Names of Toys in the Early Vocabulary of Mongolian Children and their Relation to Gender

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Abstract

This article is devoted to a very up-to-date area of linguistic research–linguistic gender. More specifically, it pays special attention to how gender linked language effects are revealed in the names of toys in the overall production of Mongolian child language by distinguishing the main stages of children's linguistic development as well as gender acquisition. In a broader sense, this aspect of child development is supposed to bring us one step closer to better understand the interaction between biology and environment.

Keyword: Child language, linguistic gender, toys, gender and language, gender acquisition, noun-verb bias in L1

1. Introduction

'Gender' has recently developed into an essential area of study and has drawn a considerable attention of sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists in the field. The beginning of the 20th century experienced a greater attention to gender-related aspects of language and its communicative nature. These included speech acts of men and women from different social background as well as the phonetic and lexical differences between speeches of male and female. A term 'linguistic gender' is proposed by Russian researchers, including Zinovieva (2014), who deal with this aspect of study due to a reason that is language-specific. Similarly, in Mongolian language the equivalent word of gender, which is хүйс [khuis], refers to both *gender* and *sex* at the same time. Therefore, researchers in Mongolia have no choice but to collocate this term with respective adjectives, such as *social* or *biological*, to be clear enough which one is being referred to. The theme studied in this particular research is claimed to be multidimensional. It resides at the intersection of various disciplines including psychology, sociolinguistics, child language acquisition, cultural anthropology and cognitive science as well. Some of these reveal traditional approaches towards the subject while others refer to more recent approaches in the field. With regards to social context, both areas of child language acquisition and gender acquisition are subject to the exposure from the society. It also is a matter of cultural anthropology as such notions can be culture specific and are broadly defined by the cultural factors surrounding them.

Most studies deal with the question in the following ways: First, theories about the way language constructs social identity have been developed (Ochs, 1992). It is, however, highlighted that their fundamental concepts require re-examination. Moreover, post-structuralist model of gender have always been embraced by sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists in that 'language' may lend itself to an ability to focus on gender (McElhinny, 2003). Overall, it is suggested that there have been three stages of how linguistic gender research has formed. The most up-to-date approach is post-feminist stage. As opposed to earlier stages of its development, this stage comprises a wider range of ideas including 'men studies', 'cross-cultural and linguocultural studies of gender', and other enriched methodological issues (Zinovieva, 2014).

For the sake of narrowing down the topic, we have decided to solely focus on various aspects that revolve around child language. In the case of Mongolian linguistics, child language acquisition is an area that is yet to be adequately addressed. For instance, number of research works addressing child language acquisition is no more than five when PhD dissertations are concerned, some of which have studied derivational features of child language development (Oyungerel, 2004; Odonchimeg, 2014). Currently, there is no research work conducted in relation to gender related issues, like gender stereotyping or gender acquisition in the case of Mongolian language. This, to a certain extent, implies that this field requires a lot of attention and much needed research. Therefore, our field of interest deals with the vocabulary range of children aged 2-5, and this particular article addresses the notion of gender acquisition in the

production of Mongolian child language. Studying the vocabulary range of children aged 2-5, this study solely focuses on nouns that are produced by both boys and girls. This includes words that name gender-linked toys.

In psychology, however, there is a large body of research devoted to understanding children's gender concepts. It is also considered that the language acquired and/or produced by children reflects their understanding of gender concept. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how the notion of gender is acquired by children and how this is revealed in Mongolian children's language production at its early stages of development. Beal (in Powlishta 1998) points out that in no area of child development will we find that biology is sufficient explanation for the behavioral differences between the sexes. In most psychological theories regarding gender, there is an implicit definition of gender difference that rests on a simplified biological foundation. It is also partially based on 3 stages of child development proposed by Powlishta (1998): a) Prenatal development b) The first year of life – in which physical development, perceptual abilities, ability level, parental interactions with young children are prominent and c) traditional theories of gender role development which is studied from psychoanalytic perspective, social learning, and cognitive development approaches. These theories focus on socialization forces (also called socialization influences) which roughly define how children learn to be boys and girls.

