

Roger Brown. 1973. A First Language: The Early Stages.
London: George Allen & Unwin. Xi 437.

Roger Brown and his colleagues at Harvard are pioneers in the field of developmental psycholinguistics. This book, a major contribution to research on child language, describes the first two of five sequential stages which Brown proposes (a later work will deal with the remaining three stages). Brown suggests that these five stages are universal (3). The stages are not based on chronological age (since children vary greatly in speed of language acquisition), but are based on the mean length of utterance (MLU): Stage I begins as soon as the MLU goes above 1.0 (or multi-word utterances) and ends at 2.0, Stage II goes from 2.0 to 2.50, etc. This measurement lies at the heart of Brown's study, and has been used throughout his research. The concept of MLU and the rules for calculating it were developed in order to compare language acquisition between different children (or the same child at different developmental stages), and hopefully, between different languages. Brown claims that MLU and the rules he gives serve "as a simple way of making... development in one language comparable with development in another" (54). Brown gives nine rules for calculating MLU, and, as these have been discussed elsewhere in detail (Crystal 1974, Atkinson-King 1975), I propose to discuss only the applicability of MLU in studies of Papua New Guinean language acquisition.

My own research is in multi-lingual language acquisition, the four children in the study acquiring Enga, English and Tok Pisin simultaneously. Enga, like many other non-Austronesian languages of Papua New Guinea, has a complex verb morphology (see Lang (1973) for additional details), and difficulties with MLU have been encountered between the three languages in the study. For example, at age 2;3, one of the children, Bepele, had an MLU in English of 2.6 (Brown's Stage II), while her MLU in Tok Pisin was 3.1 (Brown's Stage III).¹ It seems improbable that the child's development in different languages during multi-lingual language acquisition would result in the child being simultaneously in different stages; instead it seems that the languages involved and their morphological complexity must account for the variation in MLU calculated. Brown himself has noted that "studies of highly inflected languages like Finnish, Swedish and Spanish, all report some difficulty in adapting our rules of calculation, invented for English, which is minimally inflected, to their languages" (68)

In dealing with inflected languages such as those in Papua New Guinea, it seems likely that it might be best to dispense with MLU almost entirely and describe the child's development in terms of internal semantic and grammatical change, or possibly in relation to a theory of discourse, such as Scollon (1974). It is obvious that the calculation of MLU and the rules developed for English need serious reconsideration, since one of the major tasks facing child language research at present is to document a substantial body of data on languages other than Indo-European.

The book is concerned with sentence construction, meaning and understanding, and "it completely excludes pronunciation and the growth of vocabulary" (3). Stage I speech is characterized as telegraphic, and Brown discusses the historical trend from a nonsemantic 'lean' characterization of child speech (including a critique of pivot-open grammar) to present day 'rich' semantic characterization. Brown interrelates linguistics and psychology, and modestly states what he feels to be his own inadequacies. Both

his empirical findings and his insights into early grammatical development cannot be faulted; it is his theoretical foundations which appear to, possibly, be built on sand: for example, his outline of the varieties of generative grammars used by Schlesinger, Bloom and Fillmore.

In Stage II the development centers on the modification of meaning through the acquisition of grammatical morphemes. Brown presents a detailed study of the grammar and semantics of 14 morphemes and suggests that the order of their acquisition is dependent on the relative grammatical or semantic complexity. These morphemes add number, tense, aspect, specificity or non-specificity, etc., to the naming words of Stage I, nouns and verbs.

The book is written in an informal style which makes it easy to read and comprehend, and thus valuable as a textbook. Brown's extensive research and his honest willingness to criticise his own results have produced a book certain to become a modern classic on child language.

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NOTES

1. Unfortunately at 2; 3 we had insufficient utterances to compute Bepele's MLU in Enga.

REFERENCES

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Dutton, T.E. & C.L. Voorhoeve. 1974. Beginning Hiri Motu
(Pacific Linguistics, Series D - No.24)

Hiri Motu - or, to give it the name used in earlier literature, Police Motu - is the lingua franca of Papua. Nobody knows precisely when it first arose; the earliest references cited by Dutton & Voorhoeve go back to 1904, and are typically unflattering.