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# A PSYCHOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF PARENTESE IN FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

A Research

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## Dedication

*To...*

– who has gone beyond the veil, for his endless and infinite love, dedication, and support for his family;

*To ....*

our mothers, – who never get tired of being the world's coolest mums, for their blessings in every choice that we make and every action that we take; To every blunt person with loving hearts

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## **Abstract**

The main purpose of this research topics focuses on psycholinguistics, language acquisition. It describes how children learn and acquire their first language, as well as the factors affecting the acquisition. Parentese and baby talk, among many other factors, are unique in their nature and characteristics.

This paper is divided into two sections with introduction and conclusion.

The first section, sheds the light on a brief introduction about whole research, and it gives elaboration language acquisition, first language acquisition and how children acquire language, it also, shows the pre-linguistic stages and linguistic stages of children.

The second section, points out to the parentese and baby talk with indication to the and reasons of using parentese and the benefits of parentese in language learning, at the end of the paper there is a conclusion about the title of our research.

## **Section One**

### **1.1 Introduction**

Language lies in the central processing system of human beings. It is a very crucial thing they need to survive. Without language, whether spoken or written, a communication might fail. In communication, language is carried out through two basic activities: speaking and listening. In speaking, people put ideas into words and talk about perceptions, feelings, and intentions they want other people to grasp. In listening, they turn words into ideas, try to reconstruct the perceptions, feelings, and intentions to grasp. The process of how people use language is studied under the field of psycholinguistics (Joseph, 2003:14).

The term psycholinguistics involves two studies, i.e. psychology and linguistics. Therefore, in its people study how the psychological condition can affect the production and comprehension of a certain language. There are three major topics discussed in psycholinguistics: speech production, speech comprehension, and language acquisition. The first concerns with how human can produce speech how to articulate sounds and produce 'utterances. The second concerns with how human can perceive and comprehend utterances addressed to them, as well as how the language is processed in the brain. The last one concerns with how children acquire and communicate using language (ibid).

### **1.2 Language Acquisitions**

Language acquisition is known as the unconscious process by which the newborn acquires his first language. All children have the capability of learning any language as their mother tongue. There is no need to teach the language because the child acquires language through interaction with the surrounding people (Hutauruk, 2015: 52).

Cole (2008:11) says, “Language acquisition is a matter of growth and maturation of innate capacities”. i.e., every infant is born with an inborn ability to acquire any human language. Cole (2008:13) provides that linguistic structures used by a child are already printed in his mind. Yule (2010:76) also supports the idea of the existence of an innate capacity in any normal healthy child to acquire language. He argues that language acquisition is a fast process which occurs before the child starts learning a formal language in school.

Language acquisition is one of the child’s earlier achievements, which demands three components: the language, the baby and the environment. First, the existence of the language to be mastered. Second, the baby and his ability to acquire a language. Third, the environmental setting the child is surrounded by (Rice, 1989:149).

Language is not an inherited process but it is transmitted through environment and culture to the child. He acquires his mother tongue without tutoring. Unlike any other intellectual skill, language acquisition is affected by mental retardation (Hutauruk, 2015:54).

### **1.3 First Language Acquisition**

Troike (2006:4) states that first language acquisition is a language which is acquired during early childhood and it normally begins before the age of about three years old. Children are acquiring the language as long as they grow up. First language acquisition is the process of children acquiring their first language. The process takes place naturally in a child. Parents and the environment are very important and influential in the process of child language acquisition. Children usually listen and respond to the utterances produce by people around them, especially their parents.

The mother is a person that allows an opportunity for baby to participate in communication with her.

Basically, a baby only produces sound that is a language that we do not understand. Wright (1971:114) states that before producing single-word utterances, children are producing sounds of utterances that are meaningless to the adult. Then the sounds develop into a language which is perfectly with the development of their age. Through the first language, a child learns to express feelings and desires in the form of language. At the time of this language acquisition, the child uses the language to communicate with people around them. All normal children who grow up in normal households will acquire the language that is being used around them. It is just as easy for a child to acquire their language, as long as they are regularly interacting with speakers of that language. Children acquire language in stages, and different children reach the various stages at different times.

