stages discussed in this paper by no means constitute a hard and fast model for every Greek child learner. Variations in developmental stages are to be expected, they may be due to individual differences or type and frequency of foreign language input.

2. Teaching materials for children should be built around themes accessible to the child's cognitive development and immediate experiences. Language practice with communicative games, role–playing and simulations should be relevant to the child's experiences and expectations. The familiarity of the child learners with the conceptual framework of the communicative activities included in the teaching materials and the language practice, gives them a sense of fulfillment, because they do something by means of another language as they do it by means of their mother tongue. Thus, we can increase their motivation for learning through enjoyment and active participation in activities relevant to the child learners' experiences and expectations.

Although the language development of one child is not enough to give us definite results, the present research suggests that it may be easier for children to handle functions in situations that refer to present time [definite state – definite event – events in progress] and future time [neutral indicating intention – as plan and arrangement – as a matter of course], because they are more relevant to the immediate environment of the child and within a child's conceptual framework. Although children of around five years of age and over are able to handle past time [definite event – definite state – present

perfect/state up to present time] functionally in L_1, mastery of appropriate forms to express them correctly in English as a foreign language may take a longer time. Cognitive psychologists maintain that children learn pragmatic use of language and linguistic realizations that refer to present time and future time earlier than past time. It seems possible that children recapitulate learning in L_2 and go essentially through similar stages as in L_1 learning.

3. Teacher-training courses should not only deal with the teacher and what s/he can do to teach the language more effectively but they should also deal with the other partner in the teaching-learning game, the learner and his potential performance. Only if the teacher is familiar with the learner's potential language development, can s/he overcome an insistence in dealing with forms instead of with forms and functions in the context of the classroom as one possible social environment. The teacher will then be better equipped to help the learners to develop not only l i n g u i s t i c   s k i l l s but also c o m m u n i c a t i v e   a b i l i t i e s (Widdowson, 1978); in other words, to help them to develop their c o m m u n i c a t i v e   c o m p e t e n c e in the foreign language they are learning.

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1.

2. Data reference numbers: the first number indicates the tape number, the second number indicates the side of the tape and the third number the transcribed conversation.

3. M stands for Mummy;

4. V stands for Vally, the informant's first name.

5. A stands for Ashalon.

6. N stands for Nicky.