

Early Syntactic Development Following Nurture Determinants of a Three-Year Old Waray Language Acquirer: A Case Study

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Abstract

Children in early telegraphic stage demonstrate syntactic development by combining content words, and often omitting function words. This study tracked the first language acquisition descriptions of a three-year old child speaking the Waray-Waray language in the Philippines. Naturalistic home observations, interactions with the participant and unstructured in-depth interviews with the people surrounding the participant were used to collect the data for this study. In the first section of the results, it offers explanations of the developmental data of first language (L1) acquisition pertaining to a range of syntactic construction, including utterance representations, word order and production of word classes. The next section of the findings considers the various theories to explain the facets of development on the participant's first language acquisition, including nurture determinants and the behaviourism perspective. The results support the claim that the process of language acquisition depends on the input that learners receive. Moreover, the findings also show and support the claim that a child following the telegraphic stage is able to produce multi-word utterances in which it is considerable that the child's word order is not the same as the adult-grammar, but relatively consistent and understandable.

Keywords: First language acquisition; syntactic development; nurture; behaviourism; telegraphic stage;

1. Introduction

Language acquisition is the process whereby children achieve a fluent control of their native language (Varshney, 2003:307). Children are born with the ability to acquire the language, and this process is a natural occurrence. Having that ability in the context of language, all children no matter what language it is, acquire the language the same way. However, acquiring a language takes time and the process of acquiring it vary for each child. In the first year of life, every infant whose mind develops will learn his or her first language, and this process lasts until the youngster is roughly five years old (Rohimajaya & Hamerb, 2020).

The foundational process of language acquisition as natural and integral stage in early childhood development, is deeply intertwined with the broader objectives of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030. Among these crucial goals, SDG 4: Quality Education stands out, particularly its target, which emphasizes ensuring that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education. In this context, the foundational process of language acquisition in early childhood is important as it directly underpins cognitive development, social interaction, and readiness for formal schooling, thereby contributing to the broader aims of inclusive and equitable quality education and achieving lifelong learning opportunities for all.

In this context of language acquisition process, it is assumed that the people around the child and especially the parents can be considered to have a significant influence on a child's language acquisition. There have been a number of theoretical perspectives on how children acquire their first language. One of these is the behaviorist perspective which is highly promoted by BF Skinner. The behaviourists hypothesis posits that language is learnt through imitation and practice along with positive reinforcement from the environment. The second view is the innatist perspective proposed by Noam Chomsky. Its hypothesis posits that language is an innate ability; it is a biological development that the child goes through and it only acquires a fair amount of communication with the environment to develop. As per Chomsky, language is

“specie-specific” in which individuals given their natural and normal condition are capable of language acquisition, learning, and development (Grein & Peil, 2016). Moreover, the third perspective is the interactional/developmental perspective where Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky are acknowledged as prominent figures. They both put emphasis on cognitive development as part of the language acquisition, in which the hypothesis is that children acquire their language through interaction with people and objects in their surroundings.

Interestingly, children during their linguistic period have errors and flaws in the way they formed their words. However, despite these lapses, children are nonetheless able to respond to questions and interrupt conversations. This occurrence led linguists consider how these young children can make use of the complex structure of language without first undergoing instruction such as formal instruction or schooling. While not every child has the same problems, they all adhere to the same linguistic process. The native language is acquired through stages, and every stage is passed near an adult’s language. There are stages in children’s first language acquisition, namely (1) pre-talking stage/cooing (2) babbling stage; (3) one-word stage (holophrastic); (4) two-word stage; (5) telegraphic stage; (6) multiword stage. Children begin their linguistic course cooing/producing vowel-like sounds to uttering one word at a time and slowly evolve through a number of stages, each containing numbers of words than the one before. Moreover, children acquire how to form words and sentences in an order, beginning with a merely single syllable and gradually to more complex ideas - this process is called Syntactic Development.