2. Acquisition of gender categories

Gender categories are acquired and used at very early ages. Instances from an early age can be noticed at 2 years of age when children show gender typed toy preference. By two and a half, most American children show knowledge of gender stereotypes for toys, clothing, tools, household objects, games, and work. (Huston 1983) In 2-3 years, most children will use appropriate gender labels for identifying boys and girls (Leinbach and Fagot, 1986). The current sample included in this study has some aspects that relate to this age group. However, no such examples have been recorded in the case of Mongolian children aged 2-3.

Starting at age 3, most children prefer to play in same-gender groups (Maccoby, 1990). Such tendency to segregate into same-gender groups strengthens with age during the early grade school years, and the pattern is maintained until about age eleven (Maccoby, 1990). 3 years of age is also considered as a period when children show 'gender segregation' (children's tendency to prefer playmates of their own sex). Therefore, gender-typed toy preference pattern is fairly consistent and they tend to avoid playing with toys that are stereotyped for the other gender, even when the alternatives are very limited (Huston, 1983). This is not simply happening because of their parents' pressure. It is argued that there are 2 causes: a. desire for playmates who have compatible play styles and b. wish to be with others who are classified 'like me'.

But, why children show gender segregation is something of a mystery. But according to Powlishta (1998), play style compatibility and cognitive categorization are the most likely explanations. I would suggest that this is an area that needs to be addressed and studied in depth in the future. The notion of gender segregation has not been revealed in the random recording of the speech of Mongolian children around three years of age. This is partially because defining gender segregation at this age group is not the primary intention of this very research. Yet, what we know is that the gender category starts to take place in the mind of children as early as they are two or three years old.

3. Toys

One important part of children's life is toys they are attached to psychologically. Toy differences are considered to be theoretically related to child's cognitive development. For this reason, names of toys make up a substantial majority in the words children produce. Toys are considered to be important tools that lead to various aspects of children's socialization and cognitive development in their early stages of life. It is this important period of socializing when they start to develop categories about gender (Green, Bigler & Catherwood, 2004).

Toy preference is claimed to be affected by both environmental and biological factors. Alexander (2003) reported that toy preference might be related to prenatal androgen levels in the womb. Berenbaum and Hines (1992) found that girls who are exposed to higher level of androgen were more likely to play with masculine toys (in Isabelle &Jessica, 2010). Affected by the environment, parents tend to reinforce children's play with same-sex toys rather than with opposite sex toys (Caldera et al., 1989). It appears that Mongolian parents are no exception. When buying toys for their children, they prefer gender-appropriate toys. This affects children's shaping of which toys are acceptable for which genders. Children's play behavior is shaped by gender schemas that contain gender-appropriate objects and activities (Liben & Bigler, 2002 in Halim & Ruble, 2010).

Boys and girls are said to have stereotypes about what is appropriate for their sex and the other sex early in life. These gender-linked preferences influence their toy choices, reasoning and even their play behavior. Children reliably prefer toys deemed appropriate to their sex. Martin, Eisenbud, and Rose (1995) showed that attractive toys were less appealing to children if they were labelled for the opposite sex. At the age of 3 to 4, children possess a dichotomized knowledge of expected behaviors for boys and girls which they use to criticize cross-gender behaviors in their peers (Huston, 1983).

It should be noted that the actual word 'toglo:m /toy/' in Mongolian language' is the noun that has the highest frequency in the speech of Mongolian children regardless of their gender. The word 'toglo:m /toy/ is a generic word employed in various situations referring to many different kinds of toys. The noun 'toglo:m' or 'toy' is given emphasis as a generic noun in this study. Some of the cases seem to lie with the linguistic features of Mongolian language. To be more precise, those words that are related to toys in Mongolian language and are widely produced by children are polysemous in their nature. For instance, the word 'toglo:m' refers to a number of different things besides its English version 'toy'.

1. Toys
2. Games (collaborative games, PC games, etc)
3. Playground facilities
4. Cellphone or tablet gaming applications, etc

3.1 Toy gender

Children's toys maintain to be characterized with respect to gender (e.g. Campenni, 1999; Miller, 1987) and different perceptual features appear to categorise male-preferred and female-preferred objects. Results of various studies suggest that toys do have gender. Children's reasoning about sex-typed toys is influenced by their egocentric thinking and perceptual gender associations. For example, Cherney, Harper, and Winter (2006) showed three- to five-year-old children pictures of toys and asked them to identify which toys were for boys or for girls and to provide a reason why.

