香港中文大學
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Acquisition and Attrition: Language Development over the Lifespan

Linguistics Seminars

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Date: November 16, 2016 (Wednesday)
Time: 16:30 – 18:15
Venue: Lecture Theatre 3, Esther Lee Building,
        The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Abstract

As a sequel to the first talk, this second talk will view age-related language attrition as a natural stage of language development starting with child language acquisition. Contrary to the popular belief, I will argue that language attrition of the elderly at the age of 80+ or 90+ can NOT be a mirror image of the normal child language acquisition at all. Rather, the language performance of the elderly is resultant from their neurological changes and lifespan language experience, yielding both inter-individual and intra-individual differences. Neurological changes of the elderly mainly involve the atrophy of prefrontal lobe, thus the decline of executive function. Yet the cognitive behaviors of the elderly including language performance can be compensated for by either posterior-anterior shift of the brain activation in aging (PASA) (Davis, et al., 2008), or greater recruitment of the homologous brain regions (such as right frontal lobe), known as hemispheric asymmetry reduction in older adults (HAROLD) (Cabeza, 2002; Cabeza & Dennis, 2013).

At the same time, the language performance of the elderly also depends on several general principles of language experience over the lifespan either through education and learning, and use of second, third or even fourth foreign languages. Among these principles are (1) first come, last go; (2) use it or lose it; (3) means, opportunity, and motivation (MOM). Understanding of these principles can help clinical psychologists and psychiatrists identify dementia and suspects of Alzheimer's disease more effectively.

Idea density and grammatical complexity are two centrally important measures for the analysis of language performance for normal elders as well as elders with dementia as demonstrated in the well-known Nun Study (Snowdon, Kemper et al. , 1996, Snowdon et al. 1999, Kemper and Greiner et al., 2001). This talk will end with a sketch of a complexity metrics for measuring idea density and grammatical complexity for Chinese-speaking elders with normal aging and with dementia.

Finally, I wish to endorse a view of aging as a natural development biologically and cognitively, arguing that Smart Aging View should replace the traditional pessimistic view of aging.

Speaker

Professor James H.-Y. Tai is Distinguished Chair Professor and Director of the Research Center for Humanities and Social Sciences of National Chung Cheng University. He received his doctoral degree in Linguistics from Indiana University, and taught at Southern Illinois University and Ohio State University (1970-1995) before joining National Chung Cheng University to serve as the founding chair of the Graduate Institute of Linguistics and later as Dean of College of Humanities. He was Director-General of the Division of Humanities and Social Sciences of the Taiwan National Science Council during 2002-2005, President of the International Association of Chinese Linguistics (2004) and recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Taiwan Linguistic Society (2010). His research focuses on syntagmatic relations on the syntax-semantics interface and the modality of communication in spoken language and sign language, with reference to the universals and particulars of human language. Since 2010, he has been working with psychologists and neuro-scientists on the relationship between language and aging, with the aim of identifying linguistic markers of dementia in Chinese.

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