The language production begins at around the age 0-6 months where infants produce vowel-like sounds (Bolinger, 2002), followed by the babbling stage where infants age 6-8 months produce a consonant-vowel combination (Steinberg, 2003) such as [ma-ma-ma] or [da-da-da]. At around 9-18 months, the child begins to use words to communicate beginning with one-word utterances. This period is characterized by speech in single terms which are uttered for everyday objects and referred to as the “Holophrastic Stage” to describe an utterance that could be analysed as a word, a phrase or a sentence (Fromkin, 1983:328). In this period, infants start to utter recognizable words used in a context that seems to involve naming, and often use words in ways that are too narrow or too broad. At approximately 18-24 months, the two-word stage begins (Fromkin, 1983:329). By the time, a variety of combinations similar to “mommy eat” will usually appear. The child combines words into meaningful sequences consisting almost entirely of content words. The child not only produces speech, but receives feedback confirming that the utterance worked as a contribution to the interaction. At this stage, the grammar is not the same as the adult-grammar. However, even though the word order is not the same as the adult grammar, it is relatively consistent. During the period from about 24-30 months, the child masters the grammatical morphemes which were absent during the previous stage. This period is often referred to as the “Telegraphic Stage,” named as it is because it is similar to what is seen in a telegram, containing just enough information for the sentence to make sense, Fromkin (1983:330). This stage contains many three and four-word sentences. Sometimes during this stage, the child begins to see the links between words and objects therefore overgeneralization comes in, wherein children make errors in their allocation of inflections. At this stage, some of children’s utterances are grammatically correct while others have grammatical elements missing, more likely retaining content words (noun, verbs, adjectives) and function words (pronouns, prepositions, auxiliary verbs) are often omitted.

Accordingly, this study aimed to explain the regularities in a child’s early syntactic development. Syntax refers to the rules used to combine words to make sentences. Syntactic Development is the way children learns these rules. Moreover, children automatically develop syntactic rules without explicit instruction, they learn it simply by listening to others that speak around them. Skinner (1957), a pioneer in behaviourism, offered one of the earliest scientific explanations of language acquisition. He posited that language acquisition is primarily shaped by environmental influences, emphasizing the role of nurture over innate predispositions. On the other hand, as per the study of Friska et al. (2021), children primarily acquired their first language through biological means (nature). Furthermore, the participant of the mentioned study had the ability to talk sensibly as a result of a setting that helped to unleash his innate capacity to acquire the language. Therefore, nature and nurture determinants both play an essential component in the acquisition and development of children’s first language.

Thuresson (2011) in her study on “The Syntactic Development in the Earlier Stages of Children’s

First Language Acquisition" as to how the process of morphemes function during the child's 12 to 24 months showed the amount of different word classes being produced during the given time frame, wherein the study shows a high usage of nouns and verbs that proportionally increases with age. The CHILDES (Child Language Data Exchange System) database has been used to collect data in the sense of transcripts in regards with the participant of her study. The participant of her study is Ella from the United Kingdom where CHILDES contained several transcripts of her with audio at different ages which lasts from 8 to 29 minutes recorded by her father Mike. The time frame of the transcripts is set between the ages of 12-24 months and showed the appearance of different word classes in the participant's early language acquisition. Focusing on the process of language acquisition, it was found out that the first to emerge are confirmed to be nouns, next are recognized adverbs, propositions, and determiners.

With the above-mentioned opposing views as to how children are able to acquire linguistic inputs of the first language, it lays a foundation that the first language acquisition is a product of two powerful factors – nature (heredity) and nurture (environment). Moreover, the cited studies tackle different concepts, ideas and conclusions that are relevant and similar to the present study. The course of early syntactic development is into phases and are characterized by successive turning points- the start of cooing and babbling, the appearance of one-word utterances, the production of two-word combinations, and the emergence of longer-word utterances. Syntactic Development presents a broad critical milestone on child language development wherein the acquisition of syntax takes place over a number of years. Syntax, in the context of linguistics, gives meaning to a sentence which in turn the basic element of communication in any language. Thus, syntactic properties are one of the most important properties of language.

The primary reason of the researcher's interest undertaking a study on the syntactic development of a child is to observe and understand the proliferation of word usage of the child within the child's present age range, recognizing that despite extensive current studies in general language acquisition, in-depth analyses of individual syntactic developmental paths remain limited. Therefore, this study aimed to explore how a child exhibit progression in their syntactic language acquisition and to identify the factors affecting this process.

