THE ACQUISITION OF MEANING BY BENGALI CHILDREN:

A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

Ph.D. Dissertation

GIFT

Submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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DECLARATION

This is to certify that I, Jennifar Jahan, have completed this Ph.D. dissertation work on the topic "The Acquisition of Meaning by Bengali Children: A Linguistic Analysis" under the guidance of Dr. Feroza Yasmin, Professor of Linguistics of the University of Dhaka, for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. This is an original piece of work and I have not submitted it earlier elsewhere.

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CERTIFICATE

I hereby declare that this Ph.D. dissertation entitled "The Acquisition of Meaning by Bengali Children: A Linguistic Analysis" has been accomplished by Jennifar Jahan (Reg. No. 66/2017-2018) under my supervision. As per my knowledge this thesis has not been previously submitted to any other university or institution for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship or its equivalent.

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Because I have learned more about child language development from my children than from any book, this work is dedicated especially -

To

Keyaan & Anahita

and

My Parents

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ABSTRACT

This project aims to understand the meaning acquisition process of young Bengali children and the transformative changes this process brings to their overall language development. Longitudinal research was conducted with six Bengali spoken children (ages between 18 months – 5 years) who have started to acquire language in a natural setting and home environment, over a 4-year-period. Theoretically grounded on the usage-based approach to language acquisition, this research focused on foregrounding the influence of the surrounding environment of the participants by observing their everyday language experiences.

The findings revealed a complex structure of language acquisition by the children, which is constructed through constant interactions with others and is dependent on the surrounding environment mostly. Caregivers are influential and enhance children's language acquisition process interactively. Moreover, I saw children constructing multiple individualized strategies in acquiring their language. Categorizing the language is one of those brilliant interactional strategies. Perceptual, semantic, syntactic, and even social categorization took place in the children's first language acquisition period and enhanced their language growth. The findings also revealed that first language acquisition is not just about creating a vocabulary but also about the children learning the words and associating them with their meanings. By understanding the children's meaning acquisition process, this study contributes to the theory, research, and praxis on the infants' and young children's overall language development progression.

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Children are not born with language, they need to acquire it. They need sounds, words, meanings and constructions. Children need to know how to integrate language with other communication modes or when and where to use it. They strive to cope with the process of knowing others at first, and then make them understand. How do children master language skills? Or what processes do they go through as they learn to understand and talk? These questions are addressed when researchers tend to find out how this process of language acquisition takes place. This research focuses on children's acquisition of meaning of a first language, the phases they go through and how they use language as they acquire it. This study outlines some of the theoretical approaches in this field and the assumptions children make to express their thoughts along with issues that come up during the process. The focus will be thus on analyzing the steps children take while communicating meanings more elaborately and beyond one word at a time.

Children try to figure out which construction fits for a word or which constructions they should use to communicate particular meanings. Their primary target is to sort out how to present any information to someone or how to represent a situation as a speaker (Clark, 2003). At the beginning child's language acquisition contexts remain limited (generally) to his or her immediate family members (who are regularly present, especially the mother), and to the child's immediate environment. I have observed that children grow up and get experienced from new events or contexts like, going to pre-school or changing houses to a new neighbourhood. New environment affects children's early language acquisition and their language use changes too.Thus, my research interest is to see children using languages to convey meaning depending on the input they get mostly from their surrounding linguistic and

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family environment. Investigating the continuous process of early meaning acquisition of the Bengali speaking children is the main focus of this research.

Literatures on Child Language Acquisition or CLA have predominantly pointed to the positive results of correct or proper inputs on language growth of early language learners. Factors related to language acquisition like, age, gender, self-assured behaviour or expressive language and their effects were studied by them. Works of such researchers have shown many of these variables to be important for language acquisition to varying degrees (Bowerman, 1978; Huttenlocher, 1974; Bloom, 1970). Many of them studied their own children's language development and tried to make generalizations too (Halliday, 1975). Moreover, issues like 'child's concept development' has also been marked as very influencing on child's first language acquisition (Clark, 1971).

Despite the extensive literature on child language acquisition, there seems to be a gap in understanding the significance of meaning making as a vital area of overall language development, especially from the language users' perspective. Previous studies evaluated child language acquisition from a professed about its overall position in the development and growth of a child in general and its contribution to child language communication (Saffran et al., 2001). Several studies were conducted to measure the stages of language development or developmental milestones of children. Even specific areas like phonology, morphology, syntactic development or stagewise language acquisition have been explored too (Crain and Fodor, 1993; Brown, 1973; Thuresson, 2011). A few works have also been done on selective children's semantic growth (Reich, 1976; Ninio, 1985; Litowitz, 1977).

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However, understanding the relationship between children and the language learning institutions that they represent is very critical and significant as it affects the overall development of children. This research is about identifying the process of constant acquisition of meaning by Bengali speaking children. Attaching a meaning to words or objects through accumulation of semantic features is also included in the process. The context of social interaction has been identified as an important feature of language acquisition. Moreover, existence of other individuals in a child's immediate environment and healthy language input is very important for language production and influencing comprehension too. This present investigation has considered these factors and proposes to examine the issue of semantic acquisition from yet another point of view. In this context how the Bengali speaking pre-school children acquire and modify meaning along with integrating, categorizing and adapting new information will be attempted to investigate in this study.

