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Elayna S. Dyke

Minnesota State University, Mankato, elayna.dyke@mnsu.edu

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Comparison between Mexican and American Parentese: A Qualitative Case Study

Elayna Dyke

Introduction

As a communication disorders student, the more I study the mechanisms of speech and how they all work together to produce speech and language, and how intricate these mechanisms are down to vocal folds the size of dimes to the intricate fiber pathways, I am amazed that more people don't have communication disorders. I am amazed at how human communication does not just break down spontaneously all the time. Language is composed of five parameters: phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. It is formed socially and cognitively, and it is strongly tied to culture and beliefs. Another amazing thing about language is that children acquire language as soon as they are born, and some children even acquire multiple languages. A broad term for how language is developed and what factors in the environment and inside the brain lead to language development is called "language acquisition and socialization" (Ahearn, 2012).

Language acquisition is a commonplace concept. Children's first words are exciting, but we all expect them to happen within normal variations and usually in the form of "dada" or "mama." Words are expected within certain variations and certain times or else there may be something wrong. The term "language acquisition" not only covers the "what" and "when" questions, but also the "how" and "why" questions. Why do children develop language at the time that they do? How do adults stimulate language? Within the realm of how language is stimulated, an additional question lies in whether language is developed from environmental exposure or if language development bound to happen without any specific models (Ahearn, 2012).

Since language and culture go hand in hand, it is only natural that culture is an aspect of language and language acquisition. After reading the passage "Language Acquisition and

Socialization” by Laura Ahearn, we discussed in class how mothers talk to their children differently in different cultures, and how the language that we are exposed to shapes our culture and views of the world (Ahearn, 2012). The ways that parents talk to their children in order to stimulate expressive and receptive language skills is called “parentese” (which is sometimes referred to as “motherese”) (Ahearn, 2012). However, despite these cultural differences, language acquisition ages and milestones happen at around the same times for every culture and language. Similarly, the type of vocabulary and the subjects that parents talk about to their children vary depending on culture, and those aspects of culture shape how children interact with the world (Kramsch, 2014). After a certain point, children begin to interact with each other, which also shapes the functions of language and how language changes depending on the communicative partner.

Under the umbrella of language acquisition falls second language acquisition. Many children grow up acquiring not only one language but two or more languages. In class and within the readings in class, we focused on multilingual fluency, a child’s ability to recognize non-native sounds, and the critical period for language learning (Ahearn, 2012). The critical period has been studied as a highly important time in a child’s life in which they are the best equipped to learn another language to native fluency. The number of years after the critical period is important in order to track level of fluency that can be achieved. According to a multitude of sources, it is possible to learn another language at any age, but it will become increasingly more difficult and even impossible to reach fluency as age progresses. These topics are imperative to language acquisition and how the language learners experience and define their cultures.

Topic of Focus

There is an abundance of topics in the realm of Language Acquisition and Socialization. I will be focusing on parentese in Mexican culture compared to parentese American culture, and how the way that parents speak to their children shapes their cultural roles and identities. I chose this topic because I am interested in cross-cultural child language development, because it directly relates to my major and cross-cultural communication is an important and emerging topic in the speech-language pathology field.

I was inspired to study this topic in detail from discussions in class about language acquisition. Specifically, we talked about the chapter “Language Acquisition and Socialization” from the book *How Languages Are Learned* (Lightbown & Spada, 2011, p.50-60). This topic is important because it focuses on language and identity development from the very root, and how language acquisition is directly associated with cultural identity. Due to increased cultural diversity in the US, people need to understand the very roots of language and culture, down to language development in infancy, to really understand and be culturally competent when working with diverse populations. There are studies that have been conducted on how children with diverse backgrounds obtain their second languages, but I have not seen any research focusing on the differences between first language acquisition among children of diverse populations. Through this project, I want to gain insight into different cultures, and how cultural identity is shaped through early exposure to languages. I want to gain insight in these topics in order to gain cultural competencies that I can apply to my future career as a speech-language pathologist, because these skills are becoming increasingly necessary in my chosen field.