In line with that, the answers to these questions ought to supplement the corpus of information already available on language learning and acquisition in a particular setting. Early language development language acquirers and learners have a variety of demands and character traits, and by comprehending and becoming more aware of children's needs and interests, educators and parents care support will benefit the children in supporting and developing their abilities in language acquisition and learning.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The study is qualitative in nature, and followed a single holistic case study approach, focusing on one research participant. As posited by Starks and Trinidad (2007) a single participant can provide sufficient data to uncover the core elements of a lived experience, especially when the focus is rare, which might be obscured to a larger population. Moreover, the study used a descriptive approach that entails an empirical process of seeking knowledge carried out through a series of observations and interviews to measure the syntactic development of a child and adopts a heuristic assumption in regards to the process. As defined by scholars, a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context addressing the "how" or "why" questions concerning the phenomenon of interest and relies on multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 1994, p. 13).

2.2 Research Locale

The study was conducted in a selected municipality situated in the Eastern Visayas region of the Philippines. Given its prominence as a Waray-waray speaking population fits the researcher's strong interest in studying language acquisition in this specific linguistic context.

2.3 Research Participant

A three-year old participant was chosen through the purposive sampling technique. Creswell (2012) asserted that a purposive sample is a non-probability sample that is also referred to as a judgemental or

expert sample in which its main objective is to produce a sample that can be logically assumed to represent the population. This sampling technique selects a sample based on the population's characteristics and the study's objective. As a result, the participants are specifically selected to best explain a given topic, theme, or occurrence. In light of this, the researcher carefully chose the study's participant using a set of predetermined inclusion-exclusion criteria, which stipulated that the participant must primarily be within the telegraphic stage of syntactic development (roughly ages 2-3), as this period is integral for observing the foundational development of syntax (Brown, 1973; O'Grady & Archibald, 2015). Furthermore, the participant must be a native speaker of Waray to ensure consistent exposure to the first language. Another additional critical criterion for inclusion was that the participant must exhibit typical language development for their age, as confirmed by parental interviews and preliminary observation.

2.4 Research Instrument

A home observation guide was utilized in this study to gather important data and information. Through direct home observations, the researcher gathered the data necessary to achieve the goals of the study as it allowed the researcher to observe, analyse, and assess the linguistic activities, behaviour, and abilities of the participant. The corpus also entailed unstructured interviews between the researcher and the participant's parents, and the participant's utterances were recorded and transcribed instantly so that the reliability of the study can be upheld.

2.5 Data Gathering Procedure

Moreover, prior to the researcher's collecting the data, the researcher obtained approvals in an ethical manner. Informed consent forms and a letter of permission were signed by the participant's parents given that the participant was unable to perform the signing of the documents. An orientation was held to make sure everything was understood and comprehended in which the activity's background and purpose, procedure and policies, participant's rights, confidentiality, possible risks and other agreements were clearly discussed. This included a transparent explanation of potential risks, such as minimal inconvenience from the observation sessions, and the assurance that no physical or psychological harm was anticipated. Confidentiality was also an important consideration. With that, a code/pseudonym (MP1) was assigned to identify the participant throughout the study, and it was explicitly stated that the participant's name or any other identifying information, except for the general location (with parental permission), would not appear. Parents were explicitly assured that all information shared would be treated with the utmost confidentiality and would not be revealed to anyone outside the researcher. Furthermore, the orientation covered the participant's right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, and how the results of the study would be shared with them in an accessible and understandable format upon completion. After both parents agreed to their child's participation, the researcher commenced daily observations and interactions with the participant through home visitations.

2.6 Data Analysis

The study employed qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004), approached with a specific linguistic lens. This procedure involves a systematic and iterative process of transcribing the child's observed utterances, followed by meticulous coding to identify patterns in their speech. In this study, the coding focused on distinguishing between content words (nouns, main verbs, adjectives, adverbs) and omitted function words (e.g., articles, prepositions, auxiliary verbs, etc.), as well as noted any emerging morphological inflections or emerging syntactic structures. Through this detailed linguistic analysis, recurring themes related to the participant's sentence structures development were identified and interpreted within his communicative context.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

