

Understanding Speech: on Interpretation

When investigating a young child's understanding of speech we must distinguish very carefully between the intention of the speaker, which his utterance probably expresses quite adequately for the *mature listener*, and the message extracted by the child whose experience and language skill will determine the efficiency of his interpretation. We must analyse the speech not from the point of view of the speaker but from that of the child listener.

We can only discover what a particular spoken message means to a young or linguistically delayed child by carefully observing his response(s) to it. Furthermore we cannot assume that an appropriate (expected) response indicates full understanding.

Take for example the instruction "(Go and) close the door" as said to an intelligent co-operative three years old child. If the door referred to is open, and particularly if the speaker or the listener has recently come into the room, a faint gesture with the hands or eyes is likely to be sufficient to bring about the required action. Hence a child with no understanding of speech (or even no hearing) could *apparently* respond appropriately to the instruction.

If no gestures were given a child who finds the word 'door' sufficiently meaningful to direct his attention to that object could respond appropriately by assuming that he is required to do the obvious thing with an *open* door.

Even if the child could discriminate between 'Open the...' and 'Close the...', this ability would not be *demonstrated* by a correct response. It would be further necessary to ask him to do some less likely or inappropriate thing such as shut a closed door or open an already open one. A child who is just beginning to discriminate between the two speech forms may well show some confusion, look round for a second door more likely to represent the object of the sentence, and might finally end up by doubting his ears and rather tentatively carrying out the obvious action. The linguistically more mature child would have the confidence to depend on his interpretation, possibly pointing out the stupidity of the request; however, even in this case we should have no clear knowledge of the child's understanding of the initial redundant 'Go and...' segment of the utterance which I have bracketed.

So we may see that the spoken phrase "(Go and) close the door" to the appropriately responding child may have no meaning at all; may carry no more information than that contained in the single word 'door', in which case the child's response will still depend largely upon situational guidance; may mean "Do whatever seems appropriate to the door"; "Shut the door if that seems appropriate"; or "Shut the door whatever the circumstances", even if this means first opening it.

It is thus easy to over-estimate a child's understanding of speech. Indeed it is our assumption that the child usually does understand exactly what we say to him which allows us to gradually increase the length and complexity of the speech we use towards him, so expecting him to steadily improve the efficiency of his understanding of speech. Furthermore, it is this natural but usually erroneous assumption which forces the child to compensate continually for his small continual language inadequacy by relying on his 'common-sense' observations to supply what necessary information he fails to extract from speech, and thus provides the driving/motivating force required to energise his linguistic advancement.

It will be deduced from the previous remarks that children do not learn the meaning of individual words and then learn to understand the additional meanings associated with combinations of them. Rather he first comes to respond in a simple way to complex phrases and sentences, then to respond more specifically and to differentiate between different phrases, and eventually he learns to understand the words as individual components before coming to know the subtle variations in meaning and use of these, alone and in combination.

That to a casual observer a young child may appear to increase his 'vocabulary' of understood speech by a word at a time is due entirely to the manner of making observations. This appearance is in fact an artefact. Thus we tend to interpret correct responses to such utterances as 'Show me your nose', 'Where's your Mummy?' etc., as meaning that the child knows what the words 'nose' and 'Mummy' mean when we ought to say that the child correctly interprets the whole phrase in situational context. He responds appropriately to the injunction 'Show me your nose' which to the young child might simply mean 'Put your finger in such a way', only gradually the language concepts of 'nose' and 'show me' coming to condense into independent words as a result of his responding to a variety of phrases inviting activities directed towards the nose and towards other target objects; e.g:

'Blow your nose'	'Blow the paper'
'Show me your nose'	'Show me your shoes'
'Have you got a nose?'	'Wipe the table'
'Wipe your nose' etc.	'Wipe your face'

'Have you got a hanky?'

In passing it might be profitable to point out at this time that any attempt to oversimplify our speech when teaching a language-delayed child will not aid his acquiring understanding and might well interfere with development. Naturally we need to use relatively short utterances at first, with adequate repetition and when necessary a small measure of emphasis on certain elements e.g. '*Push the pram*', '*Pick up the spoon*' etc., when encouraging discrimination, but any attempt to teach individual words by direct linking with an object or picture is misguided.

Geoffrey Waldon (date unknown but prior to 1969)