THE EFFECT OF LANGUAGE CODES IN THE HOME AND MATERNAL TEACHING STYLES ON THE LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PRESCHOOL CHILD

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A review of the literature shows that much doubts still exist on how children acquire language particularly in the traditional African societies.

Nevertheless, in almost all societies, interests, sometimes bordering on over-enthusiasm, had been shown on how children acquire language. For instance, Psammetichus, an Egyptian king of about the seventh century B.C. held that he would determine the most ancient language by the first language code uttered by the child. Marooning an innocent child, with a shepherd, in solitary confinement, the king was told that after two years, the child was constantly repeating "bekos" which in Phrygian meant bread. That led him to the surprising conclusion that the language Phrygian was the world's original tongue, Crystal (1971).1 The Holy Roman Emperor, Fredrick II of Hohenstaufen (d. 1250) made similar experiments, though the children died without results. All these and similar other experiments including that of James IV of Scotland are no more than curious speculation on the first utterance of the child. But subtly underlying them is the assumption that language acquisition was innate.

Perhaps, the first well known pioneering efforts at systematically investigating the language development of the child were those of Darwin (1877).2 He compiled a record of the language of his own son and got it published in 1840. But no sooner systematic studies began, that the dynamism became born of controversy on the theoretical rationale under-lying children's language development. In 1908, for instance, Stern (1908)3 proposed the principle of "convergence", that is, that language learning takes place by the interaction between what drive (Sprachdrang) that comes from the child and what factors come from the environment. The theory was later intensively and extensively assessed leading to a swing of the pendulum by scholars to two extremes - the Nativists and the Behaviourists.

The Behaviourists were immensely influenced by the studies of Pavlov (1927)4 in Russia, and Skinner (1957)5 in the U.S.A. To the behaviourists, language acquisition, like any other human habit, is based on stimulus and response. Though emphasis was put on the influence of the environment, they did not deny cognitive potentialities, Sapon (1968).6

Almost simultaneously, Chomsky (1965)7 set ripples on the linguistic scene by his assertion that cognitive potentialities are much more crucial in children's language learning than the stimulus from the environment. He was soon to have ardent supporters, including Lenneberg (1967)8, all of them asserting amongst others that:

(a) There is innate disposition in the child for linguistic acquisition.

(b) Children are capable of generating from primary to deep structures in their language.

(c) Imitation (i.e. habit formation) in language learning by children is subsidiary, for imitation itself has to be learnt.

(d) Children are essentially creative and capable of setting out their own linguistic hypothesis - testing it; redefining it; or rejecting it; as the occasion may warrant.

However, in spite of ensuing controversy on which takes priority - cognition or environment - increasing number of scholars hold the view that the child's family exerts the strongest influence. But speculation arises as to the variables most significant in the family. McCarthy (1953)9 asserts that a slight sex-difference in the children studied should be attributable to a closer mother-daughter than father-son relationship. Noel (1953)10 who studied language usage of 177 children and their parents came to the conclusion that the language an elementary school child hears from his parents determines the quality of his own. Stodolsky (1965)11 asserts that both the quality of the mother's language and her teaching styles contribute to her child's linguistic development. Lesser, et al12 claimed that middle class Jewish children excelled in verbal skills because of linguistic emphasis in Jewish homes. As early as 18 months, according to Irwin (1948)13, working class children's frequency and sound production improved with telling them stories at home. In fact, Rheingold (1959), (1963)14, 15 claims that as early as 3 months, reinforcement in the home increases the sound production of children.

The study is therefore designed to find out to what extent the traditional background of the Nigerian child (C-5 years) affects his linguistic development.

Method of Investigation

Eighty two mothers and their children (families) were sampled and these were considered fairly representative of the following variables: Socio-economic background, urban-rural location, family size and occupational status. One of the mothers had identical female twins. The age range of the children studied was 0-5 years. Some of the methods used include:

(a) Systematic observations of mother-child interaction for a period of $1\frac{1}{2}$ years.

(b) Systematic interview and printed questionnaire on methods of child rearing in the traditional homes.

(c) Tape recording and note taking of the language codes of parents and children involved in the study.

