

Comanche Baby and Adult LanguageComanche Baby and Adult Language

The Comanche language is a member of the far flung Uzo Aztecan stock first set forth by Buschmann, then furthered by Sapir, Whorf, and Kroeber. Comanche and Shoshone have been recognized as very similar and as one community member described it “the Shoshone speak as the Comanche spoke long long ago.” Baby talk is a subsystem regarded among linguists as being used in settings where an adult is speaking to young children or vice versa. Its features include intonational and patterned modifications of the language spoken by adults and children alike. The language also includes a unique set of lexical items that usually cover kin names, bodily functions, certain simple qualities (ouch, no, hot, cold), and vocabulary of animals, nursery games, and similar items. Baby talk consists of simple consonants, less stressed stops and nasals, and contains only a very small selection of vowels. There is a tendency for children learning languages to add an affix to words creating reduplication in their words. An example of this reduplication in Comanche saying pipiá for mother when adults say it as piá. A second phonological characteristic is the predominance of reduplication, both parts of words and of whole words, in the baby talk of all six languages in the research we are using here (Comanche included).<sup>1</sup> For several of these languages, reduplication plays a grammatical role of some sort in the adult language, but the reduplication in baby talk is generally separate and unrelated to the usage in the normal language (Ferguson, 1964).

English examples would include a choo-choo for the adult version train or itty-bitty for little. The research I am using for some explanations here comes from the comparison of baby talk in six languages, Arabic, Marathi, Comanche, Gilyak, English, Spanish. The first two are languages of Asia, the second are communities, one in each New World and Old World, the last

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<sup>1</sup> FERGUSON, C. H. A. R. L. E. S. A. (1964). Baby talk in six languages. *American Anthropologist*, 66(6\_PART2), 103–114. [https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1964.66.suppl\\_3.02a00060](https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1964.66.suppl_3.02a00060)

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two are major European languages.<sup>2</sup> Baby talk is not a linear and straightforward part of a language, transmitted by “natural“ means of language transmission. It is not a universal, intuitive occurrence in children all over, nor a one off form of speech that occurs through adult imitation of child speech. Baby talk however is present in contiguous but genetically unrelated languages, unlike animal calls, they tend to show different patterns of dispersal than other aspects of the normal language. The general assumption of baby talk is that adults are the ones to initiate it through the use of material familiar to them as appropriate for this. Baby talk has instances of being so influential that the words become incorporated into the normal language (Ex: the English word tummy). Simplification of consonant clusters is seen for all except Arabic but can occur in it as well (the simplification of consonant clusters is not universal for all baby talk, there are a few other examples where it becomes more complicated, like Arabic and Gilyak). Another example of Arabic and Gilyak going against the grain is seen by the replacement of velars by apical existing in the other four (and beyond). Replacement of R by a less harsh consonant for example (English version of wabbit for rabbit) was discovered in all six languages. Comanche seems to follow most trends of the features of other baby talk languages, except for the lack of inner change occurring to the sibilance, affricates, and stops (an example would be English baby talk “soos” instead of shoes). Kinship terms, other than those used for father, mother, and grandparents appear later in the child’s vocabulary. It is interesting to note that the maternal grandparent's terms are those first used for all grandparents. This suggests matrilineal local residence, or at the least, more intimate contact with the mother's parents than with the fathers. Another noteworthy cultural aspect in Comanche is a well defined pattern of synonymous animal terms, which figure prominently in their stories and songs. The abundance of these words in the

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language indicates a knowledge/interest in animal life, which is indicative of an earlier Shoshonean cultural tradition. Animal names were also quite frequently used in "their" names. A strong taboo on using words associated with a dead person's name may contribute to the creation of new metonymic terms that then became established in the language.

Linguistic Theories

Pinker argues that each individual kid from any culture is born with at least some language skills hardwired that develop eventually; Infants already come equipped with the skills to start speaking eventually. They acquire the ability to speak in their mother tongue with little outside intervention and can also identify different tongues better than the adults can. Pinker supporters state that babies don't learn from listening to adults, and that they would learn their language on their own. So, this event begs the question, does a child learn language from others, or is there an innate grammar possessed by all children?

