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prefabricated
Language and
maturational
constraints in
child second
Language
Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

THERE ARE TWO MAIN HYPOTHESES with respect to the role of prefabricated routines and patterns in children's second language acquisition process. One hypothesis states that creative language is the result of an internal creative process that takes place prior to the analysis and reanalysis of prefabricated routine and prefabricated pattern elements. A second hypothesis states that prefabricated language is the natural predecessor of creative language. The author concludes that although the evidence seems to suggest that children use prefabricated language frequently in their second language acquisition, this does not conclusively rule out the presence of an automatically occurring internal creative process.

Keywords: internal creative process, prefabricated language, prefabricated routines, analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

THERE IS MUCH SCIENTIFIC LITERATURE documenting research projects that have sought to shed some light onto the process by which child second language learners become linguistically creative in constructing sentences (i.e., fluent) without formal language instruction¹. Prefabricated language has been thought to be an essential--probably indispensable--ingredient of second language acquisition in children². However, there isn't a consensus as to its role in the advent of creative language. So, the issue remains a much debated one, to say the least.

The general concept "prefabricated language" (PL) can be defined as "...readymade, memorized chunks of sentences..."³ and it entails two more specific concepts: "prefabricated routines" and "prefabricated patterns."⁴ According to Krashen,⁵ "prefabricated routines are simply memorized whole utterances or phrases, such as 'How are you?' or 'Where is your hotel?'. A performer may use prefabricated routines without any knowledge of their internal linguistic structure. On the other hand, prefabricated patterns are utterances where part of the sentence is "flexible," with the rest of the sentence remaining inflexible."⁶ "That's a ____" ("car," "balloon," etc.) and "I want

to ___” (“play,” “go out,” “eat some candy,” etc.) are examples of prefabricated patterns.

THE “INTERNAL CREATIVE PROCESS”

There are two main hypotheses with respect to the role of prefabricated routines and patterns in the first and second language acquisition process. One hypothesis states that an internal creative process takes place first, and then the combination and recombination of prefabricated routine and prefabricated pattern elements takes place. The combination and recombination processes--or, using Stephen Krashen's terminology, “analysis” and “reanalysis”⁷--are the consequences of an independent creative process, thus indicating that such creative process is growing. In other words, the combination and recombination processes mean that the creative process has already begun internally, and is thus analyzing and reanalyzing prefabricated routines and prefabricated patterns until all of their elements are freed from the linguistic structures in which they used to appear. Once the “freeing” of prefabricated routine and prefabricated pattern elements occurs, they are freely combined into “creative” utterances. Hence, it is reasonable to say that this view is based on the assumption that the analysis and reanalysis of prefabricated routines and prefabricated patterns are not due to the effects of daily socialization, but to an automatic internal (biologic?) analytic process. In other words, the daily use of prefabricated routines and prefabricated patterns with other people does not enable an extraction or deduction of linguistic rules. A pre-experiential, innate, and perhaps genetically programmed language faculty accounts for the analysis and reanalysis of prefabricated language, and the advent of creative utterances.

This assumption seems to explain a further assumption held by this hypothesis, namely, that prefabricated routines and prefabricated patterns are temporary shortcuts to early production beyond the current level of competence, demanded by social and communicative pressures--that is, useful only for satisfying the need for socializing.⁸ Hence, “the creative construction process is independent of routines and patterns,”⁹ which further implies that prefabricated language plays a non-crucial role in child second language acquisition.

There is a significant amount of scientific literature arguing that the analysis and reanalysis of prefabricated routine and prefabricated pattern elements are the consequences of an independently occurring --perhaps biologic-- creative process.¹⁰ Take, for instance, Hatch's ¹¹ description of the case history of Paul, a 4-year-old Chinese learner of English as a second language.

After arriving in the United States, Paul was exposed to English while interacting with children who were native speakers of that language. He interacted with the English-speaking children in school and in the playground,

