



RESEARCH PAPER

The Acquisition of Principles and Parameters by Children Learning Urdu

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ABSTRACT

The present study attempts to explore the parameters and principles set by children while acquiring Urdu. Learning a language involves the acquisition of lexical as well as syntactic knowledge. The objectives of the study were to find out the parametric setting and wh-parameters used by the children while learning Urdu. Principles and parameters theory of Chomsky advocates that language learning involves learning lexical items and syntactic knowledge which is basic knowledge of putting words together in a sentence. The utterances of a child of 24 months were recorded for four months and analyzed using the theoretical framework of Principles and Parameters presented by Chomsky. The analysis of the data focused on null subjects, word order variation, wh parameter, and head position parameter. The study found that children set the parameters quite early on in life and follow them consistently. The present study did not find any evident deviation or miss-setting of parameters. This research recommends to exploring the gender variation in parametric settings using a large sample.

KEYWORDS Language acquisition, Minimalist program, Principles, and Parameters

Introduction

The present study explores how children set different parameters and adjust them in their utterances by using the theoretical framework of Principles and Parameters by Chomsky and Lasnik (1993). This research will be beneficial for language instructors in identifying problem areas in second or foreign language learning and teaching. Chomsky (1995) is of the view that language learning involves acquiring vocabulary and syntactic structures initially while phonological and semantic elements are acquired later. Language learning was simplified by restricting it to a finite number of rules presented by the minimalist program. It is made up of a set of principles and parameters which are quite limited in number. Children have to learn a set of principles while acquiring their mother tongue, if later they learn another language, they reset the parameters accordingly.

Adjustment of Principles and Parameters

Language learning requires acquiring vocabulary and putting it together according to the word order of the language being acquired. This acquisition process expects the child to learn some universal principles which serve as a skeleton and later

some language-specific parameters have to be internalized. While learning a second or third language, the child will only acquire language-specific parameters as the universal principles acquired initially will remain the same thereby lessening the linguistic burden of the child. It is observed that languages differ from one another on the basis of variation in different parameters such as syntactic and lexical. Exposure to the language being acquired helps the child understand which binary principle is being followed by his language. The child gets to know about his language at quite earlier stages in life whether the language he or she is acquiring is a null subject or non-null subject language, whether it is head last or a head-first language, and the type of wh parameters it uses. Sometimes a child sets the parameters accurately and sometimes s/he may miss-set the parameters, whereas settling down some parameters may take a great deal of time.

Parameters are usually taken as inborn switches fixed by children while learning a language. These innate parameters provide two options as a language will either be a non-null or null subject language, it will either be head last or a head-first language and it will either allow or does not allow WH movement. Universal grammatical principles are a part of the innate language ability of children.

Literature Review

Principles and parameters in linguistic theory were presented by Chomsky and Lasnik in 1993. Since the propagation of this theory, many young linguists and researchers around the globe who were interested in Chomsky's concept of UG used this theory as a framework for their linguistic research (Armon et al., 2004; Becker, 2000; Fozia et al., 2018; Smith & Law, 2009). The syntactic principles and parameters deal with how children acquire a language in the initial stages. It was observed by Chomsky (1986) that human languages all over the world have some common properties on an abstract level which is basically the deep structure. Chomsky (1988)'s concept of Universal Grammar deals with certain principles which are common to all languages spoken in different parts of the world (Cook, 1996; Niyogi & Berwick, 1996; Thornton, 1990). These common principles include different parameters which vary from language to language. Chomsky (2006) is of the view that exposure to a certain language triggers and a child learns to adopt these parameters according to the correct setting. Following the guiding principles set by Chomsky and Lasnik (1993), many universal researchers and linguists believe that languages are universally acquired in the same way and the deep structures are always the same in all languages with simple grammar and vocabulary as seen in the cases of child language acquisition (Boecks, 2007; Hornstein, 2001; Radford, 2004; Rizzi, 1990).

Chomsky's previous research in the creation of linguistic theory presented a piece of complex grammatical apparatus for the production of well-formed derivations, which contributed to its too complicated-picture.

Since 1993, nevertheless, his syntactic theories have been viewed as an effort to reduce the theoretical and descriptive framework that is used to account for the possibility that a monolingual speaker may produce an illimitable variety of well-formed grammatical constructs. In fact, the primary objective of MP is the removal of all non-essential mechanisms on conceptual grounds. (Maqsood et al., 2018).