#### **1.4 How Children Learn Language**

The majority of people believe that language is learned through imitation. Children learn language through their exposure to it. They copy and repeat words they hear aloud. Children learn how to pronounce sounds and words through imitation, and they appear to enjoy imitating the sounds they hear (Steinberg et al, 2001: 41). However, there is a clear limitation: imitation can only be used for speech production, not speech comprehension. Imitation cannot be involved in the primary process of language learning, comprehension, because speech comprehension comes before speech production. Another obvious limitation is that imitation is not used in sentence construction. Abstract rules cannot be imitated because rules do not exist in the physical world.



Clark and Clark (1977:296) illustrate that when using a language, children are faced with two general problems. First, they have to figure out how to map their ideas and general knowledge into propositions that they can then express as single words or groups of words. Second, they have to find out how to communicate speech acts and thematic information along with the propositional content of their utterances.

After children have begun to map ideas onto propositions, they can begin to devise rules for combining words into sentences. They must concentrate on the structure of the language they are learning. Simultaneously, they must work on determining the rules for carrying on conversations. Here, they must concentrate on the function of language in order to understand the cooperative principles and everything that goes with it. They must also work on mastering the sound system. They must figure out which sounds are used in their language and learn to recognize them when others pronounce them. In short, children learn their first language through phonology, then in lexicon and syntactic structure, and later on in semantic meanings (ibid).

### **1.4.1 Speech Comprehension and Production Improvement**

Even long before children have the ability to speak a language, they already have the ability to comprehend utterances addressed to them. Concerning with how they produce speech, there are some stages of language acquisition that young children experience (Steinberg et al, 2001:7):

#### **1.4.1.1 Pre-Linguistic Stage**

##### **1- Crying**

The first sound the baby produces is the crying sound (birth cry). It is the first step in language acquisition that children use to communicate with

the external environment. Crying sounds differ one from another. It may be either a hunger cry, a thirst cry or a pain cry (Scoval, 2008:34). This crying is considered as non-linguistic sound and universal to all children. The physical sound of crying and its communicative meaning are directly related. The more the baby is not comfortable the longer and the louder the crying is. In this stage making noises and crying help the child to control the air that comes from their lungs and the use of their vocal cords. By the end of the crying period, the cry becomes more symbolic than iconic, i.e. it is not related to the child's feeling of discomfort but it is related to its needs and to attract others' attention (ibid).

## **2- Cooing**

Cooing is the second period in the pre-linguistic stage. This period continues until the sixth month of age. In this period, the baby's vocalization is composed of the following:

A-Short vowels /a/ and /u/.

b- Long vowels /a: /, /u: / and /i: / (Salim and Mehawesh, 2014).

During this stage, the baby starts cooing to express and convey his comfort and satisfaction with the caregiver. After a period of interaction between the child and caregiver, the cooing sound of the child is translated as a way of communication with adults in order to attract their attention. "After several weeks of extensive interaction with its caregiver the child starts to coo, making soft gurgling sounds, seemingly to express satisfaction" (Scovel,2008: 9)

## **3. Babbling**

By about 6 months of age, the baby begins to entertain himself by producing a collection of different sounds, trying to imitate adults' speech.

According to Janda and Hamel (Cited in Salim and Mehawesh, 2014:98) babbling is a necessary step in language development. In this period the newborn starts producing some plosive consonants like /b/ and nasal consonants as /m/ and forming consonant-vowel syllables such as: /ba/, /ma/, /da/, and /ta/.

Psycholinguists give two types of babbling, which are marginal and canonical babbling.

1- Marginal babbling is similar to cooing. It is considered as a pre-canonical vocalization. In this stage, the baby starts producing random consonants. Marginal babbling is defined as an exercise of the organs of speech. It is composed of consonants + vowel patterns, for example ‘ma’ and ‘ta’ (Sreeja, 2018:78).

2- Canonical babbling is when the child starts producing syllables as the ones of the caregiver’s language (Schoval, 2008:11). In this period, the child starts producing a combination of sounds.

