

# On the Mental Lexicon

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper, I will examine the status of the mental lexicon in language acquisition. Yumoto (2011: 66), commenting on Yoneyama (2009) which analyzes the sentences used in Helen Keller's books, assumes that when a person who is blind and deaf acquires language, his or her mental lexicon may be different from that of normal people. This issue is very intriguing, but in fact it is not easy to find confirmatory evidence. This paper is an attempt to examine what can be said about the relation between the mental lexicon and language acquisition.

## 2. The Resultative Construction

It is demonstrated in Yoneyama (2009) that in her books, Helen Keller rarely used resultative expressions such as those in (1).

- (1) a. John pounded the metal flat.
- b. John wiped the table clean.

Instead, she used the conjunction *until* to express the resultant state, as shown in (2).<sup>1</sup>

- (2) a. This made me so angry at times that I kicked and screamed until I was exhausted. (*Story*: 6)
- b. I held on with might and main until I was exhausted. (*World*: 92)
- c. Miles and miles he [=the pony] ran until he was worn out. (*Midstream*: 279)
- d. I have read and reread it until in many parts the pages have faded out. (*Midstream*: 313)

As to the conjunction *until*, Ono (2007), based on Rothstein's (2004) idea of incremental process, argues that the natural interpretation of (3a) is (3b).

- (3) a. John sang the baby asleep.  
b. John sang until the baby fell asleep. (Ono (2007:91))

Rothstein (2004: 111) observes that “the contextual relation between singing and a baby becoming asleep is easily recognized, and it is thus easy to “measure” or “structure” the progress of a singing activity in terms of an incremental process of a baby falling asleep.” We can say that the conjunction *until* in (3b) is equivalent to that of the sentences in (2).

In her books, Helen Keller used the following sentences which can be regarded as the resultative construction.

- (4) a. I lived myself into all things. (*Story*: 36)  
b. I soon recover my buoyancy and laugh the discontent out of my heart. (*Story*:74)  
c. [A] breeze has blown my papers off the table. (*World*: 32)  
d. The door was flung open. (*Midstream*: 40)

It may be possible to say that the examples in (4) are different from those in (1) in that each of the sentences (4a-c) uses a PP as a resultative predicate and that in (4d) *the door was flung* implies that the door was open.

It is helpful here to look at Vanden Wyngaerd (2001). He argues that PPs have a wider distribution in resultatives than do adjectives by citing the following examples.

- (5) a. The wedding cake melted into a slimy mess.  
b.\*The wedding cake melted ugly. (Vanden Wyngaerd (2001: 71))

A similar line of argument can be found in Hoekstra (1998:162). He also assumes that location denoting predicates have a wider distribution in resulta-

tives.

It is not easy to explain why Helen Keller did not use the adjectival resultative construction. Is the absence of the adjectival resultative construction related to the status of the mental lexicon? Notice, incidentally, that in her books, Helen Keller often used the preposition *into*, as shown in (6).

- (6) a. The fire leaped into life. (*Story*: 9)
- b. Miss Sullivan slowly spelled into my hand the word “d-o-l-l.”  
       (*Story*:15)
- c. I felt the air had blossomed into joy. (*Midstream*:145)
- d. New ideas kept crowding into my mind. (*Midstream*:156)

The preposition *into* can refer to the resultant state, because it has the Place in its lexical conceptual structure, as shown in (7).

- (7) [Path TO ([Place IN ([Thing ])])] (Jackendoff (1990:45))

Although Helen Keller did not use the adjectival resultative construction, she used the depictive construction, as shown in (8).

- (8) a. The next morning my teacher awoke very ill. (*Midstream*:146-7)
- b. Always I return home weary.... (*Midstream*:295)

Compared to the depictive construction, the resultative construction with a location denoting predicate uniquely refers to the resultant state.<sup>2</sup> If this is the case, it is possible that Helen Keller made use of the characteristics of location denoting predicates. The same seems to be true with the expressions containing the conjunction *until*. The subordinate clause beginning with the conjunction *until* uniquely refers to the resultant state, too.