The study prioritized ethical considerations for its human participant by adhering to stringent guidelines throughout the research process. Prior to any data collection, the researcher obtained informed consent from the participant's parents, in which it involved a comprehensive orientation where the study's

background, purpose, and procedures were clearly explained. The researcher ensured the parents fully understood all study details, including the nature of their child's involvement, the methods of observation, and their right to ask questions and seek clarification before signing the consent form. Parents were also informed of their right to withdraw their child from the study at any point without penalty or needing to provide an explanation. A thorough discussion of potential risks and inconveniences was also undertaken. The researcher assured the parents that no physical or psychological harm was anticipated from participation, with risks limited to minimal inconvenience from the observation and interaction sessions. Upon completion, the results of the study would be shared with the parents in an accessible and understandable format, aiming transparency and acknowledging their contribution. Moreover, to maintain confidentiality and privacy, a codename or pseudonym (MP1) was assigned to the participant and used consistently throughout the study. All personal identifying information, including the participant's name, was strictly withheld, with the sole exception of the location for which explicit parental permission was secured. In line with that, the researcher further ensured the participant's well-being and dignity by excluding any observations or data that could potentially cause embarrassment, distress, or harm to the child or their family. All gathered information was handled with confidentiality and secured to prevent unauthorized access.

2.8 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established using a number of techniques for this study, which explored the syntactic development of a three-year old child's telegraphic speech. Long-term interaction with the participant allowed the researcher to establish rapport and collect rich, contextualized data over time, which improved the truth value of the findings. Additionally, because of the well-documented procedure, the employment of a linguistic lens in the qualitative content analysis guaranteed reliability.

2.9 Reflexivity

Over the course of the study, the researcher consciously monitored preconceived notions and potential biases concerning language acquisitions. While deeply invested in the subject, the researcher recognized the possibly of inadvertently shaping interpretations to fit existing theories. Therefore, the researcher's commitment was firmly rooted in allowing the child's own linguistic output to exclusively drive the emerging findings. To facilitate this, the researcher maintained home observation guides and field notes, serving as ongoing area for critical self-reflection on her thoughts, assumptions, and reactions during both data collection and analysis.

3. Results and Discussions

This part provides the relevant results and discussion of the data elicited from the conducted series of observations. Analysis and interpretations are concretely presented to explain the participant's syntactic development.

3.1 Syntactic Development

Telegraphic Stage

The telegraphic stage is set from 24-30 months (three years old onwards) where the child masters the grammatical morphemes which were absent during the previous stage. It is the period during which function words are added to the multi-word sentences, in which the words that are used are the absolute words required to convey a meaning and the kind of words that are likely to be omitted are articles, prepositions, pronouns and auxiliary verbs.

MP1, the subject of this study, is a three-year old child who is at the telegraphic stage of his language acquisition process. Some of the participant's utterances during the conducted series of daily observations represents the syntactic construction of a three-year old participant following the telegraphic stage, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Syntactic Construction in MP1's Utterances

No.	MP1's Utterances	Meaning of Utterances
1	Ma, ayada.	Fix it, Mom.
2	Uyam ruba nalat.	The toy got broken again.
3	Dire ako baho	I do not smell bad.
4	Toothbrush ako, Ma.	I'll brush my teeth, Mom.
5	Ma, tapos na.	I am already done, Mom.
6	Oo, sabon ako.	Yes, I put on soap.
7	Ma, piso, palit ako.	Mom, give me a peso. I'll buy.
8	Ma, tubig daw.	Mom, water please.
9	Ma, Gabgab uyag kami.	I'll go to Gabgab, we'll play.

The utterances in Table 1 demonstrate the emerging syntactic development of the three- year old participant, MP1, wherein it consists the combinations of more than two words enough for the sentence to make sense. The words produced are often ungrammatical in adult standards but certainly obeying some rules of grammar. Table 1 also shows the actual interpretation and the expansion of MP1's telegraphic utterances. Steinberg (1992) argued that children do not only use single words to refer to objects, they also use those same words to express complete thoughts which involve those objects. The telegraphic utterances of MP1 may be used in context which would contain different grammatical constructions in the adult language. For example, as presented in Table 1 the participant's intent on, "*Ma, Gab-Gab uyag kami*" could mean "Mom I will go to Gab-Gab's house and we will play". The present study has shown that the participant expresses a variety of meanings by uttering few words, and uses content words to express a thought for which the adults use a whole sentence.