The writer is aware that a study such as this having limitations for language is closely related to other variables such as thinking, memory, conceptualization, intelligence and so on that it is difficult, if not impossible to separate linguistic achievements from the total development of the child.

Be that as it may, the writer is of the opinion that language and culture are intricately interwoven. Indeed, language is the manifestation of culture. Hence cultural attitudes have implications for learning. The overwhelming evidence from this study reinforces this feeling that the extended family system in Africa furnishes the child with varying language models, and actively

supported by organized material teaching styles.

Findings

This study, based on the sampled Yoruba families has led us to some interesting conclusions:

(i) The Yoruba extended family system provided the child with a variety of learning situations and emotional security. The diffusion of care for the child amongst several members of the family and the particular responsibility of the mother contribute to the rapid linguistic development found in the children studied.

(ii) We found that there was direct and specific material intervention by mothers on the linguistic training of their child. To the Yoruba mother, language is more than speaking and listening. It includes all forms of human interaction in which a person is made aware of a thought, feeling, on question experienced by another person. Over 80% of the mothers interviewed were of the opinion that "the odour of the maternal body", (for children are put at the back of the mother to appease the child when angry) and the continuous suckling are essential elements of language training. A mother puts it this way: "Without personal and affectionate security, you cannot talk properly, or know what to say".

(iii) Though it is generally believed that crying is the commonest form of early practice with the vocal organs, it is found that a majority of Yoruba mothers particularly induced their children to cry, and children were left to cry perpetually for a long time, before mothers come to appease them. One finds it difficult to understand this apparent 'cruelty' until one analyses the immense data on crying as an indispensable form of language amongst the Yorubas. Crying by adults is common in Yorubaland and it is a cultural manifestation of a tragedy and the style varies as to the event. There are symbolic cryings and real cryings. Majority of the Yoruba children interviewed claimed that "crying makes a child healthy and to be a good speaker as an adult". They put in a proverb thus "omo ti yio ba je asamu, kekere ni won ti se enu samusamu" (Trans. "a youth who is going to be sharp will be clear and precise in his speech/crying from childhood".

(iv) Linguistic features of children studied and maternal teaching styles:

Some mothers interviewed and observed claimed that they were able to determine the significance and meanings of early sounds of their children. A particular mother claims to be able to distinguish three distinct cried (i.e. of pain, of hunger, of 'desertion') of her 3-month old child when at a distance to the child. She claimed to do this by variations noted in the pitch, intensity, and style of the child's crying and sounds.

In very many instances, the investigator and his collaborators were surprised that mothers actually talked to their children between 1-6 months as if they talk to adults. These Yoruba mothers insisted that their children "heard" them. One mother declared: "words spoken to children are not lost, they internalize with them, go into their subconscious selves, to be made use of later". Hence, in Yoruba culture, direct teaching of tribal moves and norms, customs and traditions by mothers begin at birth.

(v) Also, it is interesting enough that a number of the children studied, as analysed by their tape recorded sounds, began oral-aural discrimination of tones very early, most of them at about six months. Yoruba is a tone language and tone is phonemic. They had started to verbalize at nine months though verbal labels are semantically and syntactically related. It is strange that most of the children encountered say "je je je" (i.e. eat eat eat) to mean "food". But there were a number of children who mixed up tones and so it is not very clear at what stage of development Yoruba children actually perceive tones. One child (born 11.4.1972) and at 2 years, still persists in saying baba (for father) rather than the correct form - baba or Baba. But the same child says Mo bubu (I fall down) with correct tonal features, though he used bubu for subu. In grammatical structures, many of the children studied use Mo (Pronoun, I) with verbal elements e.g. Mo bubu (I fall down), but O (2nd person pronoun, he/she/it) for themselves in all other cases, e.g. O too (I urinate), O sun ('I' want to sleep). It is the mother who intervenes in correcting these anomalous grammatical constructions.

The study shows that the extent, the nature, and the direction of language stimulation in the home and the community reflect the interplay of many factors which affect the Yoruba child. This study, though not in any way conclusive, nevertheless indicates certain directions in which further studies may be necessary.

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