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Acquisition of the Phonological System

We all are excited when our children start pronouncing their first words, maybe not so confidently at the start. Correct pronunciation is something that comes 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. At the same time, the idea that the ancestors of different human populations shifted to articulated speech in different periods, and that the prevalence of speech pathologies vary greatly as a result of these historical differences, leads to the proposition that the acquisition of the phonological system in the ontogeny of children from different regions of the world may occur at different stages of development. In other words, I propose that 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. Now let us have a look if there are any cross-cultural studies available on this subject.

According to the works of Paula Menyuk and Satoshi Nakajima, correct pronunciation of the phonologic system by American children starts 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). (Have a look at the graphic figure, 'Acquisition of Phonologic System by Japanese and American Children'. This figure is based on the materials of two graphic figures from Paola Menyuk 1968 article.)[(1)]

This 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 by the same age when American children are just beginning this process. Interestingly, this evidence has been so far neglected in scholarly literature.

Information regarding the acquisition of a phonological system by the two main languages of China (Cantonese and Mandarin) is very important to our model. Unlike the neglected sphere of stuttering among Chinese, there are a few highly interesting publications available on this subject. According to a study by Lydia So and Barbara Dodd, the acquisition of the phonologic system among Cantonese-speaking children is more rapid compared to that of English-speaking children.

According to another study, the 90 percent rate is achieved by English-speaking children from the age of three to seven years, and the same high rate is achieved by the Mandarin-speaking children from the age of one and half to four and half years. This difference is not too far away from the figures given in Paula Menyuk's and Satoshi Nakajima's publications.

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Let us conclude. To get the fuller picture and to understand the nature of the existing differences in the age of acquisition of the phonological system, more research is needed. Also, when it comes to interpreting the results, if the results show significant differences, it would be sensible to not disregard any possible reasons, including the possible importance of the genetic factor.

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