UNDERSTANDING HOLOPHRASTIC SPEECH BEYOND VERBAL UTTERANCES

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Abstract
One interesting phenomenon of the child language is that it, all over the world, goes through processes which are universal, meaning that all normal children in the whole world undergo the same processes in acquiring language. In other words, the development of child language acquisition can be considered universal. This paper will analyze children’s holophrases – sentences expressed in one word – which can be noticed starting at the age of around one year or later. One main question will be answered in this paper, that is, how caretakers - parents, nannies, or anyone taking care of the children - can astonishingly understand children’s intended speech spoken during this holophrastic stage, and they can even repeat the intended speech in full sentences for the children without any misunderstanding. As the main subject to get the data, I had some observation on my niece, Esther (not the real name), who was 2.3 years old (28 months), at the time the research was done, and still produced holophrases which were well understood by her parents.

Keyword: Holophrases, Children

A CLOSER LOOK AT CHILD LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Children with normal hearing and speech organs have to undergo some processes before they can speak their first words. Noam Chomsky, the well-known linguist (cited in Elliot, 1981: 10), claims that almost all children by the age of five have learned the basic structures of their own language, though they may have different intelligence levels and the richness of the learning environment. It seems to be the critical period for language acquisition, for adults will find it more difficult to learn a
second language than a primary school child does. Chomsky also emphasizes how significant the universals of language are. Despite the superficial differences in the structures, all languages of the world share many important features at a deeper level. Language, in his opinion, is “species specific” (p.10).

Talking about a universal base, Chomsky suggests that knowledge of the universal base is innate (possessed from birth), enabling children to form hypotheses about the structure of their language. Inside children’s mind, there is LAD (Language Acquisition Device) which accepts linguistic data as input and the output is the grammar of the language, which the data have been drawn from (p.7). Children’s activities in learning their language, in Chomsky’s argument, are equivalent to the workings of the LAD. It represents the innate capacity in learning a natural language; part of that inborn capacity is knowledge about the language structure (p. 8 & 11). In brief, it can be summed up that according to Chomsky, babies are born with a special device called LAD which enables them to receive linguistic data as input and construct grammar as the output. The device has been there since birth, it is inherently attached in their mind and no matter what their intelligence level is, they are able to form hypotheses about the language that they naturally learn.

About the processes in acquiring language, basically all children will go through similar phases in their speech production starting from babbling, single words, phrases, and finally more complicated sentences, which will be elaborated in the next part.

CHILDREN’S MORPHOLOGICAL STRUCTURE IN THE FIRST TWO YEARS

As mentioned before, children utter their first word at the age of one or later. Yet we have to be well informed that before that age, it does not mean that babies do not communicate with the people in their surroundings. In the first two years, children change drastically from helpless infants who barely can speak and respond to people, into mobile, inquisitive, communicative toddler, and they are preoccupied with exploring their physical environment (Villiers & Villiers, 1979: 13).

How does actually a child learn language so well in such a short time? We are often amazed with the children’s ability to speak in accompaniment with their outburst of vocabulary. What a surprising de
velopment, we often think. In the first few months of life, speech elicits greater electrical activity in the left half brain of the child, and music evokes greater activities in the right half brain (Villiers & Villiers, 1979: 16). That is why we should not wonder why babies are often given toys which give out sounds or music; this is to stimulate the babies’ brain development. Since their birth, babies actually have been able to discriminate speech from non speech though they pay greater attention to human speech.

1. Babbling

At about the age of three or four months, babies start cooing (soft, murmuring sounds like those of a dove) and babbling (the sounds of a baby, often with screams), both of which approximate speech. Babbling continues until the age of around nine or twelve months. The age of one year marks an important step in the journey of children’s language development: the beginning of the understandable word production. In some cases, babbling stops when children can produce their first words, but in others, it still continues for some time until their intelligible vocabulary appears. Children start to make their understandable words which are mainly reduplicated syllables like mama or papa, also single consonant-vowel syllables like ba for baby or da for dog (Villiers & Villiers, 1979: 19, 20). In Indonesian context, this phenomenon also happens, babies start to utter those kinds of syllables as well, like mama, papa, cucu (for susu/milk), gukguk (for dogs), pipis (for pee), bobok (for sleep, in Javanese), mam/maem (for makan/eat), mimik or mik (for minum/drink, in Javanese).

