

## MSA as a Mother Tongue in Algerian Children, Challenges and Constraints, the Case of Three Young Girls.

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### **Abstract:**

This article deals with a realistic experience. The latter is all about the formal functional linguistic repertoire through the process of first language acquisition. our three daughters have been the case study, where we used MSA as a mean of interaction and communication with them from their first months and observed their progress. In addition, and thanks to different cartoon channels broadcasted in MSA, our daughters got a rich linguistic repertoire that enabled them constructing full grammatically correct sentences. But, unfortunately, this progress did not last; as the official contact with the Algerian dialect was when our first daughter entered to school, and she was criticised by the others; the matter which led her to use the dialect whenever necessary and her sisters were affected by the new situation. Far from the academic and religious settings, using MSA is negatively received by our society members, unlike the case of French.

**Key words:** functional linguistic repertoire, MSA, first language acquisition (FLA), dialect, communication, society.

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## I. Introduction

Language is an integral part of our society, and the way we live our lives. It is an irreplaceable aspect of every culture; it is a cognition that truly makes us human and helps make us unique as individuals. Through language we each of us cut through the barriers of our own personal existence. In doing so, we use language as an abstraction of the world within and around us. Our ability to interpret that world is extraordinary enough, but our ability to abstract from it just certain key aspects, and to convey that abstraction through the medium of language to another individual, is even more extraordinary. The challenge for psychology has been to reveal, in the face of extraordinary complexity, something of the mental representations and processes that underpin our faculty for language. This psychological study of language is called psycholinguistics or psychology of language, which is the empirical and theoretical study of the mental faculty that underpins our consummate linguistic agility. In other word, it is the study of the cognitive process that supports the acquisition and use of language. Thus, language acquisition is one of the central topics in cognitive science. Every theory of cognition has tried to explain it; probably no other topic has aroused such controversy. Nonetheless, learning a first language, either monolingual or bilingual first language acquisition, is something every normal child does successfully, in a matter of a few years and without the need for formal lessons. It is not surprising that children's acquisition of language has received so much attention. Anyone with strong views about the human mind

would like to show that children's first few steps are steps in the right direction.

## **II. The Most Influential Theories in Language Acquisition**

### **II.1. Introduction**

Nowadays, many children born under bilingualism conditions or during their childhood they are exposed to bilingual circumstances such as immigration or bilingual parents who use a different language and/or dialects at home. However, both monolingual and bilingual children (simultaneous bilingualism) follow the same pattern with similar stages during acquisition ages although it is possible that in bilingual children the stages do not occur at the same time for both languages; the same capacity which serves monolingual acquisition, whether it is innate or otherwise, underlies bilingual acquisition and that in monolingual contexts, this capacity is not yet put to full use; it is only in bilingual contexts that the potential is realized. Hence, the only possible and important difference between monolingual and bilingual infants is that those who are exposed to bilingual environments will need more time to respond to stimulus in their native languages than in unknown languages. In the case of monolingual infants, it will not take more time to respond to an unknown language. This can be due to bilinguals need for time to recognize if the sound of information belongs to any of their native languages, while monolinguals only have to compare with one language.

Language acquisition is a complex and unique human quality for which there is still no theory that is able to completely explain how language is attained. However most of the concepts and theories we do have explaining how native languages are acquired go back to the approaches put forward by researchers such as Skinner, Chomsky, Piaget and others. Most of the modern theories we have today have incorporated aspects of these theories into their various findings.