He learns to repeat the sounds he hears around him. The parent in this stage helps their child in relating sounds to specific objects, such as ‘miao miao’ for a cat. Thus, the child learns to denote to objects or different things (Sreeja, 2018:79).

#### **1.4.1.2 Linguistic Stage**

##### **1.4.1.2.1 Holophrastic stage**

The term ‘holophrastic’ comes from ‘holophrase’, where ‘holo’ means ‘whole’, and ‘phrase’ means ‘phrase’ or ‘sentence’. This stage starts when the child is about 11 or 12 months. In this stage the infant produces one word instead of a sentence. Researchers have shown that the young child can express a variety of semantic functions and complex ideas by the use

of single words. For example, instead of saying “give me water” the child will say just “water”. Most children come out with their first words about one year of age, some earlier and some later. Some children will reach this stage much sooner than others. However, that does not mean that there is anything wrong with the baby who goes through it later (Salim and Mehawesh, 2014:76).

Through the holophrastic stage, children acquire words by reinforcement of their parents or caregiver. The reinforcement is considered as an encouragement to the child, by smiling at him or by acting any positive signals reacting to his performance. (Steinburg and Sciarini, 2006:56)

What is often seen in children in this holophrastic stage is something called generalization, which is when a single word is used to mean several kinds of related things. For example, ‘dada’ may first refer to one particular person, as it may include all men. The utterance ‘wow-wow’ refers to one dog, all animals, soft-shippers, or people in furs. (ibid).

#### **1.4.1.2.2 Telegraphic speech: two-and three-word utterances**

When the child is two years old, he starts to combine more than two words in their utterances. He starts to use what is called telegraphic speech, combining words without using functional words. In this stage, the lexicon of the child reaches more than 50 words (Yule, 2010:90).

The child’s language development goes quickly at this stage. He tries to link two utterances to form a sentence; however, it cannot be considered as a sentence yet because it is not complete. For example, the child says ‘mom juice drink’ to mean ‘mom give me some juice to drink’. During this stage the child starts ordering words correctly; he makes no word order mistakes. By the age of two and a half, the child’s vocabulary is more

developed. Even the pronunciation becomes similar to that of adults (O'Grady et al. 1997:54).

### **1.5 The Child Development in a Social Context**

As stated by Kopp and Krakow (1982:7) in *The Child Development in a Social Context* give a brief description of the stages of children's growth. They state that children at the age of 2 start to play with peers, feel empathy, pride, and embarrassment. They start to enjoy games that entertain them. As for their cognitive development, they can represent ideas with symbols, recall the past, and understand the future. They begin to concentrate doing something they are interested in. They sometimes watch television even though they do not know what actually being shown is. The language, cognitive, and social development change as the age changes(ibid).

Moreover, Kopp and Krakow (1982:285) state that language is composed of units that are nested into each other and combined in certain ways: The largest of these units, labeled as connected discourse, contains a series of utterances they are related to each other and are produced in a conversation. Walton, et al (1972: 274) states that before the age of five children do not use covert speech to memorize, reason, or plan. Instead, they seem to use speech in socially communicative ways to respond impulsively to specific situations, including the naming of objects to other people. It means that children under five do not consider what is meant by words and how to apply them correctly. They enjoy the sounds or the way they can produce the words(ibid).

Children everywhere learn to speak at about the same age and make progress at a rate that is roughly much the same. The way children talk would give the hearer a small description about who they are. There are

two important terms in children's language development egocentric and sociocentric modes of speech. Egocentrism refers to the children's isolation within themselves they sometimes talk without knowing to whom they speak or whether they are being listened to. The egocentric speech may be expressed through repetition or talking for the sake of talking, monologue or talking to oneself as thinking aloud, and collective or dual monologue (Walton, et al.,1972: 275).

This is in contrast with socialized speech in which the speaker addresses the listener, considers his point of view, at least to some degrees, -and tries to communicate with him. It is only at about the age of seven or eight that true social maturity appears simultaneously the disappearance of egocentric speech(ibid:276).

