

SPEECH AND LANGUAGE

Before describing the way in which a child comes to use spoken language it is necessary to draw attention to one or two points about normal speech which I consider to be of great importance when we are considering a child with difficulties.

The activity-evoking function of speech

First of all it is through speech that we communicate with one another, influencing, controlling and regulating one another's behaviour. Mother says to her child, "Come and sit up", "Have a sweet?" "Oh, don't do that!", "Go and get me a plate", etc., expecting each of these instructions to be obeyed. Even when she says: "That's Auntie's house", or "A dog wags his tail when he's pleased", she expects her child to show signs of his awareness and understanding of the facts she has just imparted for his future reference. And when she asks: "Did you like that cake?", she anticipates a reply of some sort.

Likewise young John aged eighteen months may say "Ball" meaning perhaps "I want the ball"; "Give me the ball" or "That's the ball" etc., or "Mummy" meaning "Mummy I want you", or "Mummy look here" etc. In each case he expects to elicit some reaction to his speech.

Thus speech works both ways although we often tend to forget that the child's understanding of the speech of others is even more important than his own talking.

Comprehending and talking

All through his life a person normally understands what he hears a little better and a little earlier than he is able to say such things himself.

Even a grown-up usually recognises and understands the meaning of a fairly uncommon word he hears or reads some time before he uses it in his own speech or writing with any confidence, and with a young child there is usually a considerable difference between the degree of complexity of the speech a child can recognise the meaning of when he hears it and that speech which he can use to express himself.

Recognising something when heard is easier in some respects than recalling something to mind. Talking always *normally* lags a little behind comprehending the speech of others.

Speech: the medium and the message

Another thing we must do is distinguish between meaningful speech which has a message and other kinds of vocalisations. A parrot or a budgerigar may produce a clearly recognisable phrase such as "Go to bed" or "What do you want?" and at what might appear to be a very appropriate time; however none but a very

naive person would imagine that the bird knows what it is saying or that the phrase actually 'means' something. As we shall see a child with severe difficulties may sometimes produce phrases in much the same way.

Again we commonly refer to a young child's babbling and jargon as 'talking' even though we recognise that, although it is a normal stage through which a child goes on his way to talking, this kind of 'talking' does not usually convey very much information.

The efficiency of speech in communication

Without speech it would be necessary to demonstrate what we wish to communicate by mime or gesture. To 'tell' a child what we want him to do we should have to show him. At first perhaps we might have him 'imitate' our action such as clapping, waving a hand or drinking a cup of tea. Later when he has some experience we might be able to point towards an object and extend an upward palm towards the child to indicate: "Give me that...". We might make a movement with the hand towards the mouth to imply eating etc., and eventually we may have developed a fairly efficient language.

However, although the complicated and energetic activities which were necessary at first have become abbreviated to much simpler, and conventional gestures or signs, the visible-gesture language is still rather rudimentary, clumsy and involves movements of hands and arms. Furthermore people have to be able to see one another to communicate by this means which is therefore of little use in the dark or at a distance or round corners. Normal speech then can be seen to take the place of more active and energetic movements and is capable of extreme versatility and subtlety of expression.

This reminds us of how from about six months onwards the child starts to respond to speech patterns in exactly the way he could respond in 'imitation' of another's movements, and the first speech he comes to respond to are invitations or instructions to actively do something. "Give Mummy a kiss", "Clap hands", "Wave bye-bye", or to stop doing something, e.g. "No" or "Wait".

Speech, then, is a speedy, abbreviated and relatively less tiring substitute for bodily action. A sort of verbal shorthand which can be used, under all sorts of conditions even when the hands are not available, to influence and regulate another's behaviour.

When we come to examine the problems of the child who is late in coming to make use of speech it will be important for us to remember these points. Already it will be observed that there is a distinct difference between the ways in which his own speech and his understanding of the speech of others develop.