Parentese (or also called motherese) is what is commonly known as “baby talk.” It is formally defined as the way that parents talk to young children/infants in order to stimulate speech and language development. It is distinguished by a set of eight characteristics that are

commonly found. These include: “It uses a limited vocabulary, short repeated utterances, and referents that are concrete and present. Acousticphonetic analyses show hyperarticulated vowels, slower speech and articulation rate, raised voice pitch, exaggerated intonation, and pre-boundary vowel lengthening” (Corthals, 2010, p.1). These are the technical terms for slow, clear, and hyper-intonation within speech. I am specifically studying how parentese differs and is utilized in different cultural contexts and languages (specifically Mexican culture and the Spanish language). I am seeking to learn and understand the ways that parentese changes across cultures. Other areas of interest include pragmatic functions, semantics that children are exposed to, stories/types of stories that children are exposed to, and how parents respond to communicative attempts by children.

In order to research cross-cultural parentese, I have developed research questions that are specific to the topic, but will encompass all of the specific topics in the interview questions that I will ask during my interview with my case study subject. My questions are: Are there differences between parentese across cultures? How do the differences in parentese shape cultural identity and the cultural aspects of language acquisition? What are the cultural implications of the current characteristics of parentese? Through these questions, I aim to gain insight to topics and add to previous knowledge. I aim to possibly inspire new, exhaustive research on cross-cultural parentese and child language acquisition, so that we can better understand the different cultures around us.

Methodology

A case study is a way to obtain in-depth, qualitative information in order to add to information on a known topic or act as a starting point for future research (Stewart, 2014). I am focusing on one case study subject in order to obtain in depth knowledge that could be a

foundation for future research. I do not expect to reach global conclusions about my topic, but I will obtain knowledge that was previously unknown. This case study methodology is the most appropriate for my topic, because it is about cultural norms. Rather than making far-reaching claims about one culture, I will be able to look at multiple, in-depth observations about my case study subject (Creswell, 2012). Also, because culture is not universal, and there are individual differences, then I am able to discuss one person without talking about entire groups and making false claims. Case studies are based on qualitative data, interpretation, and discussion, and they usually utilize tools like surveys and interviews, which are very useful in discussing and researching topics that relate to culture (Stewart, 2014).

My subject is a 19-year-old female. For the purposes of this case study and to protect her identity, I will call her Jane. Jane has Mexican heritage, and she identifies with her culture. She is a sequential bilingual, which means that she started learning Spanish before she started to learn English. She is fluent in both languages, and she attends school in English in the United States of America. I chose to interview this subject because she has a rich cultural background, and I have heard many of her stories and experiences as a Latina who is living the United States, who has ties to both American and Mexican cultures. I have heard her personal testimonies regarding language learning, being a multicultural student, and her experiences speaking both English and Spanish. She was my randomly-assigned college roommate, and she is a close friend of mine.

I performed an interview with a set of planned interview questions and potential follow-up questions. Before the interview, I defined parentese by giving alternate terms and listing features of parentese that would be appropriate for someone who is not familiar with the technical terms to understand. The interview was recorded, and the answers from my subject were transcribed orthographically. I wrote the questions with my goal in mind to get a lot of

information about my topic. By recording the questions, I was able to refer back to them and analyze them long after the interview has been conducted. For the interview, we met face to face in my apartment without any other distractions so that I was able to record the interview. We completed the interview in one session, because neither of us have histories of short attention spans, we both appreciate time together, and we have appreciation for longer conversational durations. We met in the afternoon on a day when neither of us had to rush or had time constraints. I planned time for the interview, so I completed my homework, and I let my case study subject know in advance so that she was aware of the time commitment. I planned for a longer interview than I thought I needed because my case study is a talkative person. That was beneficial because the interview did end up taking longer than I had first thought.