## **1.6 Factors Affecting First Language Acquisition**

Nature and nurture are said to be very important factors in the process of acquiring first language. The concept of nature was proposed by Chomsky in his Universal Grammar, that children all over the world are born with a hard-wired language acquisition device in their brains. The language acquisition device enables human infants to have innate ability for language, without which they would be incapable of learning such complete speech patterns in a natural human environment (Joseph,2003:15).

The concept of nurture refers to the way in which children are treated as they are growing, as compared with the characteristics they are born with. In this concept, it is believed that children development is partly because of the treatment from the people surrounding them. The way parents and others treat a child will determine the development level, including the language of the child. First language is picked up at home in

the most natural situations. Its learning takes place along with other aspects of biological growth such as walking and governed by the principles of proximity, usefulness, concreteness, particularity, and interest (Joseph,2003:16).

As well nature and nurture, there are some minor factors influencing the success of first language acquisition. They are proposed by Joseph (2003: 20) in Psychology of language learning as in the following:

**a. The physical environment**

The materials surrounding a child have a lot to do with what and how he picks up a language. Children get involved in the materials surrounding them much more than adults. Therefore, trees, cats, dogs, etc. have a lot to do with the way children learn their first language.

**b. The social environment**

A child growing up with parents and an orphan one will make a world of difference in language learning. A mother who goes out daily to work and the one who is always by her child will bring different influence toward the child's language learning. The mother, family, and neighborhood are important social elements for the natural language growth of a child.

**c. The physical and economic resources**

Economic resources influence a child's contact with things and events and possibly limit the range of the child's overall experience. They also determine to a great extent the feasibility of the parents to care for the language development of the child.

**d. Motivation**

There are several internal and external needs which compel children to learn their first language. Among the internal needs are the need for food,

warmth, and shelter. There are also emotional needs to fulfill, such as the need for constant love, care, and affection. These needs cannot be met unless the child masters some kind of liaison devices with the world outside. The first language is the most essential of such devices. The need of social interaction requires mastery over a language for interaction with the members of the society. There is the need for self-expression and creative behavior that can be met by language.

All the factors influencing first language acquisition, parentese and baby talk are possible ways to help children acquiring their first language. They both involve the participation of people surrounding a child that make the child exposed to certain language.



## **Section Two**

### **2.1 Parentese and Baby Talk**

Obviously, when talking to children, adults use different style of language. Clark and Clark (1977:322) show that adults talk to young children mainly about 'here and now'. They make running commentaries on what children do or for anticipating their actions. Adults talk about objects that children are interested in. They name, describe the properties, and talk about the relation between objects. There are two terms used to refer to the language used by adults when they are talking to children parentese or motherese and baby talk.

The adults involved in both parentese and baby talk might be the children's parents or others who are in the children's environment. The term parentese refers to the sort of speech that children receive when they are very young (Steinberg et al, 2001: 37). It is often referred to as motherese, caregiver speech, adult-to-child language, and child-directed speech. All of these terms take into consideration the fact that the child receives input from many sources mother, father, siblings, · relatives, friends, etc. and that such input has special linguistic characteristics.

On the other hand, the term baby talk which some experts say is the same as parentese is used for referring to a form of parentese that involves the use of vocabulary and syntax that is overly simplified and reduced (Steinberg et al, 2001: 39). Some characteristics of both parentese and baby talk are discussed in the following part:

### **2.1.1 The Characteristics of Parentese and Baby Talk**

Elliot (1981: 150) states that the term 'motherese' is the same as 'baby talk' used by Snow and Ferguson in *Psychology and Language* by Clark and Clark. It displays special modifications of the adult model, particularly at the levels of syntactic, and discourse features.

When adults talk to children, they tend to use simpler language than when they talk to other adults. It is adults who have to adapt themselves to children's language style. The modifications of the language used by adults to children as stated by Elliot (1981: 151) are discussed in the following:

#### **a. Syntactic Features**

Concerning with the syntactic features, there are some characteristics that parentese has:

##### **1) Shorter MLU (Mean Length of Utterance)**

MLU (Mean Length of Utterance) is a measure of linguistic productivity in children. It is traditionally calculated by collecting 100 utterances spoken by a child and dividing the number of morphemes by the number of utterances. A higher MLU indicates higher level of language proficiency. The MLU of adult utterances is 7. Therefore, when talking to children, adults' utterances have fewer MLU.

