On Early Verb Acquisition in Chinese-Speaking Children

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Abstract : Young children acquire native language with amazing rapidity. After noticing this interesting phenomenon, lots of linguistics, as well as psychologists, devote themselves to exploring the best explanations. Thus researches on first language acquisition emerged. Early lexical development is an important branch of children's FLA (first language acquisition). Verb, the most significant class of lexicon, the most grammatically complex syntactic category or word type, is not only the core of exploring syntactic structures of language but also plays a key role in analyzing semantic features. Obviously, early verb development must have great impacts on children's early lexical acquisition. Most scholars conclude that verbs, in general, are very difficult to learn because the problem in verb learning might be more about mapping a specific verb onto an action or event than about learning the underlying relational concepts that the verb or relational term encodes. However, the previous researches on early verb development mainly focus on the argument about whether there is a noun-bias or verb-bias in children's early productive vocabulary. There are few researches on general characteristics of children's early verbs concerning both semantic and syntactic aspects, not mentioning a general survey on Chinese-speaking children's verb acquisition. Therefore, the author attempts to examine the general conditions and characteristics of Chinese-speaking children's early productive verbs, based on data from a longitudinal study on three Chinese-speaking children. In order to present an overall picture of Chinese verb development, both semantic and syntactic aspects will be focused in the present study. As for semantic analysis, a classification method is adopted first. Verb category is a sophisticated class in Mandarin, so it is quite necessary to divide it into small sub-types, thus making the research much easier. By making a reasonable classification of eight verb classes on basis of semantic features, the research aims at finding out whether there exist any universal rules in Chinese-speaking children's verb development. With regard to the syntactic aspect of verb category, a debate between nativist account and usage-based approach has lasted for quite a long time. By analyzing the longitudinal Mandarin data, the author attempts to find out whether the usage-based theory can fully explain characteristics in Chinese verb development. To sum up, this thesis attempts to apply the descriptive research method to investigate the acquisition and the usage of Chinese-speaking children's early verbs, on purpose of providing a new perspective in investigating semantic and syntactic features of early verb acquisition.

Keywords : Chinese-speaking children, early verb acquisition, verb classes, verb grammatical structures