

The Evolution of Speech Comprehension in the Young Child

Observing the evolution of speech comprehension in both normal young children and in those who mature tardily in this respect it is my impression that vocal utterances come to represent, to be substituted for, active physical processes which impose or bring about a change of behaviour in another individual.

For example a child's behaviour may be brought about by

- (a) physically imposing and directing his movements
- (b) inviting the child's imitation of one's own movements
- (c) directing his attention to a situation which is likely to induce a change of behaviour – in its more sophisticated forms this method employs semi-conventional and conventional symbolic gesture such as pointing to the mouth to indicate food or drink, to an eye to indicate sight, etc.
- (d) demonstration or mime leading to abbreviated or symbolic mime as a slight movement used to signify an action, as eating, writing, etc.

It seems to matter little what exact form the vocal utterance, which is to substitute for any of these processes, takes.

Initially a child may be conditioned to respond in a fairly specific manner to a particular vocalic sequence, for example a sequence such as 'clap hands' or 'how big?' comes to effect a stereotyped response.

At first the stimulus signal is probably some fragment of or the utterance which by chance and in conjunction with a particular set of circumstances triggers off an automatic movement response, but the variations in intensity, intonation, stress etc., and in the environmental circumstances (the same speaker at different times, different speakers, etc) which occur with repetition, gradually lead to the acceptance of any one of a whole range of possible spoken 'events' to represent the 'design' stimulus.

As the number of stimulus-response associations increases the necessity to distinguish between signals increases so that a considerable sophistication of the child's powers of auditory discrimination is essential.

A substantial increase in the number and variety of vocal-articulatory permutations is required to cope with a large number of possible actions, directed towards an extremely large number of possible objects and situations.

Leaving aside any consideration of the child's developing ability to discriminate at syllabic and phonemic level, one can discern the emergence of functional components within the speech comprehension processes of the young child.

The child would seem to scan the utterance which assails his ears, select what is significant, according to his particular stage of development, and impose order on whatever elements are in fact attended to.

At an early stage the temporal order of the 'lexical' elements would seem to be of no special importance to the child.

Virtually all effective speech towards the child during the early years consists of commands (or invitations) to carry out action (including 'No!' and 'No'), the speech seeming to consist of an 'injunction' and an 'object', the subject of the action being implicitly indicated by or implicit in the general function of such speech at this stage. As all the effective speech directed towards the child requires him to perform (or desist from) some activity, a 'subject' contained within the utterance is entirely superfluous at this stage.

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