

AN ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN A THREE-YEARS-OLD CHILD IN PHONOLOGICAL, MORPHOLOGICAL, AND SEMANTICS ASPECTS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the process of language acquisition through a psycholinguistic lens, focusing on how individuals develop phonological, morphological, and semantic knowledge. Drawing on Noam Chomsky's Theory of an innate Language Acquisition Device, the paper emphasizes the interaction between cognitive mechanisms and language exposure. Data were collected through recorded conversations with children at varying proficiency levels to analyze the emergence of sound patterns, word formation, and meaning-making in real-life communication. By examining spontaneous speech, the study aims to reveal the mental processes underlying language development and how children internalize linguistic structures through natural interaction.

Keywords: *language acquisition, psycholinguistics, phonological development, morphological development, semantic development, Language Acquisition Device, Noam Chomsky, cognitive mechanisms, spontaneous speech*

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INTRODUCTION

Language acquisition is a central topic in psycholinguistics, especially when examining how children develop the ability to understand and use language. From an early age, children absorb linguistic input from their environment, engaging in a complex process that shapes their communication skills. It is true that it is impossible to investigate children's knowledge directly and that this must be somehow inferred from observable behavior (Ambridge, 2013). This involves several mental processes, commonly grouped into phonological, morphological, and semantic development. Phonological development concerns how children recognize and produce language sounds. Morphological development focuses on the understanding of word structures such as roots, prefixes, and suffixes. Semantic development refers to how children form, understand, and interpret meaning.

Chomsky (1965) proposed that humans are born with an innate ability to acquire language, known as the Language Acquisition Device. This internal system enables individuals to grasp the structure of language through exposure. He emphasized that language learning is not solely based on experience but also universal cognitive mechanisms. Children acquire far more information about the structure of their language than could reasonably be assumed to be available in the environment. The child must somehow construct the grammar of his language from very limited and often degenerate input (Chomsky, 1960, p. 33). In this study, data were collected through recorded conversations with a child to observe how she uses and understands sound patterns, word forms, and meaning in natural speech. This research examines those aspects using a psycholinguistic lens and Chomsky's Theory.

Several previous studies have discussed early language acquisition. EduLearn (2021) conducted a case study on a two-year-old child named Taqiyya Mahiroh. The results showed strong first language acquisition across phonology, morphology, syntax, and pragmatics. The child could produce clear speech, construct simple sentences, and respond appropriately. Similarly, Friska and Syafi'i (2021) analyzed the speech of a three-year-old named Gadis Mardhiyah. They found that language acquisition occurred through both biological and environmental factors. The child showed age-appropriate development across various linguistic components. These studies suggest that first language acquisition is influenced by both nature and nurture.

Based on these insights, this study aims to examine the phonological, morphological, and semantic aspects of language acquisition in a three-year-old child named Ukassya Fahim Athallah.

METHOD

This used a qualitative approach by describing the finding data. Qualitative descriptive research is designed to provide a comprehensive summary of an event or phenomenon as experienced by individuals (Kim, 2017). The subject of this study was a 3-year-old child named Ukassya Fahim Athallah. The language used by this family is Indonesian. Data collection and analysis consist of several stages. First, the data is taken by recording the child's conversation with the writers for two meetings, a quite long conversation. The recorded data is then transcribed. Second, after the transcript process, the data is then classified based on the acquisition of phonology, morphology, and semantics. Third, the writer identifies which is the phonological, morphological, or semantics substitution that occurs in words and the omission of

sounds in words. Fourth, observations in the form of data or findings can be analyzed and confirmed with language acquisition Theory in children.