In this chapter, I provide a synopsis of my assignment by providing its research statement followed by a section that identifies the significance of this study in the field of first language acquisition and semantics in natural language and cultural settings.

1. Statement of Problem

First language acquisition is intrinsically intertwined with communication as interactions and socialization with others are created, enacted, and toughened all the way through it. Acquisition is therefore achieved and reinforced communicatively with the help of the information and experiences gathered from the environment as well as the people nearby the learner. Language comes individually as one of the most vital of human activities. The marvelous capacity of acquiring and analyzing of the essential characters of language input starts from birth (Lust, 2006). The use and understanding of language represent the child's

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thoughts more clearly than their attempts to communicate with others.

Meaning acquisition is an innate process that occurs naturally to every normal human child from the first year of their life.

The way in which infants or young children know the meaning of things, or how they expres s a language's semantic function, is called meaning acquisition.There are several factors that are and considered to be the precursors of language development. Starting from the child's single word utterances, it appears to be like that these early words at first have primarily 'intentional' meaning rather than 'lexical' ones (Morgenthaler, 1981). A child who starts to convey meaning through verbal language is understood better for what he or she intends to mean or communicate. The content of a child's speech is considered to be its conceptual substance as several factors like age, self esteem, cognitive- perceptual development, linguistic or non- linguistic experiences are related to it. According to researchers, the language facility of the child could influence their ability to communicate expressively and help in the growth of language competence too. The nature of the speech produced by the child can never be understood until the environment or language situation is considered. This makes the need for proper 'language input' more important in the successive development of a child's language faculty. The 'usage based theory' of language acquisition foregrounds the importance of identifying the meaning making process of a first language learner from his /her perspective. My research takes the usage based theory as a base to enter the realm of child language acquisition and attempted to understand and co-create the everyday communicative practices. Like all the young language speakers of the world, the Bengali speaking first language learners also engage in interacting with each other through social and linguistic processes. This study specifically tried to understand the meaning making

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discourses that emerge from the interactions and inputs received from the immediate family members and surrounding environment of the child through participant observations and in-depth interviews. The ultimate goal here was to observe and figure out the communicative experiences of the children's meaning expressions in their day today life. It foregrounded the acquisition processes of the participants to create spaces of language development.

1.2 Significance of research

On the basis of the research interest, the question might arise why it is important to look at the meaning acquisition process of Bengali speaking children from the input they get from their surroundings. Children learn only the 'language forms' they are exposed to. To know how language acquisition proceeds, digging up the nature of the exposure is a necessary component of any account. Among organisms, only human kind is blessed with the language acquisition ability. Thus, determining the nature of the perceptual, cognitive, conceptual, representational and linguistic capacities that enable children to perform the language act is also very essential to any inquiry to language acquisition.

The acquisition of First language has been an area of interest for decades. David Ingram (1989) divided the history of the studyinto three periods- (a) The period of diary studies (1876-1926), (b) The period of large sample studies (1926-1957) and (c) The period of longitudinal studies (1957-present). Starting from the early 'Diary study' of Charles Darwin (1877) till recent case studies, it can be seen that different studies have shed light on this issue. Darwin's diary contains observations of the facial expressions and gestures that his son William made during the first 3 years of his life. The standard work on this topic is C. and W. Stern's *Die Kinderprache* (1907), a book which summarized the observations of their three children in a masterly fashion that had been so plentiful in studying child language

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acquisition during the next twenty or thirty years. This book was a guideline for further work in child observation. Even though, it was done on psychological perspectives. During the modern era of diary studies, *Speech development of a bilingual child: Diary from age 2* (Leopold, 1939) has been an influential work in this field, focusing mainly on the acquisition of a child's vocabulary.

The very first study on child's semantic acquisition was done by Suppes (1974). In the book *The Semantics of Children's Language*, Suppes tried to put up issues involved in the child's first language acquisition. But the book has been criticized for emphasizing mostly on grammar or syntax, and too little on semantics. Other than these major studies, specific areas such as lexical development, syntactic development, grammar and verb acquisition, phonological development (etc.) have been studied descriptively (Tomasello et al., 1986(a); Tomasello & Ferrero,1986(b); Dromi, 1999; Tomasello, 1992; Mervis et al.1992; Kedar et al. (2006); Weerawardhana, 2016).

If the subject matters of these researches on child language are analyzed, we can perceive that study in this field started at first inquiring issues like psychological or non-verbal development of children. Later the focus shifted to studying issues that fall into the mainstream research on first language acquisition of children. It is true that many vital areas related to this field explored, including the research interest I share, which is semantic acquisition. But it has always been analyzed as a part of the child's over all language development or including in inquiries on stage of language development. Morgenthaler (1981) presented a descriptive work on semantic information of pre-school language users. Important to this study are age, gender, sense of worth, assertive behaviour, expressive