## **II.2. Behaviourist Theory**

One of the earliest scientific explanations of language acquisition was provided by Skinner (1957). As one of the pioneers of behaviourism, he accounted for language development by means of environmental influence. Skinner argued that children learn language based on behaviourist reinforcement principles by associating words with meanings and through the components of classical conditioning, which involves unconditioned and conditioned stimuli, and operant conditioning which refers to a method of learning occurs through rewards and punishments for behaviour. Correct utterances are positively reinforced when the child realizes the communicative value of words and phrases. For example, when the child says ‘milk’ and the mother will smile and give him some as a result, the child will find this outcome as a reward that enhance his/her language development (Ambridge & Lieven, 2011). According to the behaviourist theory, language acquisition is a process of habit formation that involves a period of trial and error where the child tries and fails to use correct language

until it succeeds. However, relying on that children are often unable to repeat what an adult **says**, especially if the adult utterance contains a structure the child has not yet started to use, Skinner's account was soon heavily criticized by Noam Chomsky, the world's most famous linguist to date.

### **II.3. Innateness Theory**

In the spirit of cognitive revolution in the 1950's, Chomsky argued that children will never acquire the tools needed for processing an infinite number of sentences if the language acquisition mechanism was dependent on language input alone. He determined that being biologically prepared to acquire language regardless of setting is due to the child's *language acquisition device (LAD)*, which is used as a mechanism for working out the rules of language. Consequently, he proposed *the theory of Universal Grammar*: an idea of innate, biological grammatical categories, such as a noun category and a verb category that facilitate the entire language development in children and overall language processing in adults. Grammar is considered to contain all the grammatical information needed to combine these categories, e.g. noun and verb, into phrases. The child's task is just to learn the words of his language. For example, according to the Universal Grammar account, children instinctively know how to combine a noun (e.g. a boy) and a verb (to eat) into a meaningful, correct phrase (A boy eats). So, this inborn capacity needs just to be triggered in order to appropriately work out. This Chomskian (1965) approach to language acquisition has inspired hundreds of

scholars to investigate the nature of these assumed grammatical categories and the research is still ongoing.

## II.4. Cognitive Theory

In contrast to the work of Chomsky, Piaget considers all cognitive acquisitions, including language, to be the outcome of the gradual process of construction. He, does not agree that children's language ability is constrained by a fixed nucleus (Universal Grammar). Piaget's comprehension of language development lies in the very process of its transformation. His *cognitive theory* states that children's language reflects the development of their logical thinking and reasoning skills through age stages from both what is inherent, innate and genetically programmed and, on the other hand, from what is collected from individual experiences (schema) and from environmental influence. In this case the surrounding gets to stimulate the sensory/motor skills of the child, he then goes through unattached cognitive phases; he first responds by learning permanently what he received through his senses.

Secondly, by using his intuition and imagination he starts connecting what is previously learned in an abstract way to a concrete symbol. After living through many communicational interactions, the child proceeds to update and *assimilate* (fitting new information into the already-existing one) and to *apply* what he learned concretely and contextually. The last stage he goes through is starting to adapt, *accommodate* and alter what he learned according to different contexts, all by using counterfactual thinking,

reasoning, and creativity. So, when Piaget refers to the genetic nucleus, he sees it in constant mutation that is directly connected with children's construction of knowledge due to experience with the outside world. Chomsky (1980), on the other hand, argues that there is no relevant experience that leads to the construction of linguistic knowledge. Besides, he describes cognitive development as the consecutive maturation of Universal Grammar (fixed nucleus).

## II.5. Social Interactionist Theory

In the light of the above, more recent theorists have stressed the importance of the language input children receive from their care-givers. Language exists for the purpose of communication and can only be learned in the context of interaction with people who want to communicate with you. Although the theories of Skinner, Chomsky and Piaget are all very different and very important in their own contexts, they don't necessarily take into account the fact that children don't encounter language in isolation. Vygotsky's *social interaction theory* incorporates nurture arguments in that children can be influenced by their environment. So, through exposure and interaction children can discover connections and construct new knowledge. *Interactionists* such as Bruner, Wood, and Ross (1976) suggest that the language behaviour of adults when talking to children (referred to as child-directed speech "CDS" or motherese) is specially adapted to support the acquisition process. This support is often described as *scaffolding* for the child's language acquisition. The term referring to the fact that the child

needs assistance throughout his language development process, especially during the first stages, and gradually the assistance fades until the child is ultimately independent. Bruner also coined the term *Language Acquisition Support System* or **LASS** in response to Chomsky's **LAD**; and which, in the fuller sense, refers to the child's culture as a whole in which they are born. Thus, constructivists and interactionists, generally, believe that the knowledge of language is constructed and never be stable or completely innate.

