Appreciating Linguistics: A typological approach

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Lecture – 60
Typology and word change: Child language Acquisition – Part 1

Hi, hello everyone, welcome to this session of our NPTEL course Appreciating Linguistics: A typological approach. We have been talking about typology and language change, what kind of relation do they have and how they are related to each other? When I talk about typology and language change, primarily we are focusing on the historical or the diachronic changes as well as the acquisition and use centric changes.

When we were talking about the diachronic or the historical development, in the previous sessions we were talking about; how did the articles come into existence or what sort of development path the use of articles has gone through in a language, let us say English or German.

Then we were talking about the word order. In case of the SOV and SVO thing, which one has come first, what is the initial stage, what is the final stage and what are the intermediate stages? And what are the linguistic tools that the typologists or the linguists the deploy to trace the trajectory of such linguistic phenomena? One was the history of articles or the path of how the articles have been a part of the system, then we did talk about word order, and in the category of word order; we were also discussing the noun phrase and then that adposition.

Which one could have come first and which one could have come later. We realized that it is the article where if the definite articles have been derived from the demonstratives, indefinite ones are derived from the numerals, as far as the word order is concerned.

SOV is considered to be the most rudimentary or the or the initial stage of the word order. Then it has moved to others or it has been developed into other kinds of word orders and OVS and OSV are the final stages. They generally do not change themselves into anything else which is why this is considered to be the least frequently occurred word order in the world's languages.

We also had a brief discussion on the adpositions. Adpositions are related to the prepositions, then the postpositions and through the empirical data in German, we have understood through the work done by the typologists that it is the postpositions which are considered to be older than the prepositions. Why?

Because postpositions have been there in the literary style of writing, as well as the 3 different kinds of postpositions that we have studied or that we have observed in German, it gives us an idea that the frequency of occurrence or when you look at the position of the adposition or the place of the adposition with a noun phrase, we realized that in most of the cases, it is the postnominal, and that is also found in the literary piece of writing,.

Considering the literary piece of writing is considered to be newer than the spoken form, the postnominal position has always been there in the spoken form. The preposition, however, seems to be primarily in the literary form of writing. So, considering these empirical evidences or the linguistic evidences, the linguists have contended or it has been claimed that the postpositions were older than the preposition. So, these are the 3 diachronic developments of language from a historical perspective.

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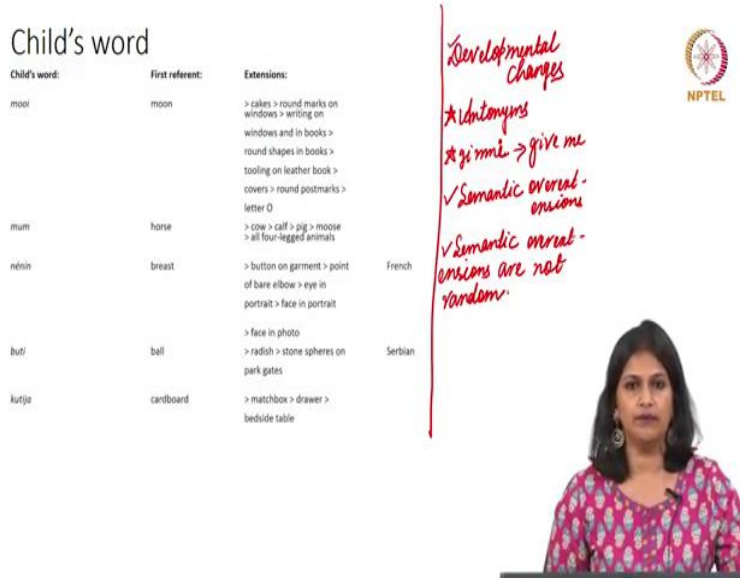

Now, we are moving to the acquisition and usage based generalization. I may not discuss it in as detailed a fashion as I did for diachronic evidences, but considering these are primarily at

the synchronic level, I would expect you to go back and to check the book and find out more data and information related to it. I am going to talk about the developmental changes now.

Until the previous session we were talking about the diachronic changes and here we are going to talk about the developmental changes. When you look at the developmental changes, I am going to talk about the language acquisition both the first language acquisition and the second language acquisition.

So, what kind of developmental changes occur and can we come up with some crosslinguistic referent or crosslinguistic generalization, when we are trying to figure out the linguistic changes from a development perspective. For that, we are trying to study antonyms. How do the children acquire antonyms?

If you follow the generativist approach of language acquisition; it is there by default, it is hardwired. There is something called universal grammar and considering languages in the human brain or in the child's brain it almost is there ever since the child is born.

Now the focus here is how fast or how comfortably the children acquire language. If I ask you the question all of you would agree with me that this is almost an effortless process for a healthy human child to acquire her first language. As children are acquiring their first language, what do they need? They need to be able to segment continuous speech into units, that is the first thing.

Let us say during the acquisition process, what exactly the children have to do or what exactly the children need to do? The first thing, they should be able to segment the continuous speech into different units, that is the first thing. Second thing, they should be able to figure out what is the relationship among these speech units. First segmentizing it, then identifying the relation.

Once they do that together it becomes easier for the child to acquire a language and the child acquires it without any conscious effort. Since this is such a natural phenomenon and there are several such relationships which are actually crucial to comprehend and then the comprehension of the sentences, the production of the sentences, the children sometimes struggle a bit to understand the partonomic and the taxonomic relation.

Tare the theoretical questions that we might have, but a child does not understand what is partonomic relation, what is taxonomic relation among the words or among the phrases, all that the child or all that the children do; they acquire the language that has been spoken or that is being spoken in the community, in the surrounding, in the family.