About the relationship between babbling and the first words, Villiers (1979: 21-2) mentions that

The child babbles a wide variety of speech sounds, some of which do not occur in the language he is learning, although they may be found in other languages. Thus a child who hears only English may nevertheless produce a click sound that is used extensively in southern African languages but never appears in English. On the other hand, the child may not babble many sounds that are quite frequent in his native language. Some sounds therefore drop out while others appear for the first time in the transition from babbling to word.
In other words, Villiers & Villiers (1979) try to confirm that there is no significant relationship between babbling sounds and the words of the child’s language that he/she will later produce. Babbling, we can conclude, is not the continuation of words, though the developmental pattern of babbling is very similar across different languages; French, Japanese, and English babies all sound similar at this stage. But there is a close relationship that exists between babbling and the pronunciation of the early words: there are a very few consonant clusters in babbling which is said to be fairly universal (for example, spoon is reduced to poon), while reduplicated syllables are common. In English situation, initial consonants outnumber the final ones. However, I cannot comment on these initial consonants which outnumber final consonants in Indonesian situation, for a survey needs to be done to find out. All of these features, Villiers & Villiers (1979: 26-7) mention, are the common patterns of early words.

2. Words

The shift from babbling to words represents a shift from uncontrolled practice or play with sounds to planned, controlled speech. Many children tend to regularize multi-syllable words to reduplicated syllables. At the same time, single-syllable words may be reduced to consonant + vowel (du for duck, for example) (Villiers & Villiers, 1979: 24). This, I assume, happens in English context only. In Indonesia, it seems that babies do not reduce single syllable words to consonant and vowel; for example, they can call their parents, pak, bu(k), mah, or pah, without omitting the final consonants. This needs further researches, however.

Villiers & Villiers (1979) further state that the first words that a child speaks are related to common vocabulary like important people around them: mother (mommy/mama/ibu), father (daddy/papa/bapak), and grandparents (granny/grandpa/yang-ti/yang-kung in Javanese). Favorite food and drinks (milk/cucu), common animals (doggy/guk-guk/kittie/pus) and daily routines (drink/mimik, eat/maem, sleep/bobok in Javanese) are also learned earlier. This idea is strengthened by Clark & Clark (1977) who assert that based on a survey on 18 children by Nelson (1973:302), it was found that the first ten words the children speak were related to animals, food and toys. Then, at the age of around
1.3 until 2 years, children have acquired around 50 words. In this period, children are very common to overextend or underextend a word that will be discussed below in more detail.

3. Overextensions and Underextensions

Overextension is the use of word to refer to a larger class of entities than the word labels in the adult lexicon. This happens because children may overextend a word for others based on the “shared semantic property.” The semantic properties can be as follows (Fromkin, 2000: 456-7, 706):

- natural kinds (or, in my opinion, natural features); For example, kitten is used to refer to all other four-legged animals.
- shape (Cookie is used for the moon; The moon is called a ball)
- color (A tomato may be called an apple because of the red color.)
- function (My niece, Esther, for example, called a duster sapul/broom, based on the same function: to clean or wipe dust; she also mistakes a pencil for a pen, bulpen both of which have the same function: to write with.)
- material (Esther also called a cat doll that I pointed to her gukguk, partly because of the same feature, that is, they are both animals, have four legs, and the same “material” as well; the dog that I have at home has short, soft fur just like the material of the doll.)
- sound (children may mistake radio for television because both produce sounds, or call a goat a cow because both make sounds.)

