

# A Problem in Second Language Acquisition

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## 0. Introduction

When children happen to go to other countries, for instance because of their parent's work, they soon learn to adapt themselves to the new surroundings. On the other hand, adults have more difficulty to adapt even after a long time. University students, who love the country where they are studying, sometimes feel a culture shock. Moreover, though children soon learn to communicate with foreign friends in their second language and through gestures, adults cannot talk with foreigners easily. When leaving for their parent's new position abroad children adapt to the new environment much earlier than adults do. Children are much better than adults at acquiring second languages.

Concerning first language acquisition, all children are biologically equal and learn easily to use a language by means of communication by the early school years. It seems that the first language acquisition is an easy and quick task for children. However, it is our misunderstanding. Children have been exposed to the environment of a first language since birth and are immersed in the language all day long. If we consider that children spend an enormous time for acquiring their first language, it seems to be taken for granted that they learn to manipulate their first language in the early school years. Infants do not produce any words but they strive for acquiring language. Children by no means acquire their first language quickly and easily, nevertheless, they all learn to use it almost equally.

We shall return to the second language acquisition of adults and children again, as stated previously. In the case of an appointment abroad, adults and children begin to acquire a second language almost at the same time. Adults may already have a little knowledge of the language. However, most adults have a hard time in acquiring the language but most children soon learn to use it. Why are children more successful in acquiring a second language than adults although all human beings can equally acquire a first language? Is it the critical period?

In the first section of this paper I will describe the critical period theory for language acquisition. In the next section I will propose a theory of the period for acquiring a culture. In the last section I will consider speech acts and suggest some idea of adults' unsuccessful language acquisition.

## 1. The Critical Period

Children begin to utter a first word about one year old and learn to communicate with their first language almost properly at the time of their admission into an elementary school. As a matter of course, language acquisition has already started from their birth when they don't utter any words but only cry, and it goes on after entering an elementary school when they start to learn reading and writing. However, it is not too much to say that a first language is normally completed in childhood. Concerning second language acquisition, children are generally better learners than adults. Furthermore, the younger the learners are, the more successful they are in acquiring language. In Japan, English is commonly taught to junior high school students, but there is a growing tendency to teach it to elementary school children. Is the age having any relation to language acquisition? Is it impossible for us to acquire a language perfectly after a certain age? As a beginning, I will examine the theory of the critical period for language acquisition in which the age is an essential factor in language acquisition.

The theory of the critical period started with Penfield's view. He was a neuropsychologist and suggested that children's quick and effortless first language acquisition is related to the development of the brain in childhood (Penfield and Roberts, 1959). (This is, however, an ill-advised notion because children indeed by no means acquire their first language quickly and effortlessly as I mentioned before.) Lenneberg, a biologist, followed Penfield's view and developed it. He said that between the age of two and puberty the human brain shows plasticity which allows children to acquire their first language (Lenneberg, 1967). This is the theory of the critical period for language acquisition.

Is this theory enough to explain language acquisition? If it is true, we cannot acquire another language perfectly in the same way as the first language acquisition after puberty or have to acquire it with other function of the brain than the one used for first language acquisition. Klein denies the propriety of this theory (Klein, 1986 : 10):

But there are serious doubts as to whether it is true. Firstly, the strictly biological evidence is by no means conclusive (for a discussion see Lamendella, 1977 ; Ekstrand, 1979 ; Paradis and Lebrun, 1983). Secondly, the notion that second language acquisition becomes more difficult and is less effective after the age of puberty rather than before, is indeed corroborated by everyday observation as well as by some empirical investigations.

He goes on to say that ideal second language acquisition is biologically feasible even after the age of puberty and gives the following example (Klein, 1986: 10):

Even in the case of phonology - including intonation - where adult second

language learners often seem to encounter special difficulties, investigations by Neufeld (1979) have shown that suitably motivated adults are capable of mastering to perfection the pronunciation of the (for them) most exotic languages, as revealed by the fact that native speakers could not recognize any 'foreign accent' in their speech.

Klein believes that the most important reason for the difficulty of adult second language acquisition is of a social nature. He says: "It may be, for example, that the adult is much less willing to give up his well-established social identity." (Klein, 1986 : 10)

The theory of the critical period may be insufficient as such to make clear the complex mechanism of language acquisition. Nevertheless, the difficulty of second language acquisition after the age of puberty is an obvious fact. It seems that social identities of adults have some connection with second language acquisition. Next I will examine when social identity of the individual is solidly established in the mind.

