

## Language acquisition among infants born in carceral institutions in Algeria

Ilhem Zoubida El Ouchdi\* , University of Tlemcen, Faculty of Letters and Arts, Department of English,  
Chetouane, Algeria

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### Abstract

Every year, many children are born in prisons. It has, however, been established in previous studies that the environment where the child lives is a key element in the process of the child's language acquisition. The present research work aims to discover the effects of the carceral institution on the process of the child's language acquisition. To reach this goal, the present investigation takes place in two rehabilitation institutions in Algeria. It collects data through interviews with mothers and interview with psychologists. The data collected is analysed and the triangulation of results revealed that the prison environment affects the child's language acquisition at the lexical level. Moreover, it deprives the child of different situations that would enable him to acquire language. This study recommends that the prison authorities should draw attention to the importance of the psycholinguistic aspect of this category of children by providing better conditions for better language development.

Keywords: Carceral institution, child, infants, language acquisition;

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\*ADDRESS OF CORRESPONDENCE : Ilhem Zoubida El Ouchdi, University of Tlemcen, Faculty of Letters and Arts,  
Department of English, Chetouane, Algeria  
Email address: [elouchdi\\_ilhem@yahoo.fr](mailto:elouchdi_ilhem@yahoo.fr)

## 1. Introduction

Prison regulations impose certain procedures concerning women. Each new prisoner has to take a pregnancy test. If the test is positive, then this woman is provided with several facilities, such as medical care and adequate nutrition until the moment of delivery when she receives transportation to the hospital for delivery (Kelly & Breslin, 2010). After giving birth, prison authorities allow the mother to keep her baby in prison in case no one can take care of the baby. According to Article 51 of the prison regulations, when the pregnant woman gives birth during her imprisonment, the prison administration coordinates with the appropriate social welfare agency to arrange for the placement of the newborn. If no placement is available, the imprisoned mother can keep the child with her until the age of 3.

The Algerian prison authorities provide special facilities for imprisoned mothers (Srivastava & Singh, 2016). They support them financially by providing all types of care, like milk, diapers, food, clothing etc. They also ensure that breastfeeding women are given adequate nutrition for their children's healthy development. The opportunity of breastfeeding is dependent on the mother's ability to lactate, which can be compromised by poor nutrition. Moreover, the child has the right to healthcare and vaccination. When the child reaches the age of 3, he will have to leave the prison and be taken either by a member of his family or put into an orphanage.

To analyse the linguistic performance of children born in prison, an interview was conducted with mothers and interviews with carceral psychologists were also carried out. The former is for mothers and the latter for psychologists working in carceral institutions where children live. Before dealing with language acquisition among children in carceral institutions, it is important to introduce the process of first language acquisition among infants living in natural social backgrounds like home. Researchers suggest that there are critical periods with different time frames for different language abilities. The critical period is a biologically determined period of life when language can be easily acquired. According to Lenneberg (1967), natural language acquisition results from constant exposure during a critical period that begins at the age of 2 and ends at puberty. This period begins after a certain maturation of the brain and ends with a certain loss of cerebral plasticity.

The special way in which many adults speak to small children helps them to acquire language. Studies show that the 'baby talk' used naturally by adults with infants tends to be an imitation and a bit higher level of the child's language. According to Piaget, as described in Britton (1970, p. 45):

*The mother's utterance is an imitation of the child's in the obvious sense. What she says is based closely on what the child said.... she consistently uses short and simple sentences, unlike conversational style of adults. Language is in fact rather like the speech of child, but a child is a little more grown-up in speech.*

A baby's speech development results from the caretaker's talk with the child while changing his diaper; she sings to him as she rocks him to sleep and when the child starts to coo and gurgle, she makes those sounds right along. According to Pinker (1996), during the first 3 years, 80% of the child's synaptic brain activity develops. Interacting with the child during this period strengthens his future language skills and ability to learn.

Baby talk has a simple vocabulary and less sophisticated sentence structure as compared to adult language. It is characterised by exaggerated intonation, sounds and repetition of questions. All these features help the child to reach sounds, consonant clusters, words and sentence patterns. Indeed, baby talk promotes a child's language development for he/she pays more attention and responds more eagerly to baby talk than to normal adult conversation.

