



## Parameter setting in the language of children at an early stage of acquisition

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**Abstract:** *The concept of Universal Grammar (UG) has emerged as Minimalist Program that studies the language at phrase-structure level. The principles of Universal Grammar are meant to be principally based on universally accepted criteria. The criteria, also known as “criteria of adequacy” consist of four principles: adequate description, explanation, definition and learnability, which govern the categorization of parameters at phrase-structure level to be applicable to all languages of the world. The present study aimed at analyzing the parameter setting of Urdu as a mother tongue in the language acquisition process of a child at a very early stage in terms of subjects, null subjects and head-positions parameters. It was found that wh-parameters were quite difficult for the children to acquire and there were certain differences and similarities in terms of the efficient setting of specific parameters.*

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**Key words:** Universal grammar, minimalist Program, acquisition process of a child, head-positions parameters, wh-parameters

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## Introduction

Minimalist Program of Noam Chomsky (1993) states that a language can be analyzed in terms of its “phrase structure”, which may be generalized for all languages of the world at universal level as all the languages of the world have same underlying rules. This concept provides a space for Universal Grammar (UG). The principles of Universal Grammar are supposed to be formulated in accordance with universally accepted criteria. The criteria,

named as criteria of adequacy are further divided into four categories: 1) the principles formulated for the analysis should be “descriptively adequate”; 2) they need to be explicable that is known as “explanatory adequacy”; 3) they must be precise and comprehensive i.e. maximally constrained or easily understandable and applicable; and 4) the aspect of “learnability” must be possessed by them. So, that the applicability in terms of universality becomes feasible. This is why the approach in question is often called ‘Universalist’ (Canagarajah. 1999, pp.77-92)

To achieve the scope of universality in this regard the categorization of the parameters is prerequisite. Prior to that, it is principally important to define it as “Head First” or “Head Last” language. Then it can be further analyzed in the perspective of parameter setting. The present study was meant to analyze the parameter setting in the language acquisition process of a child at a very early stage. The main focus was Urdu language which is spoken and understood in a quite large segment of population of the world. Its origins lie in Indian sub-continent. Urdu came in India through Sufi’s coming from Persia and their poetry in Persian, specifically in the genre of *Ghazal*. As early as 1324 AD, Urdu was not a standardized language of literature and was known as “*Reekhta*” and was used for composing poetry (Sohail, 2012, pp. 147). It is the collective product of languages like Turkish, Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit (Grierson as cited in Mushtaq & Zahra, 2012).

Askari (2008) as quoted in Sohail (2012) opines that Urdu came to sub-continent through the Muslim influx from Persia and Middle East and that it was the greatest gift to India given by Muslims. Some other scholars hold the belief that Urdu originated as a pidgin language as it was used as a means of communication between the conquerors and the indigenous people of India, later on the creolization took place and it gave birth to several independent dialects of the same language with the passage of time. (Sohail, 2012)

The incentive behind the selection of this topic for research was to explore the parameter-setting in the language of children at an early stage in Pakistani context. The research also investigates the role of universal grammar in the language acquisition. Various aspects of parameter setting were discussed in this research to create awareness among language students and teachers about different parameters and their setting at a very early stage of language acquisition by the children.

## Research Questions

Main Question:

What type of parameter-setting is found in the language of children at an early stage of language acquisition?

*Subsidiary Questions:*

- (i) What type of parameter-setting is learnt at the earlier stage by children?
- (ii) What type of parameter-setting becomes problematic for children at an early stage?
- (iii) What are the differences in terms of parameter-setting among male children?
- (iv) What are the similarities in terms of parameter-setting among the male children?

## Literature Review

According to Radford (2004), language ability includes such universal principles which lead the child in acquiring the grammatical structure of a language. Nonetheless, it is not possible that grammatical principles of all the languages are recognized equally all over the world. If this was possible, all natural language grammars would be the same and there would be no grammatical learning involved in language acquisition by the children and only lexical learning would have been sufficient. Though there are universal principles which establish the wider general sphere of the grammar of natural languages, there also appear to be specific linguistic aspects of grammar which children need to be taught as part of their indigenous language in the process of learning. Consequently, language acquisition includes learning both at lexical level as well as grammatical level.