4. Feminine-stereotyped toys

In some studies, girls reveal more variability in masculine and feminine toy play than boys. For example, Wood, Desmarais, and Gugula (2002) show that girls display more flexibility and engage in playing with feminine and neutral toys for an equal amount of time, whereas boys spend the majority of the time playing with masculine toys. Miller (1987) confirms that the toys stereotyped as feminine typically include domestically oriented toys and stuffed toys which were rated as attractive, creative and nurturing.

Furthermore, feminine toys tend to reveal high-level of play complexity and it is likely to increase as they progress into older age. This is claimed to be the primary reason why boys appear to be more cognitively delayed than girls (Isabelle& Jessica, 2010). Girls in Mongolia are said to start producing complex structures in their speech earlier than boys in general. The range of vocabulary employed by girls far outnumbers that of boys when toy names are concerned. Verbal interactions with the toys and communicative play seem to be more prominent in girls' playing contexts. Accordingly, Caldera et al. (1989) demonstrate that feminine-stereotyped toys lead to closer proximal play among toddlers. It has also been shown that girls are encouraged more than boys to play with toys that allow for collaborative role playing, such as play food sets (Leaper, 2000). It can be said that Mongolian context shares this nature of play context as to which gender is more prevalent in their of language performance.

5. Masculine-stereotyped toys

Masculine toys are claimed to affect the development of spatial skills (Isabelle& Jessica, 2010). As it can be seen in a real-life situation, toys often preferred by boys tend to stimulate intellectual and scientific skills more than other toys (Isabelle& Jessica, 2010). As opposed to girls, boys tend to be persistent and less flexible with their attachment to gender related toys. In the case of Mongolian children, this flexibility is also apparent in the number of toys that boys mention in their speech. However, it goes beyond single nouns when gender issue is concerned as most of such expressions occur in collocations that combine a verb and a noun. Another question that is highly relevant to this aspect of gendered-toy preference is the age they start to demonstrate gender typing. Overall, boys display gender-typing earlier (Blakemore, LaRue, & Olejnik, 1979) and engage in stronger same-sex toy preferences compared to girls (Carter & Levy, 1988). These are what is to be addressed adequately in our next study for the sake of revealing whether this is the case or not in Mongolian context as no studies have been conducted with this particular focus.

When the frequency of the names of toys uttered by boys is calculated, it reveals that the highest frequency occurs with the noun 'car' and its variations referring to a car, or a racing car. In Mongolian language, it would be '*uudn-uudn'* (which is onomatopoeic), '*mashin', 'uldaanii mashii'* (racing car) etc. When boys' speech production is concerned, out of 3000 utterances that are randomly recorded, 27 times they referred to a toy car and 26 cases of an actual car either owned by their parents or grandparents or the ones that they get to see out in the streets. It should be noted that the word *'mashin (car)'* in Mongolian language refers not only to cars owned by families but also to trucks and any other types of heavy load trucks. Therefore, it is used in a generic sense in this study. In contrast to this, girls' production of the same noun *'mashin (car)'* demonstrates a very different picture. They uttered 3 times referring to a toy car and mentioned actual car 7 times in 2500 utterances. So the frequency of a noun 'toy car' employed by boys is recorded 9 times higher than that of in girls' speech. Girls, when they use this noun, mostly refer to an actual car rather than a toy car. Similar suggestions have been made by a number of researchers. For example, boys are also seen to be less flexible in their toy choices and play behaviours (e.g. Ashton, 1983; Kourilsky & Campbell, 1984). In other words, boys tend to avoid play with feminine toys, whereas girls do not mind playing with masculine toys (e.g. Bussey, 1983; Green, Bigler, & Catherwood, 2004).