DISCUSSIONS AND RESULTS

This study focused on language acquisition analysis of a three-year-old child in sight of phonological, morphological, and semantics aspects. The object of this study is one of the writer's nephews named Ukassya Fahim Athallah, a three-year-old child. Through the conversation between the writer and the child, writers analyze the language acquisition that children acquire from their mother and their environment. In this part, writers will analyze the language acquisition of Ukassya based on the data already transcribed below;

The aspect discovered	Utterance	Meaning
Phonological	<i>Ukaca</i>	Ukassya
	<i>Ottowoh</i>	Athallah
	<i>Aunali</i>	Januari
	<i>Onti Tiyan</i>	Aunty Trian
	<i>Anak ulang tahun</i>	Selamat ulang tahun
	<i>Setalang uga</i>	Sekarang juga
	<i>Totong Kue</i>	Potong Kue
	<i>Unda</i>	Bunda
	<i>Iyan</i>	Sembilan
	<i>Tetuwuh</i>	Sepuluh
	<i>Muwutnya</i>	Mulut nya
Morphological	<i>anak ulang tahun Jio anak ulang tahun</i>	Selamat ulang tahun, Jio. Selamat ulang tahun (sing)
	<i>sayang bunda ayah onti</i>	Sayang bunda, ayah, aunty
	<i>satu dua tiga</i>	Count a number
	<i>Ottowoh</i>	Athallah
	<i>tetalang uga tettalang uga</i>	Sekarang juga, sekarang juga (sing)
	<i>umun 3 4 5</i>	Umur 3, 4, 5

Semantics	<i>bulan apa ulang tahunnya? → Jio</i>	It is the same birthday month as Jio.
	<i>Onti siapa? → onti tiyan</i>	Aunty's name is Trian.
	<i>Ukaca fahim ottowoh</i>	Ukassya Fahim Athallah
	<i>umun 3 4 5 → 8 taun</i>	Umur 3, 4, 5 – 8 tahun
	<i>bulan apa ulang tahunnya? → Jio → Januari</i>	It is the same birthday month as Jio.
	<i>sayang bunda ayah onti</i>	Sayang bunda, ayah, aunty
	<i>Onti siapa? → Onti Tiyan</i>	Aunty Trian
	<i>belajar ini</i>	Learn this
	<i>bahasa Arab huruf Hijaiyah</i>	Arabic's alphabet – hijaiyah letter
	<i>tebak apa Abjad Arab A B T</i>	Guess hijaiyah letter
	<i>anak ulang tahun Jio</i>	Selamat ulang tahun, Jio

A. Phonological Aspect

Ukassya's pronunciation of "*mucuna*" instead of "*muleta*" demonstrates a phonological process known as elision, where the medial consonant [l] is omitted. While she successfully constructs the suffix [-nya] and maintains the correct vowel sounds, the absence of the consonant [l] suggests a simplification strategy commonly found in early language development. According to Friska and Syafi'i (2021), children at this stage often simplify complex consonant clusters or medial sounds in multisyllabic words to make articulation easier. This simplification helps them produce speech more fluently, even though it results in deviations from the standard form. In this case, the elision of [l] reduces the articulatory difficulty of the word,

reflecting a typical developmental pattern as the child continues to refine her phonological system.

Ukassya's use of the word "*Ryan*" instead of "*Sembilan*" (meaning "nine") reflects a natural process in early phonological development. In this case, Ukassya applies syllabic reduction by dropping the initial syllable [sem-], simplifying the word to a more manageable form: "Ryan." Additionally, phoneme simplification occurs as more complex consonant sounds like /s/ and /m/ are omitted and replaced with easier sounds such as /y/ and /n/. This pattern aligns with the concept of telegraphic speech, as described by Friska & Syafi'i (2021), where children around the age of three often omit less salient or more difficult parts of words in order to produce simpler but still meaningful utterances. Therefore, the transformation from "*Sembilan*" to "Ryan" illustrates a typical linguistic strategy used by children to adapt language production to their current level of articulatory ability.

The utterance "*otong kuenya*" shows a clear case of initial consonant substitution, where the bilabial stop [p] is replaced with [o]. While the overall word structure and vowels are preserved, this substitution suggests a consistent challenge with producing certain voiceless bilabial stops. According to Friska & Syafi'i (2021), consonant acquisition in early childhood is often gradual and inconsistent, with some children regularly substituting or omitting difficult consonants as part of their natural phonological development. This could be because the growth of sound production equipment in children is not perfect (Safitri, 2018). Ukassya's pattern here reflects this process, highlighting how sound mastery occurs progressively over time.