His own talking develops out of his babble sounds as his parents couple spontaneous sound with whatever meaning happens to seem appropriate to them. The earliest words sound like 'nouns' and are repeated a great deal

before they are used to demand the action or objects to which they refer. 'Mummy' and 'Daddy' or rather their early equivalents are among the earliest spoken 'words'. On the other hand the speech which is first responded to appropriately consists of short phrases which elicit active movements, bending forwards to kiss, clapping, raising or waving hands, vocalisations etc., and not the 'names' of objects and people.

A few definitions

We may then define a few words before following a child's normal use of language through the first years.

Vocalisation is roughly speaking the use of speech sounds containing voice or 'buzz'. Ordinary speech, babbling and singing all involve vocalisation. All vowels in English are 'voiced' as are some of the consonants such as 'n', 'm', 'b', 'd', 'g', etc. It is possible to feel the voice vibration with the finger-tips if they are placed on the larynx (Adam's apple) during talking.

Articulation is the term used to describe the production of formed speech sounds or syllables. It is roughly what is referred to as 'pronunciation' in everyday speech. As we shall see, a child may articulate or pronounce a phrase accurately and distinctly but without meaning or, on the other hand, 'inaccurately': for example "Wan bibi" (I want a biscuit), with very definite meaning. Perfect clarity of speech although very important is not as important as meaningfulness.

I shall describe the child's own developing speech first, partly because it is what is usually described under the heading of speech and because it is the more obvious and noticeable aspect of speech.

It is convenient to separate the spoken side of speech from the understanding of the speech of others and this, in my view, is appropriate in the early stage because *I believe that the two sides begin to develop quite independently before starting to become fused into one system during the second or third year of life.*

Speech

During the first six months of life baby's vocalisations consist of crying sounds and increasing amounts of 'gurgling', 'ahhing' and 'cooing'. By the end of the third month he can usually produce such sounds as 'ghoo' or 'la' and a month or so later he usually is beginning to laugh aloud. By the end of this period, baby is using quite a variety of sounds as 'g-g-g-g', 'k-k-k-k', 'er-er-er-er', etc., and soon after to produce the multiple syllable babbling sounds which are characteristic of the second half of the first year, beginning with 'am-ma', 'oo-la' for example, and leading to 'dadada' or 'bababa' and long chains of more varied sounds.

During the second six months his babbled vocalisations became more and more influenced by the sounds his parents make to him; he listens to his mother's voice, chuckles perhaps and vocalises in reply possibly repeating some of the sounds she has used (in her speech).

By eight or nine months, baby is beginning to shout deliberately to attract attention and invites long 'conversations' (consisting of alternating babble) between himself and a parent. Gradually the parents, all unwitting, start to shape baby's speech and impose meaning on his utterances. "Mumum" says baby. "Yes, Mummy's here" is the reply. "Dahadahdah", exclaims the baby, and the fond parent equates this with the dog which has just entered the room perhaps or the donkey toy lying on the floor, etc., and she both makes some more-or-less appropriate movement and repeats back what she thinks she has heard.

Usually before his first birthday baby is using one or more 'words' with meaning to refer to something or to an activity and this is the beginning of his effective speech. The words don't have to be those used by the grown-ups so long as they have a more or less constant and consistent meaning. He uses these words at first perhaps when he sees the objects to which they refer and in between simply to enjoy repeating the sounds. Then he learns to demand through speech. "Mumum" he exclaims petulantly holding up his arms to be picked up; he shouts "ball" or "car" expecting to be given what he asked for.

In between actual communications he continues to practise using his voice and articulation and during the second year he produces the extended sequences of speech-like babble interspersed perhaps with real words, referred to as 'jargon'. He repeats and begins to combine some of these 'words' in his now extensive vocabulary (perhaps 40 or more) to produce short phrases of his own construction.

At this stage he frequently echoes what is said to him and talks to himself as he plays, the previous jargon monologue now having largely given way to real speech although much of it is clearly said (or sung) for the very joy of saying it.