Moreover, it is noticed that when speaking to a child, adults modify their language and adapt it to him, which is called 'motherese'. Pinker (2005, p. 8) defined motherese as the speech to the child that is '*slower, shorter, in the same ways (but not all) simpler, higher-pitched in content to the*

*present situation, compared to speech among adults*'. The mothers may seem easy to understand and easy at the first glance, but it is this data that makes the linguistic background of the child. The mothers also use paralinguistic communication like gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, kinesics or body language and proxemics.

On the other hand, the child imitates his parents' speech too. This phenomenon is named 'reduction' by Piaget and is defined as a linguistic improvisation that makes the child imitate not what is said around him but the way it is said. Adding to this is the ability to shorten sentences by using only keywords to convey a message. For instance, these are recordings of an 18 months and 27 days girl made by Brown and Bellugui (1964), as cited in Britton (1970, p. 43):

Mother's utterance	Child's utterance
'Baby is in the high chair'	'Baby high chair'
'Eve is having lunch'	'Eve lunch'
'He sat on the wall'	'Sat wall'

### 1.1. Conceptual framework

Children learn new items at an incredibly fast rate due to the number of words they hear from adults during their everyday conversations (Kovacs, Nagy, & Biro, 2021; Mguwata, 2020). Scholars investigating first language acquisition are interested in defining the nature of children's concepts in early child language. Piaget (1994) revealed that young children develop concepts starting at the age of 2. It is at this age that the child starts to widen the use of language and move from one word to one object to a class of objects. That is to say, they can assign objects to categories even when they do not have the relevant vocabulary.

The development of concepts is an essential part of a whole process that takes place in a child's mind (Ciobanu, 2018; Joudi, 2019). Concepts are the big ideas that children learn as they engage in a range of experiences, for instance, a baby drinks milk. As the baby grows older, he drinks juice as well. So, the concept of liquids that can be drunk expands as the child experiences different liquids. Bruner, in Britton (1970), considered that the development of thoughts goes through two main periods: perception and conception. The former takes place in the first 2 years of the child's life and the latter develops from the age 2 onwards.

The period of conception starts at the age of 2 and is referred to by Piaget as a spontaneous concept. The more the child grows up, the more his conception develops and makes him achieve the ability to organise his thoughts. Vygotsky (1997) focused on the role of communication when analysing conceptualisation. He considered that mutual interaction and comprehension among people is the most important element for the development of any concept. This mutual influence results from the ability to use grammar in all its aspects as is declared in the following statement:

*grammar is conceptualisation..., the core area of study to date within the field of cognitive linguistics is semantics and morpho-semantics and the way these two components of language determine syntax (the way words are put together to create grammatically acceptable phrases and sentences).*

Everyday interactions and experiences pave the way for the child to learn different concepts. Therefore, the more the child is involved in the society he lives in, the more his conceptualisation develops. The child is more socialised, which leads him to socialised thinking that progresses through time that leads him to a social immersion.

#### 1.1.1. Linguistic development

The mother tongue is the first language the child learns and hears (Belinskaya, Martsinkovskaya, Orestova, Kiseleva, & Kriger, 2020; Deacu, Kilyeni, & Barbulescu, 2018). It is the language through which emotions, moral and social values, and cultural and traditional norms are conveyed. When the child pronounces his first words, he starts communicating his emotions and

feelings and learns to use this same language to get his needs. Investigations have shown that the mother tongue shapes thinking and contributes to its development, as well as to cognitive and metacognitive capacities.

Indeed, linguistic development occurs when children develop their speech starting from producing simple sounds to forming meaningful sentences. Pinker (1996) believes that at the age of 2, the child is in complete mastery of 200 words, and when, he/she reaches the age of 6 he/she masters perfectly the linguistic structure of his mother tongue.

