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prefabricated
Language and
maturational
constraints in
child second
Language
Acquisition

víctor d. meléndez torres

ABSTRACT

THERE ARE TWO MAIN HYPOTHESES with respect to the role of prefabricated routines and patterns in children's second language acquisition process. One hypothesis states that creative language is the result of an internal creative process that takes place prior to the analysis and reanalysis of prefabricated routine and prefabricated pattern elements. A second hypothesis states that prefabricated language is the natural predecessor of creative language. The author concludes that although the evidence seems to suggest that children use prefabricated language frequently in their second language acquisition, this does not conclusively rule out the presence of an automatically occurring internal creative process.

Keywords: internal creative process, prefabricated language, prefabricated routines, analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

THERE IS MUCH SCIENTIFIC LITERATURE documenting research projects that have sought to shed some light onto the process by which child second language learners become linguistically creative in constructing sentences (i.e., fluent) without formal language instruction¹. Prefabricated language has been thought to be an essential--probably indispensable--ingredient of second language acquisition in children². However, there isn't a consensus as to its role in the advent of creative language. So, the issue remains a much debated one, to say the least.

The general concept "prefabricated language" (PL) can be defined as "...readymade, memorized chunks of sentences..."³ and it entails two more specific concepts: "prefabricated routines" and "prefabricated patterns."⁴ According to Krashen,⁵ "prefabricated routines are simply memorized whole utterances or phrases, such as 'How are you?' or 'Where is your hotel?'. A performer may use prefabricated routines without any knowledge of their internal linguistic structure. On the other hand, prefabricated patterns are utterances where part of the sentence is "flexible," with the rest of the sentence remaining inflexible."⁶ "That's a ____" ("car," "balloon," etc.) and "I want

to ___” (“play,” “go out,” “eat some candy,” etc.) are examples of prefabricated patterns.

THE “INTERNAL CREATIVE PROCESS”

There are two main hypotheses with respect to the role of prefabricated routines and patterns in the first and second language acquisition process. One hypothesis states that an internal creative process takes place first, and then the combination and recombination of prefabricated routine and prefabricated pattern elements takes place. The combination and recombination processes--or, using Stephen Krashen's terminology, “analysis” and “reanalysis”⁷--are the consequences of an independent creative process, thus indicating that such creative process is growing. In other words, the combination and recombination processes mean that the creative process has already begun internally, and is thus analyzing and reanalyzing prefabricated routines and prefabricated patterns until all of their elements are freed from the linguistic structures in which they used to appear. Once the “freeing” of prefabricated routine and prefabricated pattern elements occurs, they are freely combined into “creative” utterances. Hence, it is reasonable to say that this view is based on the assumption that the analysis and reanalysis of prefabricated routines and prefabricated patterns are not due to the effects of daily socialization, but to an automatic internal (biologic?) analytic process. In other words, the daily use of prefabricated routines and prefabricated patterns with other people does not enable an extraction or deduction of linguistic rules. A pre-experiential, innate, and perhaps genetically programmed language faculty accounts for the analysis and reanalysis of prefabricated language, and the advent of creative utterances.

This assumption seems to explain a further assumption held by this hypothesis, namely, that prefabricated routines and prefabricated patterns are temporary shortcuts to early production beyond the current level of competence, demanded by social and communicative pressures--that is, useful only for satisfying the need for socializing.⁸ Hence, “the creative construction process is independent of routines and patterns,”⁹ which further implies that prefabricated language plays a non-crucial role in child second language acquisition.

There is a significant amount of scientific literature arguing that the analysis and reanalysis of prefabricated routine and prefabricated pattern elements are the consequences of an independently occurring --perhaps biologic-- creative process.¹⁰ Take, for instance, Hatch's ¹¹ description of the case history of Paul, a 4-year-old Chinese learner of English as a second language.

After arriving in the United States, Paul was exposed to English while interacting with children who were native speakers of that language. He interacted with the English-speaking children in school and in the playground,

and made early use of prefabricated language. During the first month of his arrival, "it seemed as if Paul was learning by imitation. He might repeat the sentence immediately after the other person said it, or he might remember it and use it later in the appropriate situation."¹² "Propositional" speech appeared in the second month. Some prepositional sentences were the following: (1) "This kite."; (2) "Ball no."; (3) "Paper this."; and (4) "Wash hand?". At the same time, Paul was using prefabricated language--specifically, prefabricated routines--such as: (1) "Get out of here." and (2) "It's time to eat and drink." Hatch explains her findings in the following way:

Quite clearly two separate and very distinct strategies were running side by side. After week twelve it became increasingly difficult to separate out imitations since Paul's rule stages moved so fast that he quickly caught up with the language as it was spoken by the children in the playground.¹³

In the same line as Hatch,¹⁴ Wagner-Gough contends that prefabricated patterns do not directly evolve into creative rule-governed language:

It is quite clear that there is no transfer between some imitations and subsequent free speech patterns. For example, a learner may say 'My name is Homer' in one breath and 'He Fred' in another, the former being a memorized pattern and the latter the learner's own rule.¹⁵