##### **2) Fewer Verb Forms and Modifiers**

Adults also minimized using verb forms and modifiers when talking to young children. In English, the present verb form is more preferable than the past one.

##### **3) Fewer Subordinate Clauses per Utterance.**

Adults use simpler utterances when talking to children. They usually use only one clause in each utterance and avoid using complex utterances to children.

#### 4) More Verbless Sentences

A verbless sentence is a sentence that is grammatically incorrect, since it has no predicate (no verb). However, it can be analyzed as consisting of grammatical units functioning as subject, object etc. Some examples of verbless sentences are questions, commands, and elliptical responses.

#### 5) More Content Words, Fewer Function Words

Content words or open class words are easier to be understood by children since they have clear referents. Words that are considered as content words are nouns, adjectives, verbs, numerals, and -interjections.

#### b. Discourse Features

The discourse features found in the utterances of adults to children are:

##### 1) More Interrogatives and Imperatives

Interrogative and imperative are used more often than other kinds of sentence when adults talk to children. The reason is very obvious: the interrogative is used for encouraging children to give response and the imperative is used for giving commands or request. Therefore, utterances such as Do you want some cookies? or Come here. Mommy have something for you. are common for children.

##### 2) More Fluent and Intelligible Speech

Adults' speech to children are usually fluent and intelligible. Fluent means speaking in a smooth and easily way. Being intelligible means using the simplest language, which is usually indicated by the use of simple

words and simple sentence structure. As stated by Clark and Clark (1977: 326), an adult's utterance to other adults usually consist of more than 10 words. Thus, when talking to children, adults use less than 10 words in an utterance.

### 3) More Repetitions

Using many repetitions is one of the characteristics of adults' utterance to children. By using more repetitions, children will get the meaning of the utterance easier. The repetition might be done completely or partially. Complete repetition refers to the repetition of the whole utterance, such as in Mommy is coming! Mommy is coming! When the repetition is dorie partially, only parts of the utterance that are repeated, such as in Mommy ... Mommy is coming!

Besides Elliot, Clark and Clark (1977:327) also, states some characteristics of adults' utterances to children. They are:

- a. Almost 100% of the utterances addressed to children aged two are followed by a pause. The number is decreasing along with the increase of the age of the children.
- b. Once children begin to see one and two-word utterances, adults begin to provide both implicit and explicit information about conversational turns. For example, they may provide model dialogues in which the same speaker asks a question and then supplies an answer to it.
- c. Adults seldom correct what children have to say. When they do it, they only seem to do it to make sure that the child's contribution is true. The correction is made explicitly or implicitly.
- d. Adults use very short sentences when talking to young children. Since the sentences are short, the words used are also simple.

e. Adults repeat themselves when giving instruction. The repetitions are more frequent the younger the age of the child is. The repetitions allow children more time to interpret adults' utterances because they do not have to remember the whole utterances.

Clark and Clark (1977: 320-321) further state that there are three things that influence the way adults talk to children. First, they have to make sure that children understand an utterance being addressed to them, and not to someone else. To do this, they can use the child's name, a special tone of voice, or get the child's attention by touching them.

Second, once they have the child's attention, they have to choose the right words and utterances to make the child understand what is being said. For example, adults will not discuss something abstract but something that the child is doing, looking at, or playing with at the moment of the speech. Third, they shall make utterances that are easy to be understood. Usually, short sentences are preferable with slow pace of speaking (ibid).

## **2.2 The Reasons of Using Parentese**

Although they are still young in age, children are intelligent learners. They learn things faster than adults. However, since children are still egocentric, adults need to modify their language to get closer to them. There are some reasons behind the modifications of the language. All of them aim at stimulating children's learning process in producing and comprehending language (Cook, 1979:67).

### **a. Giving general problem-solving advice**

By their speech, adults give children a hint or a method rather than a solution. However, sometimes they also give direct instruction to get children involved in an activity (ibid).

b. Giving a manageable task.