### 1.1.2. Phonological development

Phonological development is a gradual acquisition of the speech sound system, based on the child's perception and production of speech sounds. Stern and Carrooll (1969, p. 256) state that:

*children come to the task of learning phonology with some knowledge in how to communicate in nonverbal ways. The pre-linguistic infant knows how to use gestures to make assertions and requests, and once early speech sounds are mastered, they are quickly used for these same communicative functions. The child's first attempts at producing sounds have more to do with practicing the sound system than with communicating with others. The ability to communicate without words and to vocalise without meaning merge into productive and communicative speech. Phonological system begins with the child's perception of speech and turns to the production of speech.*

After birth, the infant produces vegetative sounds including natural sounds like burping or crying. When vocal play begins, the infant starts to string together long vowels or consonant sounds. Consonants are gradually acquired after vowels from the easier to the harder according to place and manner of articulation. After the period of early vocalisation, he/she can produce a series of consonants vowels syllables and develop utterances, such as ma-ma and da-da. Around the age of 9–12 months, most infants show initial signs of word comprehension. By producing speech sounds, infants practice their articulatory movement and learn to produce the prosody of language. After their first word appears, they simplify adult's language; this means that they are omitting, substituting and adding sounds (Table 1).

Table 1. Phonological development

Phonological features	Definition	Stem	Pronunciation	
Consonant cluster	Children find it difficult to produce consonants cluster, so they reduce them to smaller units	Sleep	/si :p/	
		Bring	/rɪŋ/	
Deletion	The deletion occurs in the last consonants. Sometimes children omit the last sound and swap other sounds around.	Cat	/kæ/	
		Mouse	/maʊ/	
Unstressed syllables deletion	Children often reduce syllables complexity.	Potatoes	/'teɪtəʊ/	
Substitution	Easier sounds are substituted for harder ones.	-Substituting glide or liquid consonants	Rabbit	/wæbɪt/
		-Fronting consonants		
		-Substituting nasal sounds for denasalised ones.	Shoes	/suz/

		Not	/dot/
Addition	Children also seem to like addition and reduplication. They often add an extra vowel sound to create a CVCV structure.	Doggie instead of dog	/doggi/

### 1.1.3. Morphological development

Morphological development is the acquisition of the relevant morphemes adding to rules governing their use. According to Akhtar and Tomasello (1997), morphology is an important part of a grammatical system, but it differs from sentence-level grammar in various ways. At the level of form, morphemes can often be bound to lexical items, which may make it more difficult for children to be productive with them independently of those words. Once the one-word stage has been surpassed and mastered, early words are learned in chunks without an internal morphological structure. Later on, the child's capacity to learn and use grammatical structures increases by the age of 2. He can use some inflectional morphemes to indicate the grammatical functions of nouns and verbs.

### 1.1.4. Syntactic development

Syntactic development is the development of a child's ability to create grammatical constructions by arranging words in an appropriate order (Gleason, 2005, pp. 139–140):

The remarkable feature about the development of syntactic rules is that seems to take place *almost unnoticed, with no explicit instruction. Parents who quite consciously and conscientiously teach their children concepts and words never presume to teach syntax. They focus on what the child is saying rather than how the child says.*

Parents teach their children words and concepts (what the child is saying) never presume to teach syntax (how the child says it). Syntactic development starts with a period of single-word speech where the child's utterances do not show any structural property. They are used to name objects and to express requests in their environment. For example, he/she says ball to mean I want the ball. Around the age of 18 months, the holophrastic stage glides gradually into a stage where the child has become aware that adding more words will improve communication. He is capable to determine that the combination of two words should have a certain relationship with different meanings. Later on, the child begins to produce longer and longer utterances that show more complex syntactic patterns.

At first, these utterances lack grammatical inflections and functional words. For instance, a child's earliest negation patterns are built around pre-verbal (no have it) and pre-subject (no door open). After the emergence of the copula, the child uses the negative form correctly. He/she can say 'she is not going'. By the end of 36 months, most children can produce 'wh' questions, like what do you do? Around the age of 42 months, the child can form and understand relative clauses, like this is the toy that I like, and embedded ones, like I know that you like this toy. At this point, he/she is skilful enough to apply the reflective pronouns accurately like: I see me in the mirror. When the child is around 48 months, he/she has acquired much of the adult's grammar.

### 1.1.5. Semantic development

Fromkin and Rodman (1983, p. 164) define semantics as 'the study of the linguistic meaning of words, phrases, and sentences'. Semantic development is a child's language acquisition of the meaning associated with words. It is a gradual process that begins just before the child says his first words. He/she tends to use these words more broadly or narrowly than an adult; which is known as overextension and under extension. The former means that the child uses a word in a broad sense, for example, the word dog may be used to refer to all four-legged animals with a tail (the child can notice similarities and differences between objects). The latter refers to a child's usage of a word

more narrowly than an adult's usage, for example, using the word shoe only when referring to his shoes.