Although significant theoretical and empirical progress had been made across several GB modules (including Case theory), there was still room for improvement. Additionally, it was felt that the theoretical apparatus of the GB (Government & Binding) model needed to

be reduced because it had grown too much. Chomsky then came up with the minimalist program (MP) to deal with this (1993, 1995). It's a common misconception that the advent of minimalism meant that GB was no longer significant because it served as the foundation upon which the minimalist movement was built. According to Boeckx (2006), in this case:

“If based on what I've argued, P&P creates the environment in which minimalism emerges, then Government-Binding (GB), the most refined and detailed iteration of the approach, provides appropriate (technical) principles (or "details") from which minimalist principles—what I will refer to as the conceptual core of minimalism—can be derived” (pp. 61,62).

According to Maqsood et al. (2018), empirical data analysis indicates that while the Wh-movement is required in English, it is optional in Urdu. Additionally, it demonstrates that, in contrast to Urdu, where it is optional, tense markers and the Wh-phrase movement in English are required. In contrast to English, where tense markers move overtly, in Urdu they move covertly. The results of the study demonstrate that the [+WH, EPP] characteristic drives the movement of Wh-expression to evaluate these qualities.

Different languages have their own unique characteristics, yet they all have some commonalities. For example, all languages share a universal grammar (UG), and UG is generally seen to have two contents: parameters and principles (Kim & Sells, 2008; Radford, 2004). On the one hand, parameters are viewed as those aspects that clearly distinguish different languages, whereas principles are seen as universals on the basis of which it is proposed that all languages are comparable (Givón, 2001; Miller, 2016; Yeo, 2009).

According to Chomsky (1982)'s “Principle and Parameter Approach”, Wh-movement is a grammar action that causes a Wh-phrase to emerge from its latent position in a sentence's deep structure and form the surface structure of the sentence. It has been argued by Cook and Newson (2014) when a Wh-expression shifts, the question element or interrogative word moves from the argument place to the nearest non-argument place, indicating a complementized phrase. The terminology "WH-movement" is taken from earlier Generative grammar (1960, 1970), where the main emphasis on WH-movement seemed to be that WH-expression (which, what, where, who, why) first appeared in its authoritative place and then, by using the operation Move, it was shifted towards the left side, out of its in-situ place, to rest in its derived position that is stated at the start of the sentence (Changi, 1997; McCloskey, 2000).

Ghafar et al. (2022) found that while the WH movement was required in English, it was not in Urdu. The WH movement is used to change the order of sentences in English, but in Urdu, it is not required. In Urdu, it wasn't clear how the sentences moved. In English, on the other hand, it was clear. Based on the data, we can conclude that the addition of “[+WH, Extended projection principle]” encourages the advancement of the WH movement (Ghafar et al., 2022).

Most students of a foreign language struggle with the WH-movement construction system because it is intricate and often does not follow the same pattern in their native language. The typical pattern of Urdu sentences follows the order S-O-V, while the English pattern follows the order S-V-O. There will be profound effects on how questions are framed as a result of this Ghafar et al. (2022).

According to the principles and parameters theory, principles are common to all languages, whereas parameters vary across languages and children acquire them based on the linguistic input provided. Fozia et al. (2018) studied the parametric adjustments made by children in the Urdu language, using the theoretical framework of Principles and Parameters Theory. Based on her research, she concluded that children miss the subject, and use truncated null subjects but she did not notice any deviation in the parametric setting while learning English.

Uzair et al. (2020) studied the parametric differences between English and Urdu and found that Urdu is a null subject language. Masood et al. (2018) conducted their research on Wh-movement in Urdu and English keeping in view the minimalist program of Chomsky. They came up with the conclusion that Wh-movement varies in both English and Urdu on the syntactic level.

Material and Methods

The current research utilized Chomsky's Principles and Parameters Theory as its methodology because the researcher employed it as the theoretical foundation for this study. Over the course of many years, Chomsky presented a number of concepts that are broadly regarded as essential to the study of syntax and linguistics.

The Principles and Parameter Theory is the theoretical framework used for the investigation of questions (Chomsky, 1995). The goal of the current work is to create a holistic view of wh-questions in Urdu. It makes an effort to describe the kind and style of movement that Urdu possesses and provides an explanation for the large variety of wh questions and syntactic structures that exist.