Undoubtedly, learning of the grammatical structure does not entail learning of those grammatical aspects which are innate and governed by principles of Universal Grammar (UG). The learning of the grammar includes only those aspects of grammar which are related to deviation of a language from innate and universal principles of grammar and this deviation differs from language to language. However, it is pertinent to determine what grammatical aspects of indigenous languages are needed to be taught to the

children. It is also obligatory in this regard that the range of parameters is established in the grammatical structure of different natural languages of the world. We will illustrate this phenomenon through a contrast between Urdu and English: It is obvious from this tabulated information that even simple sentences of English and Urdu grammatical structures differ from each other.

**Table 1: Comparison between Urdu and English Structure  
(Declarative Sentences)**

<b>Complete Sentence in Urdu (SOV) (English Transliteration)</b>	<b>Object + Verb (Urdu) (English Transliteration)</b>	<b>English Counterpart with Urdu Structure</b>	<b>Object + Verb (English) with Urdu Structure</b>	<b>Complete Sentence in English (SVO)</b>
ZAINAB URDU BOLTI HAI	URDU BOLTI HAI	*Zainab Urdu speaks.	*Urdu speaks	Zainab speaks Urdu.
AHMED PANI PITA HAI	PANI PITA HAI	*Ahmed water drinks.	*water drinks	Ahmed drinks water.
WO TENNIS KHAILTA HAI	TENNIS KHAILTA HAI	*He tennis plays.	*tennis plays	He plays tennis.

**Table 2: Comparison between Urdu and English Structure  
(Interrogative Sentences)**

<b>Complete Sentence in Urdu (English Transliteration)</b>	<b>English Counterpart with Urdu Structure</b>	<b>Complete Sentence in English</b>
YE KIA HAI?	*This what is?	What is this?
AHMED KAHAN HAI?	*Ahmed where is?	Where is Ahmed?
WO KAHAN REHTA HAI?	*He where lives?	Where does he live?

The information tabulated in Table 2 displays the difference in the

interrogative structure of English and Urdu languages.

**Table 3: Comparison between Urdu and English Structure (Imperative Sentences)**

Complete Sentence in Urdu (English Transcription)	English Counterpart with Urdu Structure	Complete Sentence in English
US KI MADAD KARO	*Him help.	Help him.
SHOR MUT KARO	*Noise don't make.	Don't make a noise.
APNA APAN KAAM KARO	*Own Own work do.	Do your own work.

This table depicts that imperative structures of English and Urdu grammar also differ from each other. It is to be noted that the structural differences between Urdu and English are more complex in compound and complex sentences.

With reference to table (1), however, a general conclusion can be made that in languages like Urdu, finite verbs like *bolti hai* 'speaks' can have either an explicit subject like *Zainab* or a null *pro* subject. The case of English is quite different. For instance a finite verb like *speaks* can have an explicit subject like *Zainab*. In English a finite verb cannot usually have a null *pro* subject. Due to this reason (d) (*\*Speaks Urdu*) is ungrammatical in English. Therefore, finite verbs in a language like Urdu may have either explicit or null/*pro* subjects, but in a language like English, finite verbs can generally have only explicit subjects, not null/*pro* subjects. These two languages might be described and differentiated by concluding that Urdu is a null subject language and English is a non-null subject language. According to Vanikka & Levy (1999) the domain of deviation in the grammar of languages seems to have only two possible aspects of having or not having null subjects in case of finite verbs. Parameterization in terms of word order is the most eminent part of grammar in different types of languages of the world. The nature of word order variation can be elaborated by referring to English and Urdu sentences as discussed above.

In the simple sentence in English (i.e *Zainab speaks Urdu.*) subject is followed by verb and verb is followed by an object. However, contrastively,

in Urdu (i.e. Zainab Urdu bolti hai), the subject is followed by an object and object is followed by a verb. In accordance with the grammatical structure of English (c) & (d) sentences are ungrammatical and (e) is grammatically correct. In case of Urdu language both the sentences (a) & (b) are grammatically correct and parameter setting is okay. There are different types of parameters (i.e. null-subject parameter, head-position parameter and wh-parameter) and they have different setting in different languages as we have discussed above with reference to English and Urdu.