Underextension, on the other hand, is the mapping of a word into a very narrow, situation-specific referent. For example, the word shoe is underexteded to a certain kind of shoe only (Fromkin, 2000: 718, 455). Another example is the word flower is only applied for roses or jasmines. Other flowers may be called plants or even grass.

4. Holophrastic Stage

As pointed above, after going through a stage called cooing and babbling, children will produce reduplicated syllables, and finally they will start uttering their first understandable words, a stage that all moth
ers are anxiously waiting for. Children’s earliest speech consists of one-word utterances. Elliot (1981: 90) claims that it is common for children to pass through an early period when most of their utterances consist of a single word. Many of the utterances carry out conventional performatives like greetings or vocatives like Mommy.

This stage is commonly called the one-word stage or the holophrastic stage – meaning that children express a complete sentence in one word only. At this point, Fromkin (2000: 325) states, children seem to know not only what a word is, but also what make up a word from the morphological structure of their language. Elliot (1981: 90) further maintains that holophrastic speech has a “pivotal status” in language development: it marks the start of what we know as speech, in the way that it is vocalized or uttered, an advance from the cries and gestures the days before.

In conclusion, children across all languages go through similar stages in their speech production: cooing, babbling, uttering syllables, and finally words, before they produce more complicated sentence structures approaching the age of three. The language development process within children is such an amazing and interesting phenomenon that many linguists are urged to conduct researches on that matter. One thing that we must not ignore is that children themselves try to produce their utterances to serve a single purpose, which they want to achieve even since the moment of their birth: to interact with other people around them. This social interaction is highlighted by Villiers & Villiers (1979) as the main function of the children’s first words.

A CHILD’S HOLOPHRASTIC SPEECH AT THE AGE OF TWENTY EIGHT MONTHS: EXAMPLES AND OBSERVATION RESULTS

I had got a chance to observe my niece, a child of 2.3 years (28 months), in speaking holophrastic speech which was well understood by her father. All the data were derived during the girl’s interaction with her father. At the end of this section, after the analysis, the question raised in this paper will be answered.

Before I discuss further, it is worth noticing a question raised by Elliot (1981: 90) about this holophrastic speech:

When a child hands an adult a toy with detachable arms and says ‘off,’ or points to the mantelpiece and says ‘clock,’ the adult is likely
to respond as if the child has said ‘Could you take this off’, or ‘There’s a clock’ or ‘Where’s the clock’ depending whether the clock is in its place or not.

A question then came up my mind, how then, does the adult – whether they are the child’s parents, nannies, or older brothers and sister – understand the single-word utterances? Elliot (1981: 91) also asks, “If we assume for a moment that a full sentence underlies the child’s single word, do we assume that the word expresses the whole sentence or only part of it?”. Before answering the question, I would like to present some data that I managed to get from my observation for several days in November 2004, the right interpretation of the utterances and the possibly mistaken one are also presented.

From my observation, I concluded that what makes an adult able to understand or interpret the child’s holophrases is not simply the intimacy or affectionate relationship between the adult and the child, but it is more decided by the context in which the utterances are spoken, and it is helped also by the gestures that the kid makes.

When the child said, “botol” in case number 6, for example, I was there, watching the kid playing with a bottle of water and poured the water onto the soil. After pouring the water, she found out that the bottle was empty, instead of asking for “air,” she said “botol,” pointing it to her father. The father understood her request, got up, and filled the bottle with water. I could interpret her phrase very well. On the other hand, when the kid cried, and said, “sakit,” I was not on the spot; she just heard the cry, so when I came to see what happened, I thought that my niece had just fallen down, and bumped her head against the ground. In some cases, however, like cases number 1 and 10, anyone can interpret the words pulang and turun easily for we can simply guess the intended meaning behind the words.

Special for the ninth case, I was absent, I was not home that time, but her parents told her that every time Esther came to our house, she often raised that one-word question.