By two-and-a-half years his vocabulary is large (of the order 100/300 words) and is used to continually 'comment' on his own activities as he plays. He repeats or joins in with nursery rhymes and jingles. He starts to use 'I' and 'you' and to ask questions. "Where's Daddy?". "What's that?". However, at this stage he rarely listens to the replies he gets to the question before he is already 'asking' the next.

As he approaches three years his skill and facility with speech allow him to engage in conversations and to talk about what he has done. He can usually say his name and surname and can correctly use plurals as in: 'two wheels', etc.

His familiarity with the use of inflexions is however usually a little weak during this learning period and the child in his third year may make little mistakes such as: 'They(ve) got two hat ons' or 'What side in it?' (What's inside it?).

Sometimes it is the word order which gets a bit mixed or an associated word is substituted by a child who cannot remember the word 'glasses' and explains "Put eyes on". This is the time when the child naturally uses such shifts of meaning. For example the statement "I got two old men" was made by a bright two-and-a-half year old as he walked with the 'aid' of two walking sticks.

From now on the child's questioning intensifies and he comes more and more to listen to the replies he gets. The speech is usually pretty distinct by this time and readily understood by a stranger; however he may continue to use some mispronunciations as 'potit' (pocket) for another year or more and sometimes this extends into school life (e.g. 'bockle').

Comprehension of speech

Even during the first month of life a baby is usually quieted (from a state of irritation) by the sound of his mother's voice and within a further month will turn his eyes and perhaps his head partially towards a sound as well as by smiling a response. More and more he shows a strong social interest in the human voice, listening intently and sometimes vocalising in reply.

Probably the average baby is already capable of being differentially influenced by certain speech patterns by six months of age and sometimes when talked to at the appropriate moment will show the earliest signs of understanding speech. For example his mother's instruction "say bye-bye" given at a suitable time, when he is about to leave or has just had his going out clothes put on, may initiate a hand 'waving' response.

During the next few months more and more patterns of speech are responded to on occasion with or without 'situational guidance'. 'Give Mummy a kiss', 'Clap hands', 'How big?', 'No.' etc., are discriminated sufficiently well to allow the appropriate activity to be given in response under the right circumstances. Then such phrases as 'Give it to me', 'Here you are' and later, 'Show me your shoes', 'Where's the light?', 'Give this to Mummy', may produce appropriate directional reactions as the second year is fully broached.

It should not be supposed that the eighteen months old child is fully understanding these utterances or even responding to more than a fragment or component pattern of each but, combining what he has learned to abstract from the speech with what his understanding allows him to infer from the situation or from gestures, he can interpret simple speech fairly accurately.

From two years or so he usually enjoys listening to nursery rhymes and simple stereotyped 'stories' with repetitive refrains. During the next six months his vocabulary of understood words is rapidly increasing so that he can identify a

wide variety of objects and his increasing understanding of inflexion and word order allow him to understand fairly long and complicated instructions and to benefit from verbal description and statement. As he approaches his third birthday our normal child is usually able to sit to listen to little stories about the everyday events which are familiar to him.

Geoffrey Waldon 1965

Notes (1984) follow

Some notes on language and speech with special reference to

Speech and Language (1965)

'Vocabulary'/'word'. It should be made clear that a child develops a repertoire of 'words' used expressively in his speech and another repertoire used in his responding to the speech of others.

When observing a child's talking gross word counts are not useful, nor are attempts to classify 'parts of speech'.

A spoken word will have a 'connotation' (or set of characteristics which determine its application) and a 'denotation' (or 'object' to which the word is intended to apply), and these will be more or less extensive in their application according to the maturity of understanding and the experience of the child. For example the supposedly nominal form 'daddy' as used by a three years old child might denote his or another's paternal parent or simply a particular member of the class 'men'. Furthermore it may not be a noun, or even a word at all but an utterance "Daddy!" connoting such a notion as "Come to me, I want you!"