6. Neutral toys

A noun - "*хүү* [khu:]" is sometimes used in a generic sense meaning 'child' in general without specifying whether the child is a male or female. In other times, however, this word specifically refers to a son or boy in the family. This seems to have some influence in the gender acquisition of a child as it can be seen from their speech recorded. One particular example is that of a 3year9month-old girl. While playing with her favorite doll, she said the following to her doll acting as a mom taking care of her baby. '*Подволкоо өмсөөрэй, миний хүү*! or (Podvolko umsu:rei mini: khu:!)', meaning 'Let's put on your t-shirt, my baby/son'. Though she meant 'a baby doll or a baby girl', she employed the word '*хүү* [khu:]' in the generic sense, in this particular instance while she is referring to her Barbie doll. It suggests that this word only refers to boys and/or sons. However, Mongolian language encyclopedic and linguistic dictionary, published in

2008 by Mongolian Science Academy (Bold, 2008), contains no information connoting such gender reference with regards to this word 'хүү [khu:]'.

Another word which is often employed by girls, 'хүүхэлдэй - [khu:kheldei]', it does not connote any gender reference as stated in the same dictionary. The only meaning it suggests is referring to a doll and any other stuffed toys played by children regardless of their gender. However, there is another meaning of the same word, which is not suggested by the authors in this dictionary. Both children and their parents employ this word when talking about 'cartoons' on TV. What is interesting is that a substantial majority of boys, when using this word, refers to cartoons (23 times) while there are just 3 occasions when boys refer to stuffed toys/dolls played by girls. When it comes to girls employing this word, a rather different picture can be revealed. As for girls, this word is employed by 11 girls meaning cartoons while 10 times is recorded. A clear distinction is clearly seen here between boys and girls.

Mongolian traditional toys that are culture-specific to nomadic life-style tend to mostly reveal neutral.

7. Cultural influence on gender acquisition

The developmental intergroup theory (DIT) suggests the ways that gender stereotyping is formed and constructed by the surrounding context (Bigler & Liben, 2006 in Halim & Ruble, 2010). As such, this paper comprises environmental factors causing gender-linked language effects, i.e. words and expressions that are employed by parents, teachers and their peers and everyone surrounding them. At a large scale, this should be explained with cultural background given the ways fathers treat their boys to grow into 'strong' individuals in the future.

In psychology, the dominant approach for understanding children's belief about gender is the cognitive framework, which focuses on how gender categories emerge and develop over time. The content of children's gender categories differ from adults mainly in their reliance on non-biological markers by categorizing people according to gender (Slaby and Frey 1975). Children are said to rely on cultural cues rather than biological criteria for making gender distinctions. With this respect, Bem (1989) claims that a child mistakenly uses cultural cues (like hair length or clothing) to determine gender instead of rooting a person's gender classification in biological criteria.

The quantity and the quality of input could roughly define what is learned and how it is learned (Trehub & Shenfield, 2007). It also depends on the learner's interests, experiences, and language ability (Bloom, Margulis, Tinker & Fujita, 1996; Bloom & Tinker, 2001). As Trehub and Shenfield (2007) argue, parents tend to vary in terms of their linguistic input due to differences between social interests of boys and girls. Parents' style of verbal interaction may influence and be influenced by toddler's interests (Brody, 1999; Bloom, 1993, Stern & Karraker, 1989). Properties of input that are essential at very early stages of word learning are still to be further studied and explored. Not much is known with this respect in the field (Trehub & Shenfield, 2007).

What is clear from the suggestions in the literature is the fact that the learning of a word (be it a noun or a verb) depends on the input. Mandarin children may produce fewer nouns simply because they hear fewer nouns. However, as crosslinguistic studies suggest, the way children learn nouns and verbs hardly reveals any difference (Sandhofer, Smith & Luo, 2000).

It could also have implications on the lexical development of toddlers. In the case of Mongolian culture, parents do treat their children differently to encourage their sons to develop into a manly and strong individual whereas girls are attended and their feelings are discussed in a close proximity of their parents. Girls' academic pursuits are encouraged wherever possible while there is a whole different story when boys' education is concerned. This tends to have a serious impact on the number of male students at a tertiary level of education in Mongolia.