## 2. A Period for Acquiring Cultural Patterns

While acquiring language, children are learning the cultural patterns of their society. That is to say, children are socialized through acquiring language. Therefore, it is impossible to discuss language acquisition apart from socialization. Children's socialization means that children take in value criteria peculiar to the culture where they are exposed. Socialization is defined as follows (Kojima, 1987 : 48):

社会化とは、「ある社会集団に属する個人が、その集団が共有している行動様式、知識、技能、思考、態度、動機、価値などを身につけることによって、集団の一員となるように導かれて行く過程」のことである。

Socialization means 'the process in which the individuals, who belong to one social group, acquire behaviors, knowledge, skills, thoughts, manners, motivations, and values which are common in the group, and, as a result, they become a member of the group.'

In this section, I will consider when children take in the cultural patterns of their society.

Children exposed to different communities may be socialized through different value criteria. In other words, each child learns to assimilate to his/her society according to the environment surrounding him/her and acquire cultural patterns through his/her experiences in the society. In order to explore when and how children acquire cultural patterns of their own, Minoura(1991) examines children who are living in other cultural societies than those they were born in. Her belief is that if a child was born and raised in one society, it is difficult to know when he/she acquires his/her

cultural patterns. She stresses the differences of behaviors concerning personal relations between Japanese and Americans. Generally speaking, Japanese depend on others but Americans are self-centered. When children come to America because of their parent's work, they learn to assimilate to the American society and acquire American behavioral patterns. That is to say, they learn to be self-centered persons. Minoura interviews seventy-two Japanese mother-child pairs in Los Angeles and classifies these seventy-two children into five types as follows (Minoura, 1991 : 225):

(I) 日本人とアメリカ人の対人関係のもちかたが違うという認知がなく、ズレをどこにも感じていないタイプ

In this type, informants do not even acknowledge the differences of behaviors between Japanese and Americans, and do not feel discrepancies.

(II) 行動が違うという認知はあるが、アメリカ人のようには振舞えないか、振舞おうとしないタイプ

In this type, informants acknowledge the differences of behaviors, but cannot behave or dare not behave like Americans.

(III) 認知 行動はアメリカ的だが、情動の動きは日本的なタイプ

In this type, informants' acknowledgements and behaviors are American, but their feelings are Japanese.

(IV) 認知 行動はアメリカ的だが、情動面はどちらとも判定がつかないタイプ

In this type, informants' acknowledgements and behaviors are American, but their feelings cannot be judged as either Japanese or American.

(V) 認知 行動 情動すべてでアメリカ的で、ズレを感じていないタイプ

In this type, informants' acknowledgements, behaviors, and feelings are all American, and they do not feel any discrepancies.

Children in type (I) do not assimilate to the American society at all, and the ones in type (V) are the most Americanized. Consequently, in case that children come to America before nine years old, they are generally in type (V). However, if children come to America after eleven years old, they mostly are in type (I), (II), or (III) but never are in type (IV) or (V). The following table shows that a correlation between the above five types and the age when children came to America and how long they have been staying there.

表11-1 渡航時年齢別・滞米期間別アメリカ文化同化度 (N=72)

渡航時年齢		9歳未満		9、10歳時		11~13歳時		13歳以上		行小計		行合計
滞米期間 アメリカ文化同化度		4年 以上	4年 未満	4年 以上	4年 未満	4年 以上	4年 未満	4年 以上	4年 未満	4年 以上	4年 未満	
タイプI	N	2	1	1	3		2		1	3	7	10
	行%	20%	10	10	30		20		10	30	70	100
	列%	8%	7	34	25		25		25	9	18	14
タイプII	N		4		5		4		2		15	15
	行%		27		33		27		13		100	100
	列%		29		42		50		50		39	21
タイプIII	N			1	1	4	2		1	5	4	9
	行%			11	11	45	22		11	56	44	100
	列%			33	8	100	25		25	16	11	13
タイプIV	N	10	9	1	3					11	12	23
	行%	44%	39	4	13					48	52	100
	列%	40%	64	33	25					34	32	33
タイプV	N	13								13		13
	行%	100%								100		100
	列%	52%								41		19
小計	N	25	14	3	12	4	8		4	32	38	70
	行%	35%	20	4	17	6	12		6	45	55	100
	列%	100%	100	100	100	100	100		100	100	100	100
不明	N	1			1					1	1	2
計		40		16		12		4		72		72

(1979年8月までに採集のデータに基づく)

(Minoura, 1991 : 226)

Minoura concludes that it is the age of coming and the length of staying that have the most effect on children's acquiring cultural patterns. She builds up a hypothesis that there is a critical period for acquiring cultural patterns and it is from the latter stage of concrete operations of the Piagetian theory to the beginning of formal operations (i.e., the age from 9 to 14 or 15). As children once acquire their cultural identity, they cannot easily adapt themselves to the new cultural surroundings.