## II.6. The Usage-Based Theory

A decade or two later some psycholinguists began to question the existence of Universal Grammar. They argued that categories like noun and verb are biologically and psychologically implausible, and that the field called for an account that can explain the language acquisition process without innate categories. Researchers (Tomasello,2003; Prince& Smolensky,1993; Kuhl,2005) started to suggest that instead of having a language-specific mechanism for language processing, children might utilise *general cognitive and learning principles*. Whereas researchers approaching the language acquisition problem from the perspective of Universal Grammar argue for early full productivity, i.e. early adult-like knowledge of language, the opposing constructivist investigators argue for a more gradual developmental process. It is suggested that children are sensitive to patterns in language which enables the acquisition process. An example of this gradual pattern learning, according to *the usage-based theory*, is morphology

acquisition (Tomasello, 2003). Morphemes are the smallest grammatical markers, or units, in language that alter words. In English, third singular verb forms are marked with an –s morpheme (e.g. she eat+s, a boy kick+s). When the child hears a sufficient number of instances of a linguistic construction (i.e. the third singular verb form), s/he will detect patterns across the utterances s/he has heard. As a result of many repetitions and examples of the –s marker in different verbs, the child will acquire sophisticated knowledge that, in English, verbs must be marked with an –s morpheme in the third singular form (Ambridge & Lieven, 2011).

## II.7. The Optimality Theory

Moreover, and through *the Optimality theory* (Prince & Smolensky, 1993), the essence of both language learning in general (learnability) and language acquisition (actual development children go through) entails the rankings of constraints from an initial state of the grammar to the language specific ranking of the target grammar (McCarthy, 2002). Optimality Theory is a development of generative grammar, a theory sharing the quest for universal principles such as *universal grammar* but differs from the theory proposed by Chomsky because optimality theory believes that these universal constraints are violable (Kager, 1999). Languages are able to differ in their ranking of constraints by giving priorities to some constraints over others. According to Prince & Smolensky, language acquisition can be described as the process of adjusting the ranking of these constraints that are considered universal. Hence, the aforementioned researchers asserted that approaching

language acquisition from the perspective of general cognitive processing is an economical account of how children can learn their first language without an excessive biolinguistic mechanism.

## **II.8. Factors Influencing Language Acquisition of the Child**

The linguistic development of the child is affected or influenced by different factors. As the child acquires his/her native language unconsciously and without much complication, even though the language is complicated in its own, s/he goes through many phases that differ from one child to another per se.

Generally, to develop the different kinds of the linguistic performance or profile, it is useful to focus on the perception and production skills in accordance to the environment the child live in; and all those theories mentioned before are addressed to and applicable for normal cases .

- **The Healthy Situation of the Child**

It means the importance of health, physical, psychological, and sensory aspects of the child and its relation with his/her linguistic development. For that, healthy children linguistically are more competent than unhealthy ones.

- **Biological Maturity**

The language skills, to a certain extent, rely on the biological maturity where the appropriate development of the speaking zone in the brain allows the child to be more productive than the others.

- **Mental Ability**

It means the importance of the intelligence in the linguistic achievement. Therefore, abnormal children often confront difficulties in any cognitive process, and acquiring language is one of the most complicated processes.

## **II.9. Conclusion**

By understanding how language works and how we are able to use it, we can understand a vital yet complex part of our daily lives. Hence, finding a solid answer to the problem of language acquisition is far from being over. Each finding and each theory has been generated is not *paradigmatic*, since the researchers have studied the child's language acquisition (monolingual and bilingual first language acquisition) from different perspectives according to their field of psychology, along with taking some factors into consideration while neglecting others. Investigators of Universal Grammar are still trying to convince that language is a task too demanding to acquire without specific innate equipment, whereas the constructivist researchers are fiercely arguing for the importance of linguistic input. From these theories, we can recapitulate that both nature and nurture play a great role in language acquisition.