Over the course of the semester, I have learned a lot about how to ask higher-level, complex questions. I have been formulating questions through my reading reports, and I have been learning about questions through service learning. I have a decent grasp on which questions are effective and facilitate discussions, and which types of questions do not accomplish anything. I have been using handouts about higher level thinking, such as Bloom's taxonomy, to help guide me in asking complex questions. It is important to me to have good, complex questions so that I can get a large amount of valid information. I chose around twenty questions, so that I could have a selection of questions, but they could still stay within my specific topic area. Similarly, too few questions would not accurately cover my topic, but too many questions would take up too much time. I know that I can ask higher-level questions that involved advanced vocabulary because my subject is fluent in English, I have had complex conversations with her in the past, and she excels in academia. I have confidence in my questions and my ability to obtain information through them.

Results

Case Profile

Jane is a 19-year-old female. She identifies as Mexican-American. She has lived in Mexico many times at different times in her life. In the United States, she has primarily lived and attended school in California. She has one older brother. She is a sequential bilingual, and she acquired Spanish before she acquired English. Spanish was the only language spoken in her home until she was in fifth grade. She started to speak English when she was a toddler in preschool, and she was placed in a program for students who only spoke Spanish. Her English was greatly influenced by her teachers in school. That being said, she primarily learned English within a school setting, and Spanish was spoken in the home.

Jane noted that her parents put strong emphasis on speaking proper Spanish. She is fluent in English, and she is very aware that she has an accent. She has noted that she speaks in “Spanglish” with her brother who is also a sequential bilingual in both Spanish and English. Her parents are not fluent in English, and they speak very little English. She noted that they can say basic English sentences, but they have not acquired the cultural aspects of English. Jane loves her Mexican culture and her American culture, and she identifies with aspects of both American culture and Mexican culture. She is aware of how culture and language are highly associated with each other.

Comparison of Parent-Child Interaction in both Mexican and American Cultures

During the interview, Jane recounted her experiences as a child of parents who exclusively spoke in Spanish with her for most of her life. She elaborated on how her parents reinforced her skills in Spanish. Storytelling was a huge part of Jane’s culture and upbringing.

Jane talked about her experiences as a child, and how she would ask her parents to tell stories to her. I asked her about the content of the stories, and she said that many stories that her parents told her and that she has heard her parents tell to other children were stories that were passed down from family members. She said that adults in her culture tend to play with their children more than American parents do and increased affection in her observations within her family and Mexican culture in comparison to her observations of American families with their children. When asked about the amount of communication between children and parents, Jane responded by saying, “When parents talk to their children, there is always a conversation going. Even during daily tasks, such as the mom is feeding the baby and the dad is cleaning, the parents are interacting with each other but also with the baby.” The comments and observations regarding interaction are important because they illustrate the features of parentese in Mexican culture in comparison to the features of parentese in American culture. From the information obtained, differences between parentese in the two cultures is rooted in not just the type of interaction, but also the amount of interaction.

Comparison of Characteristics of Parentese in Both Mexican Culture and American Culture

Jane mentioned that although she had spoken to many babies in Spanish, she had not spoken to many babies in English. When asked about the features of her speech in Spanish when she spoke to babies, she talked about the features of parentese in Mexican culture and how she has observed adults talk to children. She said, “You don’t really speak like you,” and that some traits were a louder voice, high pitch, slow rate, and “cute noises.” She even gave examples of what she would do if she were holding a baby and speaking to him/her in Spanish, and the features of high pitch, loudness, slow rate, repetition, and unidentified noises that were unrelated

to verbal language were intact. She described the way that parents talk to babies as “baby talk,” and she strongly reinforced the idea that Mexican parents and American parents talked to babies in similar ways by saying, “I have seen American parents interact with their children in baby talk, and I have seen Mexican parents interact with their children, and I feel like it is pretty much the same.” I was interested in how there are many similar features that were present despite the differences in culture and language. These results make me wonder if parentese is not necessarily cultural, but rather an instinct.

The Role of Babies and Adults in Mexican Culture and Its Effect on Parentese

A critical concept in child’s first language acquisition is how cultures view babies and children, because the perception of their responsibilities is how adults will treat them and talk to them. That is the origin of the idea of parentese in American culture, because parentese is a form of language that helps children understand and teaches them the basics of language. Jane reemphasized the features of how Mexican adults in her family talk to babies, and she explained the purposes of these features by saying, “You try to almost help them figure out the word.” When asked about how babies are viewed in her culture and in her family, she elaborated on babies by saying “I feel like as far as I have seen in my family, the baby brings joy, we want the baby to learn, and we all feel a sense of responsibility.” I was interested in how she mentioned the sense of responsibility and how the people in her family want the baby to learn, because the goal of the features of parentese is to facilitate learning of language. These results show that the purpose of parentese in both cultures is very similar.

