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"My child said today 'biscu-it': Cross-Cultural Aspect of the Acquisition of Phonological System

We all are excited when our children start pronouncing their first words, maybe not so confidently in the start. Correct pronunciation is something that comes a bit later. Learning correct pronunciation, or, scholarly speaking, the acquisition of a phonological system, follows universal rules among the children of totally different ethnic and racial origins (Jakobson et al., 1963). At the same time, the idea that ancestors of different human populations shifted to articulated speech in different epochs, and that the prevalence of speech pathologies varies greatly as a result of this historical difference, leads to the proposition that the acquisition of the phonological system in the ontogeny of children from different regions may occur at different ages. In other words, according to the non-synchronous model of speech origins, children in East Asian, American Indian and Australian Aboriginal populations might acquire a phonologic system earlier than children of European or sub-Saharan African descent.

To check this proposal one needs to compare the acquisition of a phonologic system among different populations on different continents. Fortunately, there are some studies and publications, which contain interesting information.

In the article "The role of Distinctive Features in Children's Acquisition of Phonology" (Menyuk, 1968) Paula Menyuk details the acquisition and proportion of correct usage of consonants by Japanese and American children. The main result of the study is that "...one can observe the same order in acquisition and relative degree of mastery or correct usage of sounds containing the various features by groups of children from two differing linguistic environments, indicating that a hierarchy of feature distinction may be a linguistic universal" (Menyuk, 1968:142). So, the order of acquisition of a phonologic system (nasal, voice, grave, continuant, diffuse, strident) appears to be the same for American and Japanese children. But there is one difference and we are going to discuss it.

The only detail that differs in the acquisition of a phonologic system by Japanese and American children is a **very substantial difference in age**: the acquisition of a phonologic system by American children goes on **from the age range of two and half to five years**, while the same system is acquired by Japanese children **from the age of one to three years** (Menyuk, 1968:140-141; Nakazima, 1962). There are two graphic figures in the article, showing the percentage of usage of features in consonants used correctly by American and Japanese children (separately). In the following figure I combined the graphics of both Menyuk and Nakazima figures:

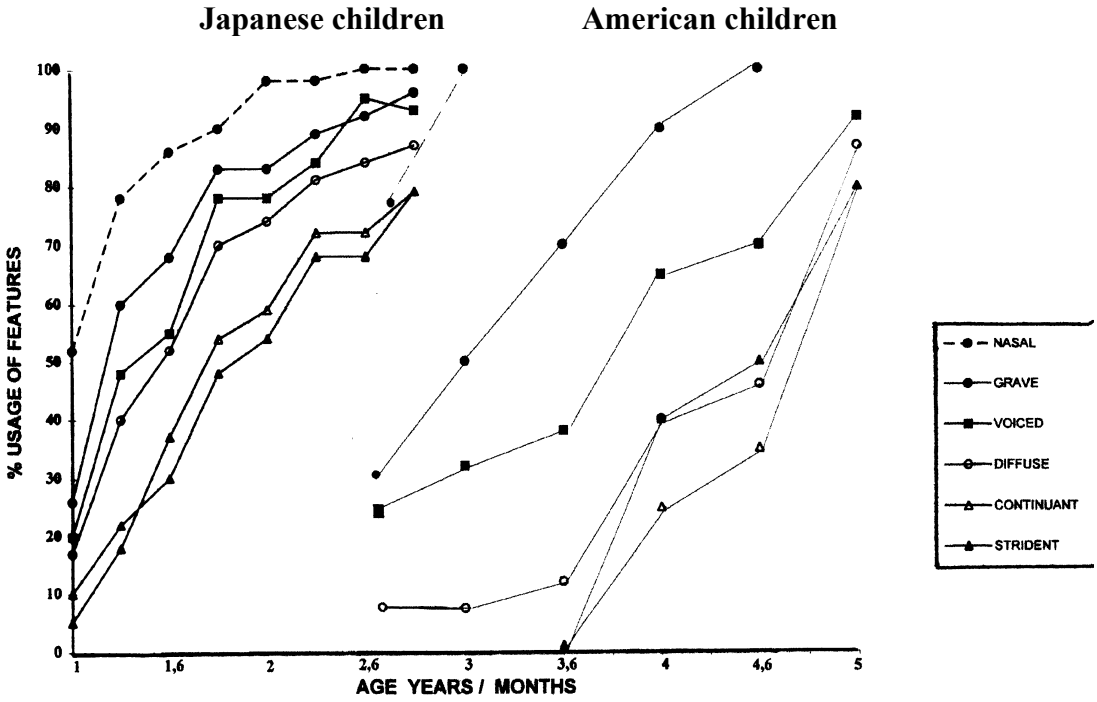

Figure 17. Acquisition of different elements of phonological system (nasal, grave, voiced, diffuse, continuant and strident) by Japanese (bold lines) and American (regular lines) children (Menyuk, 1968:140).

The combined figure illustrates the conspicuous difference in the age of acquisition of a phonological system by Japanese and American children. Japanese children appear to have almost finished the process of acquisition of a phonologic system when American children are just beginning this process. This evidence should not be overlooked. Interestingly, on the other hand, according to some studies, American children are much ahead of their Japanese counterparts in the acquisition of vocabulary. This difference has its social background: "...American mothers are inclined to verbally label the parts of toys their children play with; at 19 months, American babies have nearly twice the vocabulary of their Japanese counterparts" (Shweder, 1993:59). As for the enigmatic and totally neglected differences in the age of acquisition of a phonological system, I think this could be the result of innate differences between the East Asian and European populations. A study of other East Asian and African populations could be crucial in this context.