### **III. MSA Acquisition vs Challenges and constraints**

### III.1. Introduction

Believing in the Islamic and Arabic identity as a means of development and sophistication, we had tried our best, as parents, to implement the Arabic language in its formal version (MSA) in our daily linguistic communication with our first daughter wishing that time MSA to be her mother tongue. In addition, we totally exposed her to Arabic language broadcastings; such as cartoons and kids songs.

### III.2. Case Study

The case study of this paper is three lovely girls when they were in their first years. It is all about a real experience based on a structured observation as an instrument or tool of research. This experience is how those three girls had acquired the formal Arabic language (perception and production) rather than dialectal Arabic in an Algerian Arabic speech community.

The research is supported with several authentic, real, and spontaneous videos taken of the girls as they were interacting and communicating in formal Arabic in different daily life situations.

Our analysis is based, as it is mentioned above, on a certain number of authentic, real spontaneous videos dating from 2012. Hayaâ, the eldest daughter, then five years old. Ithar, the middle, three years old and Meweddah, the youngest, one year old. The experience lasted approximately 10 years, the period that represents the ideal age for learning a mother tongue. We felt that the experience would be relevant.

- The role of parents

The experiment consisted of speaking at home only in formal Arabic. The girls also spoke only the same code. As a result, they learned this language as a mother tongue. They learned the syntax and the vocabulary spontaneously and unconsciously, to the point

that when we sometimes used words in the dialect, they only answered in formal Arabic. The dialect has become a second or even foreign code for them.

- The role of TV broadcasting

We made sure that the girls only watch children's television channels such as “Spacetoon”, “Touyour El Djenna”, whose songs are mainly in formal Arabic.

- The role of the family

The family (grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins) promoted the idea of acquiring the Arabic language as a mother tongue and worked hard on it to facilitate for us achieving our desired target. Thus, it was a chance for them to use the formal Arabic whenever they met our daughters.

- The role of the society

Unfortunately, sometimes the formal Arabic, that has been coined classical Arabic, reflects intolerance and religious extremism. This latter is embodied in different satirical shots of the Arabic language in some films and Arabic series which distorted the image of the language and reduced its value in the Arab community. On the other hand, the use of Arabic language is underestimated in our community comparing with French that has been positively perceived.

For that, when our daughter got to school for the first time, she was treated as a weird person. Most of the time, she was subjected to bullying and ridicule by her class/schoolmates and/or by some people who heard her speaks in Arabic.

Our daughter started to feel embarrassed to speak Arabic, she tried to adapt to the new situation and keep up with her classmates in speaking the dialect for a sense of belonging.

In that time her sisters were in their first steps of acquiring the language, and the transformation in her language journey had negatively affected her sisters' language acquisition process; as they used imitate her new way of speaking. It should be noted that at the age of their entry into school, they began to lose their language. We mean by this loss the non-use but they had not lost the intuition of the Arabic language in terms of pronunciation, syntactic rules and vocabulary.

Our daughters' new code was a result of the contact of Arabic language and dialect and till now they have their special way of speaking that keep them distinguished.

- Post experience period

To this day, at the age of 16, 14, and 12 the traces of the formal Arabic language persist in their subconscious. The society as well as some teachers who gave their lessons in dialect had a negative influence on our daughters' language.

### III. Conclusion

Our daughters 'experience with language acquisition much like the story of Daisy Miller, who stood against the aristocratic society, where she rebelled against its laws and system until she died. Although the comparison seems strange, the significance is that whoever stands against the current will swept away, and we were not at that strong to face and defeat the society in its negative side. However, we must be proud of our Arabic language, and that our efforts must be combined to work to restore its luster and make sure that the civilization of our nation depends on our pride in our language, the language of Qur'an.

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