The functional meaning of a word, phrase or other utterance is determined finally, not by the speaker's intention but by the hearer's interpretation as evidenced by the transient or longer lasting change in his subsequent behaviour.

Hence my view, expressed in the early writings, that the grammar of spoken language should be analysed in terms of the responses of the listener and only secondarily with respect to the 'intentions' of the speaker.

I have often heard it said that young children comment verbally on what they are doing. This is, I believe, not entirely true. What really happens, I think, is this: the child, having learned to articulate a variety of words and phrases, and perhaps to generate new utterances for himself, and having come to associate speech forms with actions and with objects, sometimes further responds to his own actions and to the appearances of the objects with which he is playing, with speech. So far we might judge this behaviour as nothing more than commenting on his own behaviour etc; however he also *responds to his own speech* just as if it were uttered by someone else. The child's speech then has a modifying or controlling influence on his own actions and is entirely analogous to his being verbally influenced by another. This linking loop between a child's producing and responding to his own speech is essential to the mutual assimilation of the two main components of conventional spoken language.

'Questioning' by the two and three years old child.

As implied in an earlier note it is not safe to classify a child's 'parts of speech' or that of an adult talking to a child in the naive way that we often interpret the language of grown ups.

When an adult says to a child, "Would you like to give me the cup?" this is no question despite the usual intonation pattern and the interrogative symbol in the written form. It is equivalent to "Give me the cup!" If the child answered the pseudoquestion accurately and truthfully with "No, I would not" his response would probably be treated as 'rudeness' whilst an equally appropriate but *purely verbal* response of "Yes" would be seen as wilfully 'obstructive, or 'trying to be funny', perhaps.

Equally the child's "What's that?" (or better "Wotzat?") ploy *in certain circumstances* is functionally not a question, even if it is a precursor of questioning behaviours.

At first its function or role is to divert the excessive and often incomprehensible verbal demands of an adult without either ignoring or repulsing them. However much a child enjoys the presence, the attentions and the verbal utterances of an adult, that adult's tendency to expect the child to *understand what is said* evokes in the child the stirrings of an anxiety, a condition which the child can temporarily relieve by carefully interrupting and modifying the adult's verbal flow. This is best achieved by the child's controlling the interchange by evoking a verbal response from/in the adult but interrupting before being expected to respond to it.

For example: "Hello, what's your name?"

"Jimmy."

"That's a fine name. And how old are you Jimmy?"

"Two."

"And where do you live?" (Very silly question for a stranger to ask a two-year old).

"Wotzat."

"That's my tie. Do you like - "

"Wotzat."

"It's a pipe cleaner, you -"

"Wotzat."

"Tobacco for my pipe. Would you like to - "

"Wotzat."

... and so on. An enquiring mind? Not on your life!

Of course if the child were a little older he might use the dying fall, "Whyyyyyy...?" The most effective way of producing the desired effect on a

grown-up is to use the most sophisticated linguistic speech forms available and, although the child throws out the full panoply of defensive speech-like utterances within his repertoire of 'talk' he soon recognises and selects for use those which are the most effective.

This process which utilises some of the same mechanisms basic to 'handicap' behaviours is the normal and extremely efficient means of ensuring that the linguistic maturity of the child's expressive speech is steadily raised.

In the example given "Put eyes on", clearly intended as "Put glasses on", it is difficult to decide whether the child has replaced the word 'glasses' with the associated more primary word 'eyes' or is using a somewhat confused form of "Put on (your) eyes". If the latter, do we interpret this as a substitute phrase or synonymous periphrasis or circumlocution (i.e. glasses are things you put on your eyes), as is a very common interpretation of a similar 'substitution' in adult amnesic aphasia (Q: "What is this?" (a pencil) A: "Er..er..er..write with") or is it, as much more rationally interpreted by Goldstein and by Jakobsen, a complementary phrase in this case referring to its function (Q: "What is this?" A: (You) "write with" (it)).

Geoffrey Waldon 1984