Mental lexicon and semantic development are central in human language processing since they deal with word meaning association. Acquiring a lexicon is an easy task. It has been estimated that to build up a lexicon of about 700 adult-size entries, the child has to acquire new words at a rate of 10 words per day. Gleason (2005, p. 90) states that:

*the processes of concepts learning and lexicalisation, or attachment of words and meaning, may occur at varying rates and overlapping in time. At times children's concepts right match those of adults, but the children might use imperfect and only partially appropriate words because they lack better words to express themselves. To serve their communication desires, children may choose to use words in an analogous fashion or as semantic standing for words they do not know.*

First words are usually produced at around the first year of life. During this period, the child names common objects. He/she believes that the name and the referent are intrinsically related. He thinks that one cannot change the name of something without changing its nature as well. The child can understand some location words (e.g., in, on,), yes/no questions and simple what, where and who questions.

At the age of 2, the child is capable of understanding a variety of word types (nouns, verbs and prepositions.) and some simple concept terms (big, little.). Moreover, he includes basic emotion words in their vocabulary (sad, happy). At the age of 3, the child starts to sort objects into categories (foods, animals, clothing) and identifies items that are the same or different. Also, he/she uses some shapes, colours, letters and numbers to describe objects or situations. At the age of 4, the child can describe the function of common objects (the chair is used for setting and the spoon is used for eating). Furthermore, he/she can provide common antonyms (wet vs. dry) and synonymous (fast = quick). By the end of this stage, the child uses three or more adjectives (size, shape, texture and appearance). As he/she grows, their knowledge of vocabulary develops. Pinker (1996) mentions that children typically possess about 1,400 words when they are 6 years old.

#### *1.1.6. Pragmatic development*

Psycholinguists agree that language is used to inform, promise, request and query... in a given situation. It fulfils the success of communication that relies on the pragmatic aspect of the linguistic system. Besides acquiring the grammatical rules, children must learn the appropriate use of language in context (pragmatics). Pragmatic development is the study of how children learn to bridge the gap between the semantic meaning of words, structures and the intended meaning of an utterance. According to Hymes (1964), pragmatic development involves children's acquisition of communicative competencies, i.e., learning how to use language, communicate and understand others appropriately and effectively in a widening range of social contexts and activities while assuming increasingly complex social roles. Basic pragmatic skills emerge at quite an early age and remain undeveloped throughout preadolescence until the age of approximately 10 years (Saletta & Windsor, 2018; Tayyebi, 2021).

Over time, allowing the child to engage in society and become a full-fledged member of the cultural society. Studies that investigated the acquisition of verbal communicative acts (speech acts) by children have traced how very young children, starting from the pre-verbal stage, use linguistic means to perform social actions. The child uses his utterances with various illocutionary forces in the holophrastic stage, for instance, the utterance of water might be a single statement like there is a glass of water on the table or a request like give me water. Over time, he/she learns lexico, communicative and pragmatic means that enable him to communicate appropriately and effectively. To conclude, the child's pragmatic competence is his knowledge of how to configure a range of communicative resources in specific discursive practices.



One of the most remarkable characteristics of human beings is that everyone acquires language at a very young age. In this respect, psycholinguists Sampson (2005) and Sureshkumar (2002) conducted different research studies to answer the question of how young children manage to acquire their first language subconsciously in a few years without parents' efforts and the need for formal instructions.

### 1.2. Purpose of the study

The present research is conducted to draw attention to a marginalised group of children who encounters obstacles while acquiring their mother tongue. This study seeks to investigate language acquisition among children born in carceral institutions and the way they develop social interaction in a limited social context.

This research comprises two main parts. The former aims to draw a description of the language acquisition process based on some of the most important theories developed in this field. Moreover, it provides a general overview of linguistic development and the main stages of the process of language acquisition. In the end, it displays the types of penal institutions and the prison regulations concerning children born in the prison in Algeria. The latter is devoted to the practical side of this investigation, which presents the obtained data collected by using interviews. It focuses on data analysis and displays some suggestions and recommendations to draw attention to the importance of the psycholinguistic side of this category of children.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Data collection instrument

This study uses interviews with mothers and psychologists.