Chomskians would also defend the idea that grammar is an innate ability, something that only people possess (not animals). The issue with these arguments is their focus on grammar. Language is not restricted to grammar, language is made up of many more components than grammar. There's also the index of words that they need to express themselves, if babies don't need to learn those words from people, then does that mean they're automatically born with their native language in their head? Vocabulary has to be taught, along with socially accepted expressions and concepts such as being respectful or when it is appropriate to be too loud. Pinker sees the idea that parents teach their children language as a fairy tale they tell themselves to justify baby talk. My question would be, what about cultural concepts reflected in language that need to be learned? In Comanche, this includes the explanatory words used to express fear, or pain. His view on baby talk and "motherese" is very strict and in my opinion too critical. He

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argues that "children deserve most of the credit for the language they acquire" and argues hard against "the belief that Motherese is essential to language development." Chomsky supporters argue that the rules in babies' heads are so powerful that they would be able to create a new language from scratch, even in isolation. I believe there is a component of innate ability, but that it would not be strong enough to come to fruition on its own, with no external support from adults. Perhaps, baby talk is not a necessity, but at the very least, contact with the language by adults is necessary. The "innate hypothesis" has failed to undermine the need for baby talk/adults speaking to children. There is much research that baby talk can improve mental well being as well as language acquisition in children.

"No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached." -Sapir

Different languages represent reality differently, there are cultural nuances and social customs that only a native or fluent speaker would comprehend; because of this, speakers of different languages perceive a different reality. I believe this theory to undermine Pinker and Chomsky, because if culture affected language so severely then universal grammar would find itself further from the truth. Sapir and Whorf possess a "weak" view of linguistic relativity, eventually "strong" determinism came into favor. Their theory is developed under the framework that "the structure of anyone's native language strongly influences or fully determines the worldview he will acquire as he learns the language." In Comanche, we see that animal names are synonymous with certain fear words. Animals likely posed a dangerous threat to especially wandering children. I believe these words would certainly affect the cognition of a child, to teach them the collective reverence and fear of a wild wolf, panther, or bear among Comanche society.

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It is apparent when studying Comanche baby words that these are not just single words, but whole sentences with many different, but related, possible meanings; Comanche baby language is full of examples of words that might affect the way children are taught to think. These meanings are learned through gestures, intonation, and the context.

The seeming universality in some baby languages, such as the use of simpler phonemes, can be explained away by the baby's limited ability to manipulate its speech organs. Not by a universal innate grammatical language. A natural tendency to reduplicate may be supported by observations by adults of the infants “babbling” and repetition, which could also be due to their limited muscle control ability. We see both repetitive and shortened words in Comanche. Baby talk may not be necessary, but still holds a purpose. It is generally believed by adults that baby talk is easier to understand for these young children and holds their attention.

## Examples of Comanche baby and adult words:

áh, áx, áhA means something nasty or dirty, feces, urine, penis, a smell; warning that something is dirty; command for baby to defecate

Baby version: ahá - no good! (Said to baby)

The next two forms are used in speaking to and by older children. They are derived from the baby words, but with regular verbal suffixes

áhi•kwhA go off and defecate!

áhI, áhini- I have dirtied myself

aná, anó- it hurts! (Pointing to where)

así- anything nasty, poop

eroró, eró, etó- white man

Adult version- táivo- white man

Īī- its hot! Stay away

Adult version- īī

Ī- exclamation of surprise used by women or babies

hī, hīkéta is the adult version of above

īcī, īcīcīcī- cover me, dress me, i'm cold

Adult version- ící- used only in exclamation

tatá- something to eat, especially meat

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Adult version- tí'kap- food, meat

tá si- vagina, a personal name for one who has a vagina

Adult version- tá I

mamá- horse, said by child when they want to be carried on their back, also mother

mukí- giant, owl, bogey related to the legendary giant owl mú•pic

mumú- used to scare child; child's exclamation of fright; the dark thunder; cow

naná- it might hurt, get away, blood, sore, or said by child when they feel unwell

wí as I- penis

Adult version- wí asi, male personal name for one who has a penis

namí- younger sister

Adult version- námI

taká- sibling

Adult- tákA

tamí- younger brother

Adult- támI

pia-big

p'ie-old, former

t'ie-little

ke-negative

?isa-false, deceitful

hu·-wood

ca·-good, fine

so·-many

yu·-common, ordinary

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