MP1's Utterance Representations

Brown (1973), one of the founders of the modern study of language development, presumed that the next task in the language developmental cycle is to combine the rules into longer telegraphic utterances. For example, an agent-action relationship such as "mommy drink" can be added to an agent-object relationship such as "drink milk" to yield an agent-action-object rule for "mommy drink milk". Moreover, according to Brown (1973) if such a milestone is passed, then we would have concluded that the child is ready to acquire the rules of syntax, the child would be ready to produce the grammar that more closely resembles the language they are learning.

Table 1.1 Syntactic Rules in MP1's Utterances

No.	MP1's Utterances	Meaning of Utterances
1	Ma, juice ako.	Mom, I want to drink juice.
2	Ma, papaya ko.	Mom, I want to eat bread.
3	Ma, uro ako.	Mom, I want to poop.
4	Ma, tawag nala ako.	I will call you, Mom.
5	Ma, adto ako kanta.	Mom, I'll go there and sing.
6	Hain na? Kanta ako.	Where is it? I'll sing.
7	Tara kanta ako.	I want to sing.

All the utterances mentioned in Table 1.1 showed MP1's developed primitive syntax. MP1 can give remarks on his Mother doing things, reject and request objects, and asks questions. MP1's three-word

utterances are words drawn from longer potential sentences expressing a complete thought. These utterance sequences already reflect the Waray- Waray language being acquired and some of the words are properly ordered.

Accordingly, Brown (1973) carried out a longitudinal study of the acquisition of grammar in 3 American children, children from middle class families. The children were selected primarily because they were all just beginning to speak multi-word utterances. Brown (1973) noted that although the three children he studied intensively never produced a sentence complicated as “Mother gave John lunch in the kitchen,” the children did produce strings containing all of its components and in the correct order, agent/action/recipient/object/location (Brown 1973, p. 205). The participant, MP1, also produced sentences containing all of the components cited by Brown (1973). If we analyse MP1's speech, we get the following order of components in MP1's speech:

Table 1.2 Brown (1973) Components of Complete Sentences in MP1's Utterances

Ma (Agent)	piso (Object)	palit (Action)	ako. (Recipient)
	Ma (Agent)	ayada (Action)	daw.

The present study is generally aimed to ascertain the language acquisition of MP1 concentrating on one aspect of language within the area of syntax. It can be noted that the participant's utterances are both grammatically correct while others have grammatical elements missing. MP1 was able to produce multi-word utterances and might properly be considered the stage of syntax acquisition. Cattell (2002) states that it is not until two-word utterances begin that we can say that syntactic (grammatical) constructions have started to form. In regards with Cattell (2002) statement, the researcher concludes that with the participant's utterances there is the emerging syntax construction in which relationship between words in the participant's utterances.

Word Classes

With the thorough analysis of the corpus, it was also found out that one possibility children at the telegraphic stage reported to omit function words is because these are words that are not essential for them to meaning. Within the researcher's observation with the participant, it was noticeably found out that MP1 often produces observable things to express his intention and infer to omit words that are not essential for conveying the origin of his utterances, the participant only focused on what he is trying to express as the only aim is to give message. The participant only used most of the content words while grammatical function words are often omitted. Moreover, omitted words tend to be words that are not stressed in adult's utterances and children leave out those unstressed elements.

Table 1.3 Word Classes Appearing on MP1's Utterances

Sentence No.	Content Words				Function Words	
	Noun	Verb	Adjective	Adverb	Pronoun	Conjunction
1	Ma	ayada	ruha	nalat		
2	Toothbrush		baho		ako	
3	Sabon		human	na		
4	Balay	uyag			kami	
5	Juice	tagi			ako	
6	Ma	kanta			ako	

3.2 Nurture Determinants on MP1's Language Acquisition

The acquisition of the first language among children has been a long debate since time immemorial. In terms of children's acquisition of language, question had emerged like how children come to be in

command of their language. Noam Chomsky argued against BF Skinner's claim that language is verbal behaviour, Chomsky argued that knowledge of language cannot be learned through experience alone but is guided by a genetic component also known as "Universal Grammar". Arguments have always been based on the fact that either the environment or genetics play an important role in language development.