About the use of these single-word utterances, Elliot (1981: 90-1) makes a further comment as follows. If we say the child is using one word as part of an economical communicative act over which he/she has control, we are making a more appropriate statement than saying that the child has knowledge of the full sentence that he/she produces in a
A Twenty-Eight-Month-Old Girl's Holophrases

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Holophrases</th>
<th>Intended Sentences</th>
<th>Possible Mistaken Interpretations</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. pulang (go home)</td>
<td>Let's go home, Dad! / I want to go home.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. ayam (chicken), pointing to a piece of fried chicken</td>
<td>I want that fried chicken/ Give me the fried chicken.</td>
<td>That is fried chicken; Auntie is there.</td>
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<td>3. sana (there), pointing to the direction where I was standing</td>
<td>I want to go there, Dad.</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. minum (drink)</td>
<td>I want to drink/ Give me something to drink.</td>
<td>It is a drink.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. tipi (television)</td>
<td>I want to watch the TV.</td>
<td>That's the TV! The TV is there.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. botol (bottle), handing an empty bottle</td>
<td>Give me a bottle full of water, please/ Get me some water.</td>
<td>It's my empty bottle. It's in my hands.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. sandal (sandals)</td>
<td>Get me my sandals, please.</td>
<td>Where are my sandals? (Intonation is not rising, but it is possibly interpreted as a question.)</td>
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<td>8. sakit (it hurts); She was crying, holding her forehead, just bumped her head against the wall</td>
<td>My forehead hurts because I just bumped against the wall.</td>
<td>My forehead hurts because I just fell down headlong.</td>
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<td>9. Ko? (the way she calls me); I was not present.</td>
<td>Where's auntie? (I haven't seen her around.)</td>
<td>Is auntie in her room? / Is it possible if I want to meet auntie? / Please call auntie for me.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. turun (down), carried by her father</td>
<td>Get me down.</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. “tol’ aqua (water bottle), looking at the bottle</td>
<td>It's a water bottle (as if saying, “I know the brand of the drinking water bottle.”)</td>
<td>I want the bottle.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
single element. Referring to the above question (If we assume for a moment that a full sentence underlies the child's single word, do we assume that the word expresses the whole sentence or only part of it?), we can find the answer explained by Elliot based on researches done by three linguists, De Laguna, Leopold, and Nelson:

De Laguna (1927), Leopold (1949), and Nelson (1974) emphasize how nebulous and indefinite the child’s early concepts are, and so they could argue that for the child at this stage, word and sentence are one. De Laguna argued that it was important not just to consider the word the child expressed but also the gestures with which he accompanied the utterance and other aspects of the context of utterance. Children make use of the context of utterance to expand their expressive power (p.91-2).

It is the child’s gestures and the context of utterance that accompany the single-word utterance that enable caretakers to fully understand the child’s intended sentences, though these sentences are expressed in the form of holophrases. Despite the lack of perfect sentence structure that a child has, he/she is trying to communicate his/her desires or wants through these single words. Children are trying to express what they have in mind.

**CONCLUSION**

Different from children’s, adult’s speech or grammatical utterances are carefully selected and organized. Besides, they have got mature competence in their linguistic knowledge, hence they have no problems in expressing maximum information that they want to convey (Elliot, 1981).

This paper has raised one problem of child language, that is, holophrastic stage, or one-word stage, or single-word utterance. The question of how caretakers can fully understand the intended meaning behind the holophrases has been answered, that is, because caretakers see the situations beyond the child’s linguistic competence: gestures and context of utterance that become the determining factors also in understanding the single-word utterances, thus enabling them to even restate the single words in full sentences without any misinterpretation. I would like to close this paper with a quotation which shows us that child language is such an important sign that through the language, we
will get some idea of what the child knows.

The emergence of language is exciting because it is the reflection of what the child knows. Language provides a window on the child’s mental ability.
(Peter Villiers & Jill Villiers)

REFERENCES