### 3. The *Way*-Construction

Helen Keller often used the *way*-construction in her books. Consider the

following examples.

- (9) a. [T]he great ship, tense and anxious, groped her way toward the shore with plummet and sounding-line. (*Story*:15)
- b. On entering the door, I remembered the doll I had broken. I felt my way to the hearth and picked up the pieces. (*Story*: 16)
- c. Half walking in the paths, half working our way through the lesser drifts, we succeeded in reaching a pine grove just outside a broad pasture. (*Story*: 41)
- d. I trudged my weary way through the labyrinthine mazes of grammars and dictionaries. (*Story*: 84)
- e. We picked our way through treacherously smiling cart roads. (*Midstream*: 62)
- f. A blind man tapped his way along the walk. (*Midstream*: 202)

I remember wondering how she acquired the *way*-construction when I read *The Story of My Life* for the first time. In Yoneyama (2009), I concluded that it might not be difficult for Helen Keller to master the *way*-construction, because she learned the English motion expressions together as a set. It goes without saying that the *way*-construction is a member of the motion expressions in English. English is characterized, as Talmy (1991) proposes, as a satellite-framed language and the *way*-construction is compatible with this pattern. In English motion expressions, the verb mainly expresses the manner-of-motion aspect of the sentence and the path is realized as a PP or a particle. The verbs in the examples of (9) contain the manner component which originally does not express motion. It seems to me that the concept of manner is a key to the question why Helen Keller often used the *way*-construction.

#### 4. Verbs of Manner of Motion

Helen Keller used verbs of manner of motion without any path. The following are some examples.<sup>3</sup>

- (10) a. [T]he pagan gods and goddesses still walked on earth. (*Story*: 82)  
b. [H]e will walk in a little while. (*Letters*: 138)  
c. I can swim a little under water, and do almost anything I like. (*Letters*: 196)  
d. She could not even walk and have very little use of her hands. (*Letters*: 218)  
e. I tried to run; but the long grass tripped me, and I fell forward on my face. (*World*: 92)  
f. I walk in the stillness of the night. (*World*: 121)

It is also interesting to notice that Helen Keller used the combination of a motion verb and a present participle of a manner-of-motion verb or an infinitival phrase. Consider the following examples.

- (11) a. I go rowing without the rudder. (*Story*: 89)  
b. ...go skimming lightly over glistening, tilting waves, ... (*Story*: 90)  
c. ...go skimming far across the pond at a tremendous rate! (*Letters*: 193)  
d. The other day I went to walk toward a familiar wood. (*World*: 46)

It is well known that English has the GO-Adjunct Rule or meaning extension, as shown in (12).

- (12) a. Willy wiggled out of the hole.  
b. Debby danced into the room. (Jackendoff (1990:89))

Jackendoff (1990: 90) argues that the conflation of the GO component and the MOVE component into a single verb is licensed by a language-particular rule of English. It is helpful here to notice that Levin and Rappaport (1995) argue that agentive verbs of manner of motion may become unaccusative when they take a goal. Consider the following examples.

- (13) a. The mouse ran (through the maze).  
b. We ran the mouse through the maze.  
c. \*We ran the mouse. (Levin and Rappaport (1995:188))

Levin and Rappaport (1995:188) observe that the verb *run*, for example, is unaccusative when it occurs with a goal and that this is why the external argument position can be filled by an external cause, as in (13b). The unacceptability of (13c) indicates that *ran* in (13c) is unergative and that this is the reason why the subject *we* cannot occur as an external argument. We can say that compared to unaccusative predicates, unergative predicates are more activity-oriented. It is plausible to say that Helen Keller used a verb of manner of motion in its original sense.

It is possible to assume that Helen Keller, blind and deaf, was conscious of her behavior and this consciousness is reflected in her linguistic behavior. The fact that she used the *way*-construction and motion verbs in their original senses indicates that her linguistic behavior was based on activity. This seems to be one of the reasons why the conjunction *until* is used instead of the adjectival resultative construction.