In the case of "*onti*", the vowel [a] is replaced with [o], illustrating a process of vowel substitution. This kind of shift may be influenced by environmental exposure,

personal preference, or patterns frequently heard by the child. Friska and Syafi'i (2021) emphasize that in early language acquisition, children often experiment with different vowel articulations, which can result in non-standard forms. Ukassya's choice of "*one*" possibly reflects a more comfortable or familiar phonetic pattern for her, signaling ongoing exploration of vowel sounds.

In the utterance "stealing uga," Ukassya retains some correct phonological elements, such as the nasal [ng] and the vowel [a]. However, she also makes multiple phoneme substitutions, replacing [k] with [t] and [r] with [l]. These changes suggest that certain consonants, particularly [k] and [r], are still challenging to articulate accurately at her age. As noted by Friska and Syafi'i (2021), such substitutions are common in early speech development, where children tend to simplify or replace sounds that require more advanced articulatory control. Ukassya's utterance supports this observation, showcasing her developing phonological system and her use of substitution strategies to navigate difficult sounds.

B. Morphological Aspect

Ukassya's repetition of the phrase "*anak ulang tahun Jio anak ulang tahun*" shows a reliance on fixed expressions without proper syntactic arrangement. This utterance reflects Step 1 in Shin & Miller's (2022) developmental model, where children often use formulaic and repetitive structures as they begin acquiring language. At this stage, they produce entire chunks of memorized speech rather than generate grammatically varied sentences. The lack of subject-verb agreement or proper phrase integration suggests that Ukassya is still in the early stage of syntactic development, relying more on familiar forms than understanding sentence structure.

In the utterance "*sayang bunda ayah on,*" Ukassya combines several nouns and an adjective without using clear grammatical markers or connectors. This pattern indicates lexical listing rather than syntactic structuring, where words are grouped without following conventional grammatical rules. According to Shin & Miller (2022), this behavior is consistent with lexical restriction, in which children use specific forms tied to individual lexical items instead of constructing broader syntactic patterns. The child's speech here suggests a developing awareness of word relationships but without the grammatical tools to organize them meaningfully.

In this case, Ukassya begins a familiar and structured number sequence, "*satu dua tiga,*" but follows it with the unrelated word "saying," which disrupts the logical flow. This shows a case of syntactic blending, where the child starts with a formulaic sequence and then inserts another word without applying consistent grammatical rules. Shin and Miller (2022) describe such occurrences as part of early language use, where children create mutually exclusive contexts mixing known chunks without understanding how to blend them into grammatically correct utterances. This reflects an experimental phase in which children test word combinations as they move toward mastering syntax.

The utterance "*Otowoh*" appears to be a novel or invented form without a clear referent, meaning, or grammatical structure. This likely represents a case of symbolic experimentation, in which the child produces a creative form to express meaning using limited linguistic resources. According to Shin & Miller (2022), such idiosyncratic productions are common in early language development as children attempt to regularize unfamiliar input or compensate for gaps in their morphosyntactic knowledge. "*Otowoh*" may reflect Ukassya's effort to create a

meaningful expression from sounds she has heard or imagined, even if it does not conform to standard lexical or syntactic rules.

In this utterance, "stealing uga settling uga," Ukassya repeats and modifies a nonstandard word structure, demonstrating morphological and phonological play. The slight variation between "*setalang*" and "*tettalang*" suggests that she is experimenting with different sound patterns while maintaining a familiar rhythm. This behavior aligns with Step 2 in Shin & Miller's (2022) framework, where children begin to explore multiple variants of words or phrases but often restrict them to self-created or limited contexts. The playful repetition shows that Ukassya is testing out language patterns, even though the words used do not carry standard meanings. This reflects her growing awareness of form and structure, even as her system of rules is still developing.