Some tasks are too complex for children. Thus, adults may break the tasks into smaller ones that are still challenging, but children can handle. They divide the tasks into several stages (Cook,1979:68).

c. Giving advice in the form of questions

By using questions more than commands, adults challenge children to think and elaborate the answer as well (ibid).

### **2.3 The Benefits of Parentese in Language Learning**

The most important factor leading to the success of learning a certain language, whether the first the mother tongue or the second language, is language exposure. Whenever children are exposed more to a certain language, their learning will result better than they who are not exposed directly to the language. The language exposures that young children receive are mainly from their parents and people in the surrounding. Thus, the way these people communicate with the children is significant enough for the development of the children's language (Taylor,1992:32).

Investigating the process of how children learn language and also the characteristics of parentese and baby talk, there are some benefits that can be unveiled regarding the use of parentese or baby talk in relation to language learning. The benefits are that young children (Taylor,1992:34):

1.Develop more vocabulary

The speech that parents and others used in talking to children is usually around the concept of here .and now about what is happening in the immediate environment and not-about remote objects and events. The vocabulary used is simple and short. For example, consonant plus vowel word patterns such as mama are preferable than the more complex sound

patterns such as mother. This will provide children easy pronunciation of words that they will enjoy to pronounce.

The words parents use in speaking to young children anticipate the nature of the child's world (Clark and Clark, 1977: 323). Adults select their words that seem to have the most immediate relevance to what their children might want to talk about. The principle of immediacy is really held tightly when adults are talking to children. Besides the ease in pronunciation, introducing words this way enables children to relate the words with their referents. Thus, children will develop more vocabulary easily even though their pronunciations are not yet perfectly developed.

## 2. Understand abstract concepts easier

Although there are more concrete words learned in comparison to the abstract ones, children are sometimes presented with abstract concepts. When parents or others surrounding the children introduce abstract concepts, they usually do this with exaggerated intonation, pitch, and stress (ibid).

Parents tend to use higher pitch, slower speech, with more and clearer pauses between utterances, and they placed more distinctive stress on words that are considered important. They also frequently repeat or rephrase what they or their children say. For example, when introducing the concept hungry, which is a quite abstract, parent can use higher pitch and stress on words associated with it such as stomach and eat. They can also use gestures to accompany them. By this way, children will have better understanding on the concepts introduced, including the abstract ones (Taylor, 1992:39).

### 3. Learn grammar naturally

Besides the advantages concerning with vocabulary, using parentese and baby talk help children with grammar. Generally, the speech to children is short and simplified. Although it is simplified, it is highly grammatical. Ungrammatical utterances are found to occur but rarely (Taylor, 1992:40).

'This grammatical consistency is useful to children who are searching to discover the structures which underlie utterances. They do this naturally of course, since parentese and baby talk are conducted in natural settings the children will find it unconsciously without being taught officially (ibid).

### 4. Understand conversation routines

From very early on, adults encourage children to take their turns as speaker and listener in conversation. Even when they talk to very small infants, they thrust conversational turns upon them. Whatever the children do is treated as a conversational turn, even though the adults carry most of the conversation. Once children begin to use one- and two-word utterances, adults begin to provide both implicit and explicit information about conversational turns (ibid:42).

One of the characteristics of parentese is that the utterances used are mostly in the form of interrogatives and imperatives. Adults use them hoping that their children will give responses to those speech acts. As a result, the children are accustomed to respond to these situations. They will understand when to take their turns in conversation without being aware that they have learned this from a very young age (ibid:43).



**Conclusion:**

Children learn language through their exposure to it. These language exposures come from their parents and others around them. When adults speak to their children, they modify their language so that the children can understand it more easily. Parentese and baby talk are terms used to describe the unique language modification that occurs when talking to young children.

Parentese and baby talk are beneficial in language learning process. The benefits are that young children can develop more vocabulary, understand abstract concepts easier, learn grammar naturally, and understand conversation routines. In short, although parentese and baby talk are not the only factors leading to the success of language learning, they are of great contribution toward it.

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