The present study, however, found traces of nurture (environment) that affected the language acquisition of the participants. There is a considerable amount of evidences found in support that MP1's language acquisition was influenced by many aspects of human experiences brought by the external factors prior with the interviews done by the researcher to the participant's mother.

Table 2. Traces of Nurture on MP1's Language Acquisition

No.	MP1's Utterances	Meaning of Utterances
1	Ma, piso, palit ako.	Mom, give me a peso. I'll buy.

This utterance of MP1 actually means "Mom give me a peso because I will buy *something*." At a young age, MP1 was able to request something from his Mother and also aware of what he was requesting. With the given circumstance, the researcher conducted a one-on-one interview with the participant's mother in regards with the utterance made. According to the participant's mother, the knowledge of MP1 on money was because of the influence of his older sister. She further explained that MP1 might have imitated that behaviour, possibly heard the words uttered by his older sister, thus MP1 acquired the words in production.

Accordingly, one theoretical perspective visible on how the participant of the study acquired his first language is the behaviourist perspective, which is highly promoted by BF Skinner. The behaviourist theory's main belief is that the environment that surrounds the child influences his behaviour. In the context of language acquisition, changes in linguistic behaviour is shaped by the external factors which serves as the determinants of acquisition. For the behaviourists, the child acquires linguistic behaviour through conditioning by means of habits, imitation rewards and punishments and also practice.

In light of this, the researcher on her daily observations met this pattern when the participant made an attempt to repeat his older sister's utterances, imitates what he heard from the environment and obtained responses from the researcher itself through rewards and punishment in an effort to keep the communication. With that, the participant's learning behaviour from the observations conducted can be analyse under the following:

Imitation and Reinforcements

The participant imitated his older sister when singing the alphabet song when he was asked by the researcher. Furthermore, the participant's learning behaviour in regards to the English Alphabet was strengthened with the positive reinforcement given by the researcher. The researcher gave rewards upon the utterances of the participant with the input given. Moreover, negative reinforcement was not accommodated in any way during the learning process because of the fact that the participant even though some of his utterances on the alphabet are not clearly pronounced, still showed interest in learning (Journal Entry May 2, 2024).

4. Conclusion.

The appearance of multi-word utterances in the participant's (MP1) speech marks an integral turning point in language acquisition, indicating an emerging ability to grasp and express relationships between words even if grammatically incomplete. The findings revealed that these initial multi-word phrases originate from more intricate underlying thoughts, demonstrating that children can communicate complex ideas effectively despite not adhering strictly to adult grammatical norms. MP1's utterances clearly demonstrate characteristics of the telegraphic stage, primarily featuring content words while omitting function words like articles and prepositions, which only suggests an intuitive understanding of core

communicative principles. Moreover, these findings underscore the importance to acknowledge the role of external linguistic exposure on a child's fluency and competency, emphasizing that understanding environmental factors provides valuable insights into language acquisition.

5. Recommendations

Several recommendations for further research initiatives are made in light of the study's emphasis and scope. While this study offered a thorough examination of syntactic development in a single three-year-old child, it is recommended that future researches try to gather more conclusive and varied samples in order to fully outline the principles of first language acquisition. Furthermore, since this study's data was examined through the lens of a single case, a comparison analyses may be made easier in future research by including several cases. Moreover, the generalizability of findings would be strengthened by such comparisons, which would be important in determining whether children exposed to similar language contexts have comparable verbal inputs and speech patterns. Additionally, as this study was conducted over a relatively short period of time, future researchers are strongly encouraged to conduct longitudinal studies to track the development of language abilities and comprehension over lengthy periods of time. With that, a more dynamic knowledge of the developmental paths in language learning might be possible. In this vein, through a thorough single-case analysis, this study provides a fundamental knowledge of early syntactic development which serves as a useful benchmark and methodological guide for larger-scale future research. In addition to highlighting particular areas that require more research, such the effects of different language inputs, it also offers a basic framework that may be used to contextualize and evaluate the results of bigger, comparative, or longitudinal investigations.

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7. Author's Bionote

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