The important question which comes under discussion in the perspective of parameter-setting in the language acquisition process is how children reach to the level of appropriate setting for a particular parameter, and what kind of evidence is used by them in the setting of parameters. According to Chomsky (1981) there are two significant types of evidence which might be available to the language learner. They are named as *positive evidence* and *negative evidence*. The reference of positive evidence is made to a set of observed expressions illuminating a scrupulous occurrence. For instance, if children produce such a structure of utterance in which heads are preceded by their complements, this offers them positive evidence and consequently they are enabled to set the head parameter at its accurate place in the structure of their speech.

There might be two possible categories of negative evidence– direct or indirect. In case of direct negative evidence, the correction of children's errors might be carried out by other speakers of the language. Nonetheless, this sort of correction is not very much effective in language acquisition due to its irregularity, and moreover children do not usually respond to this sort of correction. This phenomenon can be further illustrated by the following dialogue of McNeill (1966) cited by Radford (2004):

CHILD: Nobody don't like me

ADULT: No, say: 'Nobody likes me'

CHILD: Nobody don't like me

ADULT: No, now listen carefully. Say 'Nobody likes me'

CHILD: Oh, nobody don't likes me

In accordance with the claim of Hyams (1986) negative evidence in the form of parental dissatisfaction or explicit corrections has no perceptible effect on the syntactic ability of the child. On the other hand, self-correction

is not so frequent a phenomenon that can play the most important role in the process of language acquisition. To a certain extent it can be said that kids depend upon direct negative verification. We might instead imagine that they learn from indirect negative evidence. Indirect negative evidence might result into the child's perception that English is head-first language. Even though it might be said that indirect negative evidence results into something positive in the process of language acquisition, but there are prospective learnability issues subsequent to this claim. Consequently, for making sure that non-occurrence is ungrammatical the child is supposed to pass through a large experience but it does not seem feasible in the case of children.

The assumption of parameters as binary and single-valued along with the evidence in its negative form appears to be superfluous as a whole. Such considerations of learnability have forced Chomsky (1986) to conclude that children learn language from positive evidence only. It is also claimed that negative evidence is not used by the children in the setting of parameters. This claim is also named as "*no negative- evidence hypothesis*" (Guasti 2002). This study is not meant to address any such intricate situation in the process of language acquisition. It is simply meant to highlight the nature of parameter setting in terms of word order in the language of children, especially Urdu, at a very early stage of acquisition process.

## **Methodology**

The sample includes twenty respondents between the ages of 24 ~ 30 months. Only male kids were taken as respondents. A qualitative research approach was adopted. A questionnaire was designed in the perspective of research questions for the collection of data. All children belonged to lower middle class families whose parents, especially fathers, were government employees, living in in-service married accommodation. The basic educational background of the parents of the respondents was almost the same. The parents were taken into confidence and they were clearly informed about the objective of the study. A number of parents were consulted for the research and only willing parents were approached for the appropriate timings in the perspective of data collection. Parents were not compelled or forced in any way for the adjustment of the timing. Adjustment of timings was purely in accordance with the comfort of the children and their parents. The data was analyzed qualitatively.

## **Data Collection**

Data was collected through personal visits. For collection of data a questionnaire was formulated as a research instrument after a detailed literature review on the subject. It included five open-ended questions along with nine declarative sentences. There were 15 sentences in the questionnaire in total. The respondents were asked to answer five questions and repeat nine sentences. Data was collected in the presence of the parents of the children. For analysis, data was recorded with the permission of the parents. There was no issue in the process of data collection except the adjustment of timings for data collection due to the official commitment of the parents of respondents, although it was settled down in a significantly efficient manner.

