

Note on Language Development

- a) Verbal or linguistic communication within a speech community consists in the regulation of one member's behaviour by another through the agency of the system of spoken language which they possess in common. Hence it follows that investigating the development of linguistic communication involves observing speech patterns in relation to the behavioural changes they evoke.
- b) Verbal communication contains two aspects or processes which operate in opposite directions: Expressive speech which consists in generating speech to influence the behaviour of another and receptive speech which consists in interpreting and being influenced by the speech of another. Hence it follows that observations on verbal behaviour may be made in two ways - by observing the child's behaviour which is evoked by particular speech patterns or by the speech patterns he uses to produce the changes in behaviour he requires.
- c) These two activities come to employ the same phonological system, lexical code and sets of governing rules but in the early stages they evolve quite separately and in different ways. They remain separate to some extent throughout life although they soon begin to influence one another and the dissociation is most apparent during the very early years. Hence it follows that information gained from one kind of observation does not necessarily relate closely to or allow inferences to be drawn about the state of the other.
- d) Developing verbal understanding is essentially acquiring an increasingly discriminating capacity for being regulated in one's behaviour by speech not in building up a repertoire of mental associations which can be aroused by speech sounds. Hence the functional state of verbal understanding is more reliably studied by observation of response to instruction than by eliciting evidence of simple association between word and referend.
- e) Verbal understanding evolves on a basis of the child's responding in a progressively discriminating way, to an adult's (e.g. his mother's) direct physical, later gestural and finally verbal 'commands' so that the abbreviated, less energetic and generally more efficient spoken gesture comes to usurp the effectiveness of the more rudimentary mechanical forms of communication. Hence it follows that attempts to teach or accelerate the growth of verbal understanding in

communication should involve contriving to have the child respond actively to verbal instruction rather than attempting to set up direct association, between words and their referends.

f) It is the child's delight in his own active movements which reinforces the association between a spoken command and the activity response it comes with practice to evoke in him. Hence it follows that with young children such teaching should make use of the physical activities which they already find enjoyable.

g) Developing expressive speech consists essentially in coming to gain increasing control over the behaviour of others by means of spoken language not in an enlarging capacity for selectively emitting speech sounds in response to visual or other stimuli.

h) Expressive speech evolves on a basis of the child's eliciting active responses from his mother and other adults as they insist on discerning 'meaning' in his utterances long before it actually exists and so impose signification on the vocalisations which are already being moulded towards conforming to the appropriate phonological system.

I) It is the delight the child takes in the active movements of others which reinforces the association between his vocalisations and the responses which they come to evoke.

j) Verbal response to speech is a special case of the expression of the verbal understanding (receptive speech) system, the primary response being the speech pattern itself, as echo, or imitation etc., or the semantic information contained in the utterance. It must be recognised that in the latter case the child's own interpretation of the original speech stimulus has been translated into descriptive or explanatory form and this metalingual communication is subject to all errors and distortion which his own knowledge of the language and limited expressive powers must impose. Any inference about the child's understanding of the original speech must be made so to speak on second-hand information.

Hence (c,h,i,j) it follows that any attempt to assess the verbal understanding of young children from their spoken responses is fraught with even more pitfalls than observing their direct non-verbal responses. However it should be noted that the child's verbal responding is a major factor in the linking up and integration of the receptive and expressive language systems so that with time and practice it becomes a reasonably efficient means of communicating the condition of one's understanding.

k) In time and under the conditions of a 'normal' phase relationship between the two the child's expressive speech system in responding to environmental influences comes to act on his own receptive speech system through the external loop between mouth and ear so allowing a regulatory influence on his own behaviour and a potentiating effect on his learning and laying down the foundations for self-direction in activities and aiding emancipation from slavish responding to the direct and immediate environmental influences.

Geoffrey Waldon 1965