So, the concern or the question here is that; you need to find out how the early language shows that the children deviate from the ambient language by lacking the relevant concepts. If the child does not have enough relevant concept, then she seems to deviate from the ambient language. In that case the chunking of the words sometimes comes together. They use it as a chunk.

When the child says give me, actually the meaning is give me, but the child does not hear it as give and me separately, because that is not how we speak. We do not say please give me a book. In give me, there are two separate chunks, but they are clubbed together when a human speaks, and that becomes a little tricky for the child to find out what that give me g i m m e which sounds like gimmi; which is actually give me.

These kinds of chunking and un-chunking the words, that is something very crucial to understand child language acquisition, the issues related to child language acquisition. On this note, let us try to find out what kind of referent do they use and this referent what the children are using, what sort of extension it might have? So, on one hand we have the child may use a word less generally than the language would allow.

Let us take an example of a dog. A dog is generally referred to a particular dog; a child does not understand that dog is actually an umbrella term, which might include many types, there are many varieties of dog, but a child identifies a dog only as a dog. So, that is one side of the story.

The segmentation error that the child has, where the single word is taken to be more than one word by the child. And, on the other hand, there is the problem chunking often we see that the children extend the applicability of a word beyond the boundaries like beyond its boundary.

So, in one way, when they said dog, they refer to only one dog. Ideally dog should include a lot of other types. For example, they say moon; so moon can be a cake for them, moon can be any round shaped object, but moon is not like that. So, the first referent in their extensions, there is a list given over here.

Now, let us look at the first example, that we have. Here is the child's word. Here are some examples from English, French and Serbian. The examples for moon and horse, that is for English; breast is for French and ball and cardboard are for Serbian. So, what do we see here?

There has been a semantic overextension. When the child acquires a language, she tries to extend it too widely and it goes beyond the semantic boundary of a particular term. I will try to explain it as simply as possible, but let us see how much you understand and then maybe you have to read a little more and look at the data. Go back to the book, it will be easier for you to remember, to understand. So, what is it? This is semantic overextensions.

What is semantic overextensions? We will see whether this is systematic or random. When you say semantic overextension, it means the meaning, of a particular word has gone beyond its semantic boundary. Generally the children associate one word with multiple referents. That is what we call semantic overextension. There is a significant or striking similarity as far as the shape of a particular thing is concerned.

Most of the times you would see children overextend the meanings related to shape. Let us look at the example. A child would say mooi; that means, moon and what could be the possible extensions of moon? It can be a cake, it can be a round mark on the window, it can be a round shaped writing on the windows and in the books, round shapes in the books, tooling on the leather book covers and any kind of round postmarks and the letter O, all of them can be the first referent is moon; so moon can mean either of this.

If they see the letter O, the child is going to say this is moon. If the child sees a round mark on the window; let us say it is a wooden window and there is a small hole and then it is covered with glass, the child is going to identify it as moon. Definitely that is not moon, definitely the round postmarks are not moon and definitely the letter O is not moon, but then

the child is going to associate with it. This is called overextension. These are the data that have come from Clark(2003).

The other example is horse. A child is going to say mum for horse and a horse can be extended, the semantic boundary of horse can be extended to a cow or calf, a pig or it could be a moose or any kind of a four-legged animal is going to be considered as a horse. That is also a kind of overextension, especially in English for an English speaking child. The data from French.

It is nenin, that means, breast, it could be button on the garment. For a French speaking child that could also be a breast and point of bare elbow; if you have a bare elbow then that can also be a breast for the child, eye in the portrait; let us say there is a portrait and there is the eye and the child is going to identify with the breast and the face in the portrait can also be identified as breast for the child. That is how the data says about the German speaking children when they try to extend or they do the overextension of semantic referents of a particular word.

Now, it is about ball, that is the Serbian data. So, the Serbian child for a ball it could be a face in the photo. They can extend the first, they would say buti and this buti means ball, that is the first referent, but what are the extensions? The extensions could be a face in the photo that could also be a ball, radish can also be a ball, stone spheres on the park gates that can also be a ball. So, these are the semantic overextensions for the Serbian child.

Similar, is the case with cardboard; cardboard for a Serbian it is good kuti or kutiyar I do not know how they pronounce it, but then cardboard for the Serbian child could be matchbox; it can be extended to a drawer and it can also be a bedside table. If there is a bedside table, they can consider it as a cardboard. These are the semantic overextensions that a lot of children do. However, one thing to notice here is that such kind of extensions are not random, this is what you please remember.

Semantic overextensions are not random, rather they have to be associated with certain other things, related things. The examples, that we have here bit, moon or horse or it is breast or ball or cardboard, all of them you can see that there has been some relation; moon and then

the letter O there is some semantic relation like, the letter a letter O has a shape which is similar to the moon.

So; obviously, if the child is associating moon with the letter O there must be some sort of overlapping and especially in case of the shape. So, there is a striking similarity between the significance of a shape and how the child is going to extend it. So, shape of a moon, shape of a horse, shape of a breast shape of a ball and then shape of a cardboard all of them and then the overextension that you see over here, you can see that there has been a matching.

So, because of this relation between the referent, the first referent and then the semantic extension, we must say that this is not random; the child is not going to extend the first referent moon let us say to a chair. A chair will never look like a moon to the child or TV screen will never look like a moon to a child, unless the shape of the TV is a round shape.

So, that is the reason why it is clear that the semantic overextensions are not random. On this note, what are the points that emerge from this discussion?

Keywords: universal grammar, ambient language, chunking, segmentation error, referent, semantic overextension

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