C. Semantics Aspect

In datum 2, Ukassya answered "*umun 3, 4, 5*" instead of "*3 tahun*" when the writer asked his age. It shows inconsistency in expressing age, reflecting conceptual confusion and unstable semantic representation. From a semantic perspective, this suggests an unstable mapping between linguistic symbols (numbers and time units) and their referents (his actual age). The overlapping number sequence indicates that Ukassya has not yet fully internalized the fixed nature of age as a singular, countable concept. Instead, he is likely associating numbers loosely with the idea of "being little" or "growing up," showing an early developmental stage in semantic categorization and temporal understanding. According to Wahyuningsih (2018), during the speech emergence stage, children still frequently make errors in grammar and meaning, even while producing understandable language.

In datum 3, the writer asks, "*Bulan apa ulang tahunnya?*" he answers, "*Jio*," which is explained later by his mother that Ukassya means his birthday month is the same as his friend's birthday in *January*. This phase, which goes from an irrelevant response to an accurate association, shows a developing ability to use contextual cues to understand and convey time-related concepts. Semantically, this indicates that Ukassya is beginning to link words not just to immediate labels but to broader categories and relations (e.g., people and time). Wahyuningsih (2018) highlights that children analyze experiences using context and semantics, allowing them to map language onto accurate concepts gradually.

In datum 4, Ukassya said, "*sayang bunda ayah onti*." Semantically, it reflects an early stage in language development where word meaning is strongly tied to personal experience and emotional relevance rather than grammatical rules. At this stage, children often use high-frequency, meaningful words in loose sequences to express feelings or relationships. This reflects the early production stage, where children produce one or two-word combinations and rely on key phrases, as described by Wahyuningsih (2018).

In datum 5, when Ukassya asked, "*Onti siapa?*" (the context is "What is your aunty's name?"), Ukassya responds, "*Onti Tiyan*," referring to *Aunty Trian*. In this exchange, Ukassya not only forms a simple question structure but also provides a specific referential name, demonstrating both inquiry and accurate naming within his social circle. Semantically, this shows early development in role categorization and the ability to map social labels onto familiar individuals. It reflects his growing understanding of how language can represent social relationships. This supports the idea in Wahyuningsih (2018) that social naming and role categorization develop through semantic mapping and input from caregivers.

In datum 10, Ukassya's utterance "*anak ulang tahun Jio*" ("Happy birthday, Jio") reflects his attempt to connect a familiar person his f, his friend, Jio, with the concept of a birthday. This indicates early conceptual association through language, where known names are linked to emerging ideas. Semantically, it demonstrates Ukassya's developing ability to form meaning by associating personal experiences with broader abstract concepts, like time and celebration. As noted by Wahyuningsih (2018), children in the early stages of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) often build understanding by connecting familiar vocabulary to new meanings through contextual exposure and interaction. This utterance shows how language functions as a tool for mapping lived experiences into structured concepts.

CONCLUSION

The process of language acquisition tends to follow similar patterns for children across the world, regardless of their mother tongue. This is because language is a universal human capacity. Children can acquire any language that is presented to them, provided they are exposed to it in a natural and supportive environment. In terms of phonological development, the sequence in which sounds appear is closely linked to biological and neurological growth. While the general order of sound acquisition is genetically influenced, the timing and realization of these sounds vary from one child to another. As a result, the trajectory of one child's language development may differ significantly from that of another. The findings of this study show that Ukassya most frequently used vowel sounds such as /a/, /i/, /u/, /o/, and /e/, and consonants such as /p/, /b/, /m/, and /t/. Certain sounds, like the consonant /k/, were not present in her speech. Similarly, fricative sounds like [s] and [j] were also absent. Nasal consonants such as [m], [n], and [ŋ] appeared more regularly. The data also revealed that Ukassya engaged in sound substitution and

omission, which may be attributed to either underdeveloped speech mechanisms or genetic factors. Nevertheless, first language acquisition can progress rapidly when children are consistently exposed to meaningful language in a rich and interactive environment. This underscores the importance of active participation by parents, teachers, and the broader community in supporting language development. Rather than prematurely judging a child's linguistic ability, adults should focus on providing high-quality language input through engaging and meaningful interactions. In doing so, children will be motivated to develop their language skills healthily and naturally.

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