<u>SESSION THIRTEEN - UNDERSTANDING OF SPEECH</u>

<u>PREFACE</u>

This paper is clearly about a child's understanding the speech of others. It has been asserted that being modified by the speech of others and actively modifying the behaviours of others through speech involves two separate mental processes which are learned and which develop independently in different ways, only subsequently coalescing in certain respects so as to seem to be two aspects of the same process.

It follows from this that there must be two different kinds of verbal understanding, namely, understanding the speech of others and understanding one's own speech.

It further follows that the first stages of each must be capable of developing separately and *remaining separate*, at least for a period of development. Anyone seriously concerned with the pathology of children's language will have observed occasional children who respond entirely appropriately to the speech of others but who utter no speech whatsoever.

This seems intuitively acceptable to most of us; however, if what has been asserted is true, it ought to be possible for a child to be able to use speech in a manner which implies full understanding of what he is saying (i.e. what he expects to result from his various utterances) whilst being entirely unable to understand the speech of others, even though he 'hears' it adequately. And indeed this is the case. One can detect differences in both normal and 'delayed language' children during development and occasionally very marked differences indicative of continuing dissociation.

I am not, of course, referring to the child who either uses complex sounding parrot-like talk with no expectation of more than a non-specific response from others or to the child who uses a stereotyped utterance 'Do you want a sweet' in anticipation of a specific response. (GW '84)

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Conventional spoken language has to do with one individual's influencing the behaviour of another through the medium of speech. One utters the sounds, the other, having experience of responding to such sounds, reacts appropriately. At its most elementary a simple short behaviour is initiated immediately by a simple vocoarticulatory pattern; at a more sophisticated level an utterance might profoundly alter the whole lifestyle of the hearer.

Clearly both the speaker and the hearer must learn their skills in order to be reasonably successful in communication and normally the experience is such as to allow the roles to be reversed, often alternating as conversation. However speech expression and understanding of the speech of others are two entirely separate skills arising separately, being reinforced differently and having their independent aspects of understanding.

Naturally, as their acquisition is to culminate in their combined use, the phonological structures and syntactic rules are common to both, but, far from representing the two aspects of the same process, they are two separate sets of understanding/behaviours which develop in parallel and subsequently combine to form a compound behaviour within which the original components always retain a measure of independence.

Hence the young child's linguistic understanding of what he says develops to some extent independently of his understanding of what he hears. That is to say they are two different kinds of activity and two different kinds of understanding.

In keeping with the argument that the basis of communication is the individual's registering, recognising, interpreting and acting upon patterns within the physical world I consider the child's learning to understand the speech of others as the linguistic reflection of his prior learning to interpret the patterns of his physical world. General fundamental understanding is – in form, structure and function – common to all humans and this implies that Man naturally develops an internal syntax for organising and using ideas which forms the basis for the outward system of ordering-rules and the words by means of which he communicates with others.

This outward language . . . clothed in a vocabulary of arbitrary symbols, must be learned by the same processes previously discussed (Sessions One to Ten).

Within a certain context he responds in some relatively clear-cut and appropriate way, to a particular pattern of circumstances. Subsequently, following a certain kind of experience . . . this behavioural pattern comes to be elicited by a speech pattern (relatively or precisely) specific to it.

The development of a child's understanding of the speech of others seems to follow very closely some aspects of the development of his fundamental understanding and just as his earliest understanding consists in the simple response patterns which give rise to derivative patterns which, in their turn, subdivide again, so it is that as certain of these fairly well-defined behaviours come to be elicited by speech in the early months this verbal understanding extends, proliferates and refines in parallel with the extension, proliferation and refinement of the evolving behaviours.

It is as well to state at the outset that there are two quite different ways in which understanding comes to be associated with the speech of others. These ways are entirely in keeping with the two parallel pathways described earlier.

In one case (the general fundamental) the association is reinforced 'specifically' whilst in the other (the particular) the association is 'non-specific'. For example the more obvious but relatively less important case where the child's attention is drawn to an object or situation under conditions where his making the association is generally pleasurable in some way: 'This is an apple… an apple… where's the apple?… yes that's the apple' is of the latter type. Even here this form is basically of the former or specifically reinforced type but the imperative aspect (where is? = indicate the whereabouts of 'give me') has been reduced to the indicative 'attend to', and then to a mere carrier phrase. In this way a child may accumulate a large repertoire of words or phrases which can awaken appropriate associations within his mind but unfortunately by itself, that is to say if not based on groundwork of specifically reinforced understanding, such a 'vocabulary' is linguistically impotent.

On the other hand a child's responding to a simple instruction (e.g. 'No', 'Clapanz', 'Wavebyebye', 'Wherzdaddi', etc.) is accompanied by more than sufficient specific reinforcing factor to cement the association so that the more often the child responds the more readily he can and does respond. There need be no social awareness in the transaction. Their social overtones however important to human development are not necessary to the growth of linguistic understanding.

These earliest responses have no direction; they are definable actions which do not act on anything in particular; however towards the end of the first year the well-defined actions of picking up, putting, giving, etc. require targets and hence acquire direction so that verbal definition of action becomes linked with the nominal description of the object which it acts upon.