### 2.2. Participants

The present investigation takes place in two rehabilitation institutions in Algeria. The participants included 10 mothers in prison and 2 psychologists.

### 2.3. Analysis

The data collected were analysed using content analysis. The results are tabulated to make them easier to understand.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Mothers' interview analysis

The questions for the interview are ordered gradually according to the stages of language development.

#### 3.1.1. Pre-talking stage: 0–6 months

Question 01: Does your child react when you speak to him/her?

Table 2. Babies' reaction

Yes	No
09	01

Question 02: Does your child follow you with his/her eyes?

Table 3. Babies' interaction with eyes

Yes	No
10	00

### 3.1.2. Babbling stage: 6–8 months

Question 01: When did your child start babbling?

Answer: Mothers reply that their children babble at the normal age.

Question 02: What are the sounds produced by your child?

Answer: The results show that 10 children produced sounds such as /baba/, /mama/, /dada/ and /digiba/.

### 3.1.3. Holophrastic stage: 9–18

Question 1: What are the words produced by your child?

Table 4. Words produced by children

Names	Stem	Pronunciation	Stem	Pronunciation	Stem	Pronunciation
Iyad	ball	/bawu/	go out	/lu: ʔi /	Milk	/ʔiba/
Fatima	Aicha	/icha/	Potatoes	/tata/	Cat	/bibaʃ/
Youcef	Cat	/bibaʃ/	Diapers	/ku:ʃ/	cartoon	/miki
Rania	Desend	/hawad/	room	/ʃala/	crèche	/krəʃ /
Alae	dress	/roppa/	Abdekader	/ʔabdəkka/	bravo	/bravo/
Khadidja	eat	/mɔmmi/	sleep	/dodo /		
Mouhaed	Mom	/mama/	good bye	/baɪbaɪ/		
Ibtissem	daddy	/baba/	I want to sleep	/ninni/	spoon	/mifa/
Riham	doll	/rupija/	my aunt	/tata		

Question 2: Does your child respond to simple instructions?

Table 5. Children respond to simple instruction

Yes	No
10	00

### 3.1.4. Telegraphic stage: 18–24 months

Question 1: Is your child able to utter two words sentences? If yes, give examples

Table 6. Two words utterance

Yes	No
7	1

The examples are presented in Table 7.



Table 7. Examples of two words utterance

Expressions	I want to sleep	I want milk	I want to watch a cartoon	It is shower time	There is no cat
Pronunciation	/bari ninni/	/ʕtini ħliba /	/netfara3 miki/	/ljum duʃ /	/bibaf baħ /

### 3.1.5. Multiple-word stage

Question 1: How do you evaluate your child's lexis?

Answer: All mothers agreed that their children's lexis is very limited and their children know only the names of objects available in prison.

### 3.1.6. Questions concerning prison environment

Question 1: How do you spend your day with your child?

Answer: Nine mothers replied that they spend all the day in a cell of mothers' unit, while one mother answered that she spends the day in the cell of activities.

Question 2: How do other prisoners behave with your child?

Answer: Mothers mentioned that all women treat the children with tenderness, love, sympathy and take care of them.

Question 3: If you have other children, how do you see your child's language development in comparison to his siblings?

Answer: Six mothers mentioned that their children are late in comparison to their siblings, while the rest do not have other children.

Question 4: How do you see the environment of the prison for raising a child?

Answer: 10 mothers shared the same reply that the prison authorities provide all types of care (milk, diapers, food and clothes); however, the prison environment is not an appropriate place to develop different skills.

Question 11: What do you suggest as solutions to enhance your child's situation?

Answer: 10 mothers suggested that their children should not live in the same condition as prisoners and the prison should be contained places special for these children.

## 3.2. Psychologists' interview analysis

Another interview was addressed to psychologists who provided detailed answers to all the asked questions.

### 3.2.1. Question 01: How many years of experience do you have in this field?

Table 8. Psychologists' years of experience

Prison 1	Prison 2
The psychologist stated that she has been working in this institution since 2005.	The psychologist declared that she has experience of 10 years in the pavilion of women.