Furthermore, she points out that as children rapidly learn to acquire English two years after their coming to America, they also rapidly acquire cultural patterns. It is clear that the acquisition of language and the acquisition of cultural patterns (i.e., the socialization) interact with each other.

It might be too much to assume that there is a critical period for acquiring cultural patterns because one can change value criteria of one's own will after growing up. However, it seems that children take in their cultural patterns, that is social identities, simultaneously with language acquisition when they were very young. The social identities may firmly remain in their mind and affect their acquiring language. Next I will consider how the social identity of adopted culture has an influence on second language acquisition.

### 3. Speech Acts

I have showed that social identity of the individual is established approximately simultaneously with language acquisition. Next I shall focus my attention to find out what is the influence of an individual social identity on his/her language acquisition.

Japanese bow or say, "*Konnichiwa* (Hello)," when they meet with an acquaintance but they never exchange greetings with a stranger. However, Americans cheerfully hail and say to a person passing by, "Hello. How are you?" Japanese and American behaviors are sometimes different in the same situation. In other words, speech acts are different from culture to culture.

The first scholar to give much attention to speech acts was Austin (1962). The following passage, which explains Austin's theory of speech acts, is quoted from Cohen (1996:384):

A *speech act* is a functional unit in communication. According to Austin's theory of speech acts (1962), utterances have three kinds of meaning. The first kind is the *propositional* or *locutionary* meaning, namely, the literal meaning of the utterance. If a pupil says to a teacher or sends a note, "It is hot in here," the locutionary meaning would concern the warm temperature of the classroom. The second kind of meaning is illocutionary, namely, the social function that the utterance or written text has. The *illocutionary* meaning or function of "It's hot in here" may be a request to turn down the heat. If the utterance is expressed emphatically or if it is repeated, perhaps it would also function as a complaint. Austin adds the notion of *perlocutionary force*, that is, the result or effect that is produced by the utterance in that given context. Thus, if the utterance leads to the action of turning down the thermostat in the room, the perlocutionary force of that utterance would be greater than if the request were ignored.

From Austin's time, many scholars have studied speech acts. Their common view is that speech acts are fundamental to human communication. They are performances of certain acts through words, that is, requesting something, refusing, thanking, greeting someone, complimenting, and complaining.

After these definitions of speech acts, I would like to deal more in detail with the differences between Japanese and Americans' speech acts. As I mentioned above, Japanese speech acts are sometimes different from Americans' speech acts. Gass says, "... speech acts are realized from culture to culture in different ways and that these differences may result in communication difficulties that range from the humorous to the serious." (Gass, 1996 : 1) The differences between social identities are often revealed in the differences of speech acts. Matsumoto (1994) successfully explains a peculiarity of Japanese and American culture by applying his original notion of Cultural Transformational Rule (CTR). According to Matsumoto's theory, the deep structure of

Japanese and American mind is the same, but through other CTR, their manifestations, that is their surface structures (i.e., speech acts) are different.

We cannot understand the illocutionary meaning and the perlocutionary force of speech acts through formal learning of a language. Acquiring language means that not only we learn to use the language literally but also we understand the implied meaning of the language. In order to know the implied meaning we have to learn the cultural background of the language, for instance, the social identity of the person who uses the language.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this paper, I have pointed out the obvious fact that adults have more difficulties in second language acquisition than children do. The theory of the critical period, as such, is insufficient to explain the reason of adults' difficulties. However, the observations in Minoura's(1991) study have showed that people acquire their cultural patterns when they were very young and the cultural patterns firmly remain in their minds. According to Minoura's theory, cultural patterns are almost simultaneously acquired with language. Furthermore, it seems that the individual well-established cultural patterns, that is social identities, have an influence on second language acquisition. The deep mind of individuals is the same, but through other value criteria of the adopted culture, the realizations are sometimes different. In other words, speech acts are different from culture to culture. These differences give rise to communication difficulties among adults. We, therefore, conclude that well-established social identities of adults are one of the problems in second language acquisition.

Adults are more worried about making an error than children are. I think that this communication anxiety may be another problem in adults' second language acquisition. To account for how individual identities have an influence on second language acquisition will be the object of a further study.

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