## Results

Data collected through recording is discussed in this section. There were twenty children who were selected for this study. Their parents speak Punjabi as their mother tongue. Urdu is spoken with the kids for all forms of communication (formal or informal). Sometimes Punjabi is also spoken during the conversation between wife and husband or with guests. Among these twenty children, ten were almost 26 months old and ten were almost 30 months old. They were all physically and mentally quite sharp and medically fit. The children were asked five questions to answer and ten sentences to repeat in Urdu language. Following is the English translation and transcription of those Urdu questions and declarative sentences:

- |    |                                  |                               |
|----|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1  | Aap ka naam kia hai?             | (What is your name?)          |
| 2  | Aap ke baap ka naam kia hai      | (What is your father's name?) |
| 3  | Aap ki behan ka naam kia hai     | (What is your sister's name?) |
| 4  | Aap kia khana pasand karte hain? | (What do you like to eat?)    |
| 5  | Aap ki ammi ka naam hai?         | (What is your mother's name?) |
| 6  | Mein ne saib khaya               | (I ate apple.)                |
| 7  | Mein ne pani pia.                | (I drank water.)              |
| 8  | Mein TV dekhta hun               | (I watch TV.)                 |
| 9  | Mein cartoon dekhta hun          | (I watch cartoons.)           |
| 10 | Papa achchay hain                | (Papa is good.)               |



- |    |                                |                          |
|----|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 11 | Mein bread aur jam khata hun   | (I eat bread and jam.)   |
| 12 | Mama achchy hain.              | (Mama is very good.)     |
| 13 | Mein ne doodh pia              | (I drank milk.)          |
| 14 | Mein bat se khelta hun         | (I play with bat.)       |
| 15 | Mein Tom aur Jerry dekhta hun. | (I watch Tom and Jerry.) |

The response of the children, except one, to all above mentioned sentences was quite interesting. It enhanced our interest in the process of children language acquisition. There was only a single word response to all the five questions and it was nothing else except a noun (one word). For *two-word* utterance we asked for the help from the parents of the children. They repeated the questions by giving instructions to their children to tell the full names (child's own name, mother's name, father's, name, sister's name, names of eatables like bread & jam, bread & butter or egg & slice). It was found that children could speak two words easily but they were habitual to one word response. They were good at nouns i.e. names. When the children were asked to repeat the above mentioned sentences (6~15) the response was almost same. To all these ten declarative sentences the repetition by the child was in two words. Therefore, present study confirms that the children were quite comfortable with two-word utterance as compared to the whole or complete sentences mentioned above.

There was one child among the respondents who could not speak more than one word and his age was 24 months. After experiencing this response of the child we conducted an interview of the father of this child. He told us that the male children in their family acquired the language slowly and his child would start speaking two words after the age of at least three years, whereas female children acquired the language earlier and they started speaking two words at the age of twelve or fourteen months. It was contrary to the canonical concept of child language acquisition. If we refer it to one of our researcher's experience, his female kids started saying two words in a single utterance almost after twelve or fourteen months of their age in average, but the acquiring the ability of uttering two words together in his family by male children was not as late as the child under study was. They generally acquire two words response at the age of eighteen months.

In accordance with the above mentioned discussion, it is therefore concluded that female children acquire the language earlier than the male

children and learning the nouns first is common to both male and female. In terms of parameter setting they take nouns as the solely important component of their utterance. Among the three basic parameters known as “wh-parameter”, “null-subject parameter” and “head-position parameter” the children under study were observed to be inclined toward the setting of null-subject parameter and head-position parameter. There was almost no sense of wh-parameter and according to child’s father, the queries and questions were exercised by the child with different intonation and non-verbal patterns (the exceptional case). The other children could understand and respond the wh-questions in their verbal expressions. Urdu being the Head-First language according to my understanding reflects noun as the most important component of a sentence or utterance at the early stage of language acquisition which results into null-subject parameter and head-position parameter (where noun is considered to be as head or null-subject) setting in the earlier stage of language acquisition by the children.

## **Conclusion**

At an early stage of language acquisition children acquire the parameter setting in terms of subjects, null subjects and head-positions parameters. The application or may be accurate application of wh-parameter is learnt comparatively at later stages. Subjects, null subjects and head position parameters are learnt earlier than wh-parameters. Wh-parameters are a kind of problematic area in parameter setting for the children. Differences and similarities in terms of the efficient parameter setting among the male children were found in this study. There could be different reasons behind these differences and similarities but they were not explored due to the limitations of this study. Nothing could be generalized because the study was carried out on a small scale. We can only have an idea of the trend of parameter setting in Urdu language in the process of language acquisition at an early stage.

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