### 3.2.2. Question 02: How do you see the child's linguistic development in the prison?

Table 9. Child linguistic development in prison

Prison 1	Prison 2
The psychologist answered that this child (Mouhamed) has linguistic retardation. Despite the	The psychologist's reply showed that 9 children's linguistic development is normal. In terms of

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fact that Mouhamed is 28 months, he has poor lexis, he produces only a few words such as mom /mama/ and goodbye /bay bay/ and he has not moved yet to the next stage (Telegraphic stage).

According to his mother, his linguistic development has stopped after being transferred to this institution. She added that Mouhamed communicates only with his mother through body language and crying. However, he does not show any sign of autism.

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communication and interaction. However, they are very limited at the lexical level. They do not know many concepts like phone, cat, dog, mountain, tree, mirror, and all things that are not found in the prison.

They are always asking about words that they hear from prisoners' conversations.

### *3.2.3. Question 03: How do you see the conceptualisation of these children?*

Both psychologists shared the same opinion that children's conceptualisation is not developed. They gave examples of family relationships: father, siblings, grandmother, grandfather, cousins and uncle... because most of these children do not live with their fathers, the notion of a father is absent. Moreover, they use the concept of siblings to refer to children residing with them.

### *3.2.4. Question 04: What are the different situations that the child is exposed to for acquiring language?*

Both psychologists agreed that since life in prison is restricted and prisoners are living the same routine, the child is not exposed to a variety of situations and conversations that enable him to learn and develop his linguistic competence.

### *3.2.5. Question 05: How do you see the child's behaviour in the environment of prison?*

Both psychologists claimed that children are afraid of men and because they spend all the time with women, boys have developed some female speech and attitudes, for example, boys want to wear the veil. They added that children acquire expression related to prison regulations heard from guardians, such as / ija lapel/ /lagras / nchri m cuantina/.

### *3.2.6. Question 06: Does the mother play a role in the child's development?*

Both psychologists agreed that the mothers play a great role in the development of their children. In Mouhamadia, the psychologist added that the child 'Ali' has a problem at the psychomotor level because of the ignorance of his mother.

### *3.2.7. Question 07: What do you think about the duration of 3 years imposed by the penal code?*

Both psychologists' answers revealed that keeping the child with his mother after birth is crucial for the child's emotional and physical development. However, the separation after this period strongly affects the child emotionally and physically.

## **4. Discussion**

Although prison authorities give much importance to the child's psychological development, the psycholinguistic aspect is more or less neglected (Çimşir & Uzunboylu, 2019; Garmash & Tsarkova, 2021; Jones, 2016; Long et al., 2020). They should provide them with linguistic diversity through television and contact with males. As children residing in prisons are spending the most precious years of language development in closed environments, the prison authorities should provide open spaces where they can develop their knowledge and enrich their vocabulary.

Since regulations keep males and females apart, boys develop females' speech and behaviour. As an attempt to find a solution to this behaviour disorder seems to be urgent, children should be exposed to the external world to make them differentiate between the two genders. As interaction with the environment plays an important role in a child's language development, prison authorities should put a considerable number of children together, for example, building special institutions that

receive only imprisoned mothers with their children (Van Nijnatten, 1998; Villardón-Gallego, García-Carrión, Yáñez-Marquina, & Estévez, 2018). These institutions should be provided with kindergartens and mothers' units to create an appropriate atmosphere that encourages children to acquire language.

Recent research has shown that learning through play is an important part of a child's language development (Toub et al., 2018; Uzunboylu & Altay, 2021). It is necessary to provide educational toys that help children learn many different skills, for example, toys that develop problem-solving skills and how cause and effect work. Furthermore, toys that promote speech and language and give them opportunities to learn new concepts. It is necessary to sensitise mothers about the importance of the critical period during which the child develops language and makes them aware that the child, who has not acquired language by this period, will never entirely catch up.

## 5. Conclusion

After having completed this research, the researchers realised that the research and advocacy work on this subject needs strongly to be encouraged at the national level. Language is a humanistic feature that makes human beings different from other creatures. It is extremely complex, yet children already know most of the grammar of their native languages before they are 5 years old. This natural process does not require any conscious efforts or formal instructions.

Even though stages of language development are universal, the environment where the child grows up can affect this process. Every year, many children are born in prisons and stay there for 3 years as the right of breastfeeding. Prisons are inadequate places that cause linguistic retardation for these children. The lack of varied stimulations and the restricted regulations of the prison have a great impact on children's language acquisition process.

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