Literacy and Parentese: Connections and Roles

Literacy and error correction were important concepts that Jane talked about that related to language acquisition as a child that I was not expecting to find through my interview questions. She elaborated on how her parents strongly encouraged and enforced literacy in Spanish at home by saying, “For example, my mom, usually it was my mom, she would encourage a lot of reading. She had me read out loud so that she could correct the words that I was mispronouncing. That was mostly just my family, though.” She also mentioned on how error correction is important, because there is a lot of value in correctness and proper form of language in her family, and how her family particularly valued these features. Error correction starts as early as the child reaches the first word milestone. Error correction is not a common feature in American parentese, so I was interested in seeing a difference in features after seeing many other similar features.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that there are no significant differences between the features of Mexican parentese and American parentese according to the personal account of my case study subject, Jane. However, according to Jane’s experiences, there are differences in the amount of interaction, because she has observed Mexican parents giving more attention during play and affection to their children in comparison to American parents. I was surprised to learn about how similar the features of American English parentese were to the features of Mexican parentese. Furthermore, Jane explained the purpose of the features by mentioning responsibilities from other family members and how learning language accurately is very important. The prevalence and importance of error correction was the main difference from parentese in both cultures according to Jane’s experience. She specified that her parents were different in the sense that they greatly reinforced literacy and proper Spanish, which was different from other families

within the same cultural group. Through this study, I learned that the characteristics of parentese may not necessarily be cultural, but rather instinctive. However, there is little research on parentese in other cultures, so the rules of parentese may not be inclusive to all cultures, which is excludes many cultural groups. Overall, I was interested in how my case study subject talked about how there were no significant differences between American parentese and Mexican parentese within her personal experiences.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. At which ages did you start to acquire Spanish and English?
2. How often was Spanish spoken in your home? How often was English spoken?
 - a. In which settings did you acquire English? Who was a proponent in your acquisition of English?
3. How do you speak to children in Spanish? Describe some techniques you use when you talk to children.
4. How do you speak to children in English? Describe some techniques you use when you talk to children
5. How do your parents talk to young children in their first languages?
6. Can you describe how much adults talk to their children and in which contexts?
7. Can you describe how parents sound when they talk to their children (specifically infants)?
8. How do you see babies and young children in society? How does that affect how you talk to them in both English and Spanish?
9. Do you believe that children are predisposed to learn language without models or that the environment is important for language development?
10. How do parents react (in general) to milestones like first word? Are they cause for celebration or everyday occurrences? Can you list some examples or tell me a specific story?
11. What are the functions of children's language, and how does this change as they grow older?
12. How do adults stimulate language in young children?
 - a. What specific communicative actions do parents do? Do they request, ask for more information, repeat what the child says, etc.?
13. What are some of the first things (from your experiences with children and your own experiences) you learn how to do in your culture?
14. How to parents respond to child's communicative functions, such as requests or complaints?
15. How do your role models and professional and social aspirations affect how you use language?
 - a. Can you describe any cultural role models?

16. Can you describe how literacy and reading are implemented in your home?
17. What vocabulary are children exposed to, such as first words?
 - a. Example: American children are introduced to farm animals early in life.
18. What was your first word? Are there common first words among people from your culture?
19. Do your parents talk differently either of their languages?
20. How much are children encouraged to talk in different situations? Are there situations in which children are discouraged from talking?
21. What function do children play in society in your culture?
 - a. What are they expected to do? What are their responsibilities as children? For example, the concept of “play is children’s work” is commonly known by white, American parents.
22. If you have observed parents from different cultures interact with their children, in what ways are they different or the same?
23. What methods of language learning do you see as the most effective?
24. How does your family view language learning and acquisition? What value do they place on error correction or immersion?