The sample includes utterances of a twenty-four months old child for four months. The data included utterances recorded between the ages of twenty-four to twenty-eight months. The conversations of the child with her mother were recorded through personal visits and later analyzed using the theoretical framework of principles and parameters. A qualitative research approach was used and the study focused on types of parametric settings and analyzed the WH parameters used by the children.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The utterances of a child between the age of 24-28 months will be analyzed in order to see whether the parameters have been correctly set by the child. The parameters which will be analyzed are the null subject parameter, head position parameter, and wh parameter. The analysis will be guided by the research questions and the theoretical framework of principles and parameter theory presented by Chomsky (1993).

Table 1
Utterances of a Child and Mother

Child's Utterances	Mother's Utterances
<i>Park jaana hei</i>	<i>Nai baita bahir bhot thand hei</i>
<i>Candy do</i>	<i>Nai daant kharrab hoty hein</i>
<i>Papa kahan hei?</i>	<i>I don't know</i>
<i>Kiyon?candy mazy ki</i>	<i>Tum kiya khawo gi abi</i>
<i>Chips</i>	<i>Naraaz kiyon ho?</i>
<i>Talha ladta h</i>	<i>Tumary haath main pen kis ka hei?</i>
<i>Mamu ka</i>	<i>Eesha kis ki hei?</i>

<i>Papa maama ki</i>	<i>Kis kay kapray hain</i>
<i>Buuk lagi</i>	<i>Esha tumhain toy kon laaya</i>
<i>Papa</i>	<i>Yh book kis k hei?</i>
<i>mairi</i>	<i>No, yeih tumari to nai hei</i>
<i>kis ki phir?</i>	<i>Papa kahan hain?</i>
<i>University</i>	<i>Esha ka hua</i>
<i>Pari dolli</i>	<i>Esha ki doll gandi</i>

The analysis of the data shows that the head position parameter has been correctly set by the child as “*lawn*” which is the headword used earlier than “*khailna hei*” which is the compliment but the auxiliary “*mein*” has been omitted in the sentence “*lawn mein khailna hei*”. The utterance also shows that the child has internalized that Urdu is a head last language. When she is asked, “what will she eat?”, she says, “*chips*”, which is a noun and substitutes only one-word ‘*chips*’ for the whole sentence, “*mein chips khaawongi*”.

In the utterance, “*talha larta h*”, she omitted the subject ‘*muj*’ and auxiliary ‘*say*’. It also indicates that she has understood the fact that Urdu is a null subject language. The utterance of the sentence, “*lawn main khailna h*” indicates the acquisition of head position parameter as well as word order by the child. In this utterance also the subject ‘*mujay*’ has been omitted as instead of saying ‘*mujay lawn main khailna hei*’, she just says, “*lawn mein khailna hai*”, which shows that she takes Urdu as a null subject language.

The analysis of the data also shows that the child knows how to form questions as she asks, “*papa kahan hei*”? She also knows alternative ways of forming questions too as “*kyun? Candy tasty hei*”. The child seems to have attained the capability of forming questions in Urdu language as the expression of interrogation has been moved towards the front by her in the utterance, “*kiya huwa*”. To put it another way, wh parameter has been attained by the child. The sentence uttered by the child, “*kis ka pen*”? shows that the child has perfectly internalized the wh parameter. The wh expression, ‘*kis ka*’ has been moved towards the beginning before the noun ‘*pen*’ in ‘*kis ka pen*’ by her. Though she has correctly framed question she has omitted the auxiliary ‘*hai*’ as instead of saying, ‘*kis ka pen hai*’ she just says “*kis ka pen*”?

The analysis of the data reveals that the child has not either learnt to use auxiliaries or is in the process of learning due to which she is not using them. Urdu language has two ways of framing wh questions. It uses either the wh expression in the front or after the subject. In most of the interrogative constructions, the child has used the wh expression initially. Urdu is either taken as a null subject language by the child or she is in the process of deciding whether Urdu is a non-null subject or null subject language as she uses the expression, “*lawn khailna hai*” and “*thand lagi hai*”.

The analysis of the data shows that in all those expressions where she talks about herself, she does not mention the subject in response to ‘*kiya khawo gi*’, she just says “*chips*” instead of saying, ‘*main chips khawongi*’. Further she also says “*candy do*” instead of ‘*mujay candy do*’. When she is made to mention the subject by asking ‘*kis ki books hain*’? she says, “*Isha ki*” instead of either saying, ‘*Isha ki books hain*’ or ‘*mari books hain*’. This shows that she either takes Urdu as a null subject language or thinks that it is not essential to mention the subject when she talks about herself. In response to the question, “*kiya khawogi*”? she says, “*chips*” and does not use any expression to refer to herself. Similarly, subject is omitted by her in ‘*candy do*’

Experience, observation and research reveals that Urdu is a head last language. When children between the ages of twenty-four to twenty-eight months start communicating, initially they use single words or phrases as a replacement of a complete sentence comprising of a subject, verb and object due to which Urdu seems to be a head first language. The analysis of the data collected will further clarify the ambiguities. The utterances of the child are analyzed according to different parameters.