Some physical traits that are (or could be) specific to different genders have been revealed in the utterances of these children in a very interesting way. One particular example is as follows. 'Барилдаад надаа уначихлаа. Охин юм байна л даа'. A 4-year and 7-month old boy said that his counterpart (another boy of about his age), while wrestling, was defeated. So he must be a girl because he could not win in this particular round of wrestling. In Mongolian mentality, wrestlers are seen as symbol of physical and mental power. Though manly treats could be common across different cultures around the world, the action of wrestling in this very situation is purely culture-specific.

Another example that shares quite a similar picture is uttered by a 4-year-old boy. He said that he sleeps in his own room on his own because he has grown older and stronger. This should entail some explanation about cultural aspects of Mongolia. Having his/her own room has not traditionally been the case in Mongolia. Though it is becoming more common with city dwellers, it still is not the case outside urban areas. This cultural notion is already embedded in the thinking of a 4-year-old child being intertwined with the understanding of or needs to grow stronger as a man. He even sounded like he was proud because he could stay alone in his own room which is not a typical picture seen in Mongolia.

No utterance referring to a future possession of a car was made by a girl while this was the case for some boys. Again, it has some cultural implications that are specific to Mongolian context. Most Mongolian families own a single car per family and in most cases it happens to be the father who drives the car even if the mother possesses a driver's license. This seems to have some implications in the speech pattern of a child, especially that of boys, as they produced some speech meaning that they want to be in possession of a jeep in the future.

In talking about future, there is another example that has gender application in it. A 4-year-old boy said he wanted to be a policeman in the future whereas no girl has been recorded to be saying anything about becoming a policeman/policewoman. It would be an interesting notion for later studies in the field to further explore Mongolian children's understanding of gender through jobs that are for men/women.

There is a range of words that collocate with the word 'тоглох/to play'. Some collocations in Mongolian language with the verb 'play' can be literally translated into English. Playing chess, playing cards or playing with a ball could all be said to have its equivalents in English when word to word translation is concerned. But in Mongolian language the verb 'тоглох/to play' could be employed in a situation where it refers to 'telling a joke'. This particular meaning of the verb has actually been recorded in the speech of a 4 year and 7 month old boy.

Apparently, it seems correspondent with the natural partitions hypothesis which argues that fundamental psychological divide takes place between nouns and verbs. In studying whether nouns and verbs are learnt in different ways, Sandhofer, Smith and Luo (2000) conclude that such quantitative studies offer little insight into how nouns and verbs are learnt although a rough picture about the average frequency of nouns and verbs is revealed. Similarly, in this study, frequency of the noun "тоглоом" and the verb "тоглох" is studied in accordance with the age of the child. This, however, does not provide a substantial ground to make any conclusion whether noun categories are more prominent than the usage of verb category or vice versa when first language learning of Mongolian children is concerned. With the frequency of the verb 'to play' in Mongolian, which is higher than that of the generic noun 'toy' (both of which derive from a same root in this language), it appears that Gentner's suggestion about nouns being the privileged starting point for all learners seems to be challenged in the case of Mongolian language. Similar results have been suggested by a variety of studies including those by Choi (1998) and Sandhofer, Smith & Luo (2000). What Gentner suggested needs to be tested and respective quantitative studies at a larger scale to find out whether the dominance of nouns in early vocabulary of Mongolian children is more prominent or not.

8. Conclusion

Based on what has been covered in this article, it seems apparent that children's first language production reveals certain notions that reflect culture-specific features when Mongolian context is concerned. An initial glance reveals that there are certain aspects that Mongolians share with other language speakers when linguistic gender is concerned. Yet, there are some other features that seem to be more prevalent and are reflected in the speech production of Mongolian children compared to those of other cultural background. What is interesting is that some of the expressions uttered by children of different genders have not taken their place in the most popular encyclopedic and linguistic dictionary although a clear distinction can be noticed in the speech production of 2- to 5-year-old children.

It suggests that studies focusing on the first language acquisition need to be conducted in a larger scale, especially when Mongolian language is concerned. There is an urgent need to address this issue from various perspectives by means of quantitative studies in the future. Cross-linguistic studies are also another area that would serve as a platform to enhance respective studies that are yet to address this subject matter.

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