The intermediate stage (e.g. 'Give it me', 'Here you are' [=Take this], 'Pick it up') gives rise to the next phase (e.g. 'Give me the …', 'Pick up the …', 'Put it in the …') where the objects are specified so that the nominal vocabulary expands rapidly. An increase in the range of actions capable of being initiated through speech (e.g. 'Push the …', 'Turn the …', 'Kick the …', 'Throw the …', etc.) increases the linguistic associations of the objects acted upon so that for example the word 'ball' comes to be understood not simply as being associated with the object it refers to but as the common segment of such injunctions as 'Kick the ball', 'Throw the ball', 'Pick up the ball', 'Give me the ball', 'Put the ball in the . . . .', etc. as well as of such adjectival associations as ' . . . . big ball', 'red ball', 'John's ball', etc., has these experienced associations, uses and behaviours incorporated within the reference.

A child's understanding of the speech of others implies that the child's behaviours are in some way modified as a result of his receiving the spoken message. Since for a spoken signal to lead unequivocally to a change of behaviour (or, to put it more generally, to a behaviour) that form of behaviour must already exist as a regular component of the child's repertoire of behaviours, it follows that in the special case where the child is learning to respond to a spoken signal his capacity for making the response must precede his ability to link the event of his making the response with the signal.

In fact behaviours must be well established (or well defined) before they can become associated with language although the definitions of early responses may have wide tolerances, that is to say, consist of a wide envelope containing a number of variant possible responses, as also may the bundle of signals, any component member of which may be capable of eliciting the response.

I would suggest that it is the child's capacity for readily making a few fairly well defined responses which renders him susceptible to being influenced by signals from the surroundings during the early months. Speech patterns from an adult will be limited by the child's range of behaviours (as comprehensible to the adult) and 'effective' speech will be that which appears to trigger off recognisable responses so that within the various vocoarticulatory output of the adult interacting with the child those speech patterns which can be associated with definite items of behaviour will be inevitably selected. These patterns being necessarily imperative or injunctive in function the grammatical forms in terms of adult speech mechanism is the frequent contingency where an injunction (such as 'Up you come', 'Over you go', 'Give mummy a kiss', etc. and in due course more specifically 'Wavebyebye', 'Wherezdaddi', Clapanz, etc.) is caused fairly regularly to be followed by the 'appropriate' response. It is the pleasure specifically associated with the response itself that directly reinforces its relationship to the verbal pattern which comes in due course to elicit it.

I would further suggest that the child's more gross early behaviours give rise by a kind of subdivision to variant derivative forms which themselves give rise to more varied subdivisions and so on. In the same way the child's responding in a fairly gross way at first leads on as his behavioural responses differentiate and refine to his responding differentially to more and more subdivisions of instruction. Hence the relationship of later speech understanding to earlier is exactly parallel to that existing between later more differentiated actions and the earlier pluripotential forms from which they have arisen.

The earliest responses to speech have, like the earliest actions, form and definition but, not acting primarily on the outside world, no particular direction. For example the response to 'No' is generally speaking one of desisting, usually temporarily, from whatever activity has previously occupied the child's attention. 'Clap hands' does not, for the nine months child, entail bringing the hands together in a percussive action but the adopting of a total bodily activity in which the hands happen to move in some such way as to allow an indulgent parent to imagine a resemblance to the hand-clapping of an older individual. This does not mean that the response is not a clear-cut one; only that the child is not attending to the business of striking his hands together. Similarly only the lively imagination of a baby-bemused adult could find real resemblance between the clutching movements of the late first year child coupled with his, as likely as not, looking in the opposite direction and that of the older child waving goodbye to someone. ‘Where’s daddy’ at first is the signal for the child to rotate his head long before he can be seen to be searching visually for his father.

As the first year draws to its close the child’s own actions are becoming more and more consistently directed towards the surroundings and lagging in parallel with this the child’s responses to speech tend to take on definite direction so that his responding to ‘Give it to me’, based on his offering objects towards an extended hand, specifies not only a particular form of (offering) behaviour but also a definite direction, that is to say towards the speaker wherever he happens to be relative to the child. The response to ‘Here you are’ similarly had both definition and direction and subsequently it is seen that just as most of the child’s behaviour can be reduced to doing some kind of action towards some kind of object, that is to say, acting in such and such a way on such and such a target, so can the basic speech toward the child be reduced to the form ‘do this to that’ or act in such a way on such an object.

Reference to Session 5 will remind that actions are perceived basically in terms of the form of perception I have termed ‘praxic’ whilst the thing acted upon is more likely to be perceived as a ‘constant-image’. So a very rough classification of words might divide some of them into those signifying the transient or perpetually changing, most of which would be termed verbs, and those signifying enduringness or those perceptions which seem to remain unchanging at least for brief periods of time, most of which would be termed nouns, either substantive or adjectival.

Unfortunately there are exceptions to this rule so that I find it more consistent when examining the speech used towards young children to term those that initiate a particular form of action, ‘definers’, and those which indicate the objective of the action, ‘directors’.

GEOFFREY WALDON
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