The view that an internal creative process takes place prior to the analysis and reanalysis of prefabricated routine and prefabricated pattern elements is explained succinctly by Krashen and Scarcella:¹⁶ "Prefabricated routines may evolve into patterns, but at the same time, independently, the creative construction process develops. This implies that in some situations propositional language may 'catch up' with automatic speech--that is, the language acquisition process may 'reanalyze' patterns and routines as creative constructions." In other words, the "prefabricated language" mode and the "internal creative process" mode are independent of each other, and the "internal creative process" mode eventually predominates. Prefabricated language serves only as a shortcut, a practical tool to allow social interaction with a minimum of linguistic competence, "...a temporary strategy for the performer to solve certain communication problems that his creative language has not evolved far enough to handle."¹⁷

Such view is congruent with Chomsky's¹⁸ notion of a "Universal Grammar," in that it assumes a pre-experiential, innate, and perhaps genetically

programmed language faculty that accounts for the analysis and reanalysis of prefabricated language and the advent of creative utterances. However, it should be noted that the role of Universal Grammar in second language acquisition is still unclear, as "...there are still a number of logical possibilities concerning its role in second language learning."¹⁹

"UNIVERSAL GRAMMAR" AND MATURATIONAL CONSTRAINTS IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

It is a common observation that young children construct the complex grammatical system of their primary language without any systematic training or explicit instruction. More importantly, the highly complex nature of the rule systems that govern the child's developing grammar could not emerge from any kind of experience alone.²⁰ The knowledge that underlies the structures of language that have developed by age six is simply too abstract to have been constructed from the application of general learning strategies, such as comparing and contrasting different kinds of examples, generalization, and analogy, among others. Consequently, linguists propose that a language-specific faculty or module that is pre-experiential, innate, and genetically programmed places at the disposal of the child an elaborate conceptual framework of prior knowledge that assigns structure to linguistic input and builds the complex cognitive network which quickly develops into a complete knowledge system corresponding to the basic grammar of the child's mother tongue.²¹

The idea that children "learn" language suggests that the neural wiring for language is characterized by "plasticity", which refers to the brain's alleged ability to reorganize neural pathways based on new experiences.²² However, the concept of a language-specific faculty proposes that the neural wiring for language is a trait acquired by humans through an evolutionary process, and is "brought to the surface" or "triggered" by experience.²³ In other words, the concept of a language-specific faculty naturally implies that humans are born with a basic language design –otherwise known as "Universal Grammar"²⁴– which eventually evolves into one of the many languages of the world. But this "basic language design" does not evolve into a full-fledged language only through a "learning" process. Rather, it becomes a regular language mostly as a result of receiving input that triggers the further unfolding of the genetically predetermined "basic language design." The proposed existence of a language-specific faculty implies that the idea that children "learn" their first language is misleading.²⁵

The existence of a language-specific faculty was hypothesized following the fact that all of the world's languages have some very deep commonalities. These commonalities are called "principles"²⁶; they are what make all languages equal, at a very high level of abstraction. For example, one princi-

ple is that of “structure-dependency,” which means that all languages are structured into phrases, and the phrases are themselves structured.

However, languages are different at the surface level. Even if the structure-dependency principle appears to be shared by all languages, there must be many other rules that differ between languages. Otherwise, it would not be possible to distinguish one language from another, as all would work in the same way. What, then, makes one language different from another?

“Parameters”²⁷ determine the ways in which languages vary. A parameter is a set of options that Universal Grammar makes available with respect to a particular phenomenon. One of many parameters is the “*head parameter*.” To illustrate, consider the following sentences: a) *She* bought a new car yesterday; b) *My friend* bought a new car yesterday; c) *The friend that I met in Australia last year* bought a new car yesterday. “She,” “My friend” and “The friend that I met in Australia last year” are phrases –specifically, noun phrases. The crucial word in these phrases is “friend” (or “she,” if we have already referred to this person earlier in the conversation). Because it is the central element, “friend” (or “she”) is the “head” of the phrase, and “bought a new car yesterday” is the “complement.” So, the head parameter specifies the position of the head in relation to its complements. In other words, the head parameter deals with the way in which phrases are structured, and it can only have two settings: “head-first,” or “head-last.” Consequently, from the “language-specific faculty” point of view, the “basic language design” mentioned previously in this article does not evolve into a full-fledged language merely through a “learning” process. It becomes a regular language mostly as a result of receiving input that triggers the choosing of specific parameter settings. A particular set of parameter settings will result in the evolvment of a specific language. Thus, if anything is learned, that would be the parameter settings.

One logical possibility concerning the role of Universal Grammar in second language learning is that there are maturational constraints that limit learners’ access to certain aspects of Universal Grammar as they mature cognitively.²⁸ For example, under controlled conditions, older students tend to attain mastery of one or another structural aspect of the target language more rapidly than younger students.²⁹ However, with respect to the ultimate (long-term) attainment of the second language, the tables are turned: “younger starters” normally outperform “older starters,” controlling for the “length of experience with the second language” variable.³⁰ Thus, older learners have a short-term advantage in the second language acquisition process; but younger learners have a long-term advantage, meaning that younger learners will ultimately demonstrate better performance in the second language.³¹ The earlier the contact with the second language, the more complete the learner’s acquisition of it.