Null Subjects

The analysis of the data shows that Urdu is a null subject language as expressions like '*chali gayi hai*' indicate whether the subject is masculine or feminine. In the sentence, "*lawn main khailna hai*", the subject '*mujay*' has been excluded which shows that the null subject parameter has been acquired by the child. It is important to remember that in Urdu, it is sometimes obligatory to use the subject as unlike Italian, it is not a totally non null subject language. The collected data also shows the usage of truncated and imperative null subjects as '*lawn khailna hai*' instead of '*mujay lawn main khailna hai*' which is an example of a truncated null subject. First person singular subject has not been used even once by the child as she says, "*candy do*" instead of '*mujay candy do*' and "*thand lagi hai*", instead of '*mujay thand lagi hai*'.

Wh Parameter

Urdu language uses different strategies and multiple constructions to frame questions. It uses a variety of wh expressions like '*kiyu*', '*kider*', '*kiya*', using a rising intonation and insertion of wh expressions after the subject. Selection of a particular expression depends on the situation whether it is formal or informal and the relationship between the interlocutors. The analysis of the data shows that the child has learnt to form questions earlier than other constructions. The child says, "*papa kahan hai*" while asking about her dad. She has used the noun *papa* initially and has inserted the wh expression '*kahan*' just after the subject, '*papa*'. She also frames the questions, "*kiyun? Candy mazy ki*" and "*kis ka pen*". In both of these constructions, though questions have been framed correctly, but the auxiliary '*hai*' has been omitted as instead of saying '*kiyun? Candy mazy ki hai*' and '*kis ka pen hai*', she just says, "*kiyun? Candy mazy ki*" and "*kis ka pen*", but the child has correctly internalized the wh parameter.

Head Position Parameter

The utterance "*lawn khailna hai*" is a VP in which the verb '*khailna*' is used after the complement '*lawn*' which indicates that Urdu is a head last language. It is quite interesting to know through the analysis of the data that certain expressions uttered by the child indicate that Urdu is a head last language while others show that it is a head first language. The child uttered the sentences, "*lawn khailan hai*", "*candy do*" and "*Talha larta hai*". The analysis of these verb phrases reveal that Urdu is a head last language. In all these utterances, the verb '*khailna*', '*dou*', '*larta*' are used after the nouns '*lawn*', '*candy*' and '*Talha*'. The analysis of the adjective phrases uttered by the child reveal that Urdu is a head first language as, '*paaray kapray*' in which the adjective '*paary*' is used before the noun '*kapray*'. In the utterance '*mairi bottle*', the possessive determiner '*mairi*' precedes the noun '*bottle*' and shows that Urdu is a head first language.

The analysis of the prepositional phrases in the utterances of the child indicate that Urdu is a head last language. The child frames the question, '*papa kahan hai*'? uttered the prepositional phrases, '*chair per*' and '*car main*'. The analysis of the data provides the answers of the questions asked in the beginning as the analysis shows that

the child has correctly set the head position, word order and wh parameters as '*papa kaha hai?*' And '*bahir jawun?*'? Data analysis indicated consistency in the usage of different parameters, but the findings may differ if a larger sample is analyzed. Phonological and syntactic deviations are found in the data analyzed, but the data does not show any deviation in the parametric setting. The omission of the auxiliary '*hai*' and preposition '*mai*' in '*lawn khailna*'. Omission of '*hai*' in '*candy mazay ki*' indicate syntactic deviations but the parameters have been set correctly.

Conclusion

The current research indicated that children correctly learn the parameters specific to their language between the ages of 24 to 28th months but this finding cannot be generalized due to the limited data collected and analyzed. Children can also deviate from the parameters and also miss-set them but the utterances of the child studied did not show any evidence of deviation or miss-setting of the parameters.

On the basis of the findings, it is recommended to study parametric setting including a large sample as the findings of this study cannot be generalized due to the analysis of a limited number of utterances. Differences and similarities in parametric setting due to gender can also be explored.

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