It seems to me that Helen Keller was able to tell the difference in manner, because she said as follows in her letter.

- (14) I cannot see the lovely things with my eyes, but my mind can see them all, and so I am joyful all the day long. (*Letters*:141)

## 5. Embodied Human Activity

Gill (1997) discusses several cases of language acquisition including that of Helen Keller. His main point is that both empiricist and the rationalist views cannot account for the case of Helen Keller. He claims that what is needed is the dynamic interaction between the two. According to Gill (1997: 54), Helen Keller came to understand the relation between signs and the world, while she was engaged in a specific task in cooperation with Annie Sullivan. He seems to be right in saying that “people do not just “refer to” or “name” things in the

world; they do so pragmatically, for the attainment of certain ends.” (57)

Gill (1997:58) argues that Helen Keller grasped language because she was continually immersed in it in conjunction with the involvement in the world around her. His observation reminds me of the following passage.

(15) The treasures of a new, beautiful world were laid at my feet, and I took in pleasure and information at every turn. I lived myself into all things. I was never still a moment; my life was as full of motion as those little insects that crowd a whole existence into one brief day.  
(*Story*: 36)

What this passage says seems to accord to Gill’s (1997:62) observation that embodied social interaction forms the matrix from within which language arises.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

Gill (1997:65) argues that in the case of Helen Keller, the tactile and gestural aspects of speech were particularly focused. This observation seems to support the analysis made above. For Helen Keller, how she did in the world was very important. This seems to be one of the reasons why she used the conjunction *until* and the *way*-construction to describe her situation. Although I think that the innate language faculty is a prerequisite to language acquisition, we also have to take into consideration Gill’s (1997:52) observation that “the acquisition of language is neither exclusively a function of the body nor one of the mind; rather, it is the result of the interaction between the two in a concrete and evolving context.” In this paper, I have tried to examine whether the mental lexicon of a person who is blind and deaf is different from that of normal people. This analysis seems to show that the mental lexicon affects the way in which a person acquires language.

**NOTES**

- 1 The titles of Helen Keller's books which we cite in this paper are abbreviated as follows.

*The Story of My Life* (1902) (A Bantam Classic Book, New York, 1990) :

*Story*

*Letters* (1887-1901) (A Bantam Classic Book, New York, 1990): *Letters*

*The World I Live In* (1908) (New York Review Books, New York, 2003):

*World*

*Midstream: My Later Life* (1929) (Greenwood Press, Westport, 1968):

*Midstream*

- 2 Rapoport (1991) observes that the secondary predication construction can be interpreted as depictive or resultative depending on the context. She presents the following examples, cited from Green (1973).

(i) a. She cooked the [fish]<sub>i</sub> dry<sub>i</sub>.

b. She ate [her knuckles]<sub>i</sub> raw<sub>i</sub> (Rapoport (1991:166)).

It might be possible to assume that Helen Keller used the location denoting predicates to avoid the ambiguity. For further discussion on the relation between depictives and resultatives, see Rapoport (1991, 1999).

Notice, incidentally, that regarding the verb in the resultative construction, Rapoport (1991) states as follows.

In order to head a resultative, then, a verb must have two properties: it must be a verb of process or activity and it must necessarily entail a contact with or effect on its object. (Rapoport (1991: 171))

It may be worth examining whether these properties are related to the absence of the adjectival resultative construction in Helen Keller's books.



3 Needless to say, Helen Keller used motion verbs and manner-of-motion verbs with a path, as shown in (i).

- (i) a. I promised to keep still while she went to the house to fetch it.  
(*Story*: 18)
- b. Mrs Hopkins jumped up from the breakfast table and ran to the door to meet us. (*Letters*: 153)
- c. As I walk along its even pavements, I recognize expensive perfumes, powders, creams, choice flowers, and pleasant exhalations from the houses. (*Midstream*: 165)
- d. I was to walk to the middle of the alley and stand with upraised face and arms. (*Midstream*: 204)

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