## Proto-words 9-12 months

These are phonologically approximate but representations of nouns.

## ONE-WORD STAGE – 9-18 months

The earliest stage of grammatical development hardly seems like grammar at all, since only single words are used. The average child is about a year old when she\he speaks the first word. Roughly between 12 and 18 months the child speaks only in one-word utterances: ‘milk’, ‘mummy’, ‘cup’ and so on.

Occasionally more than one word will appear but the phrase will be used as a single unit: ‘allgone’, ‘allfalldown’. 60% of words used at this time have a naming function and will later develop into nouns. About 20% express actions and some will develop into verbs.

However, to speak of these single utterances as ‘words’ is misleading. In many respects these early utterances function as if they were sentences. The words convey more complex messages. For example, the word JUICE may be used to mean ‘I want some juice’, ‘I want more juice’, ‘I’ve spilt my juice’ etc. The context, the child’s use of gesture and intonation enable the parent to understand what the child means.

Linguists prefer to call these utterances HOLOPHRASES (or one-word sentences).

Although the child’s own utterances are limited, understanding of syntax is more advanced. Children show this to be the case because they respond to two-word instructions, such as ‘kiss mummy’.

###

## TWO-WORD STAGE – 18 months-2 years

Two-word sentences usually begin to appear when the child is about 18 months old, though single words continue to be used for some months after this.

Here are some typical two-word utterances spoken by babies:

mummy gone baby table

she silly silly hat

mummy car my doggie

there teddy comb hair

daddy pen baby cry

a person performs an action SV

a person or object is described SC

an action affects an object VO

an object is located SA

an object is given a possessor S [Crystal 1986]

The ambiguity of some two-word utterances arises partly because inflectional affixes are absent. These include, for example ‘s’ at the ends of words to denote plural or possession, and ‘ed’ to indicate past tense.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | A: Early20 – 24 mths | B: Intermediate | C: Late3½ - 4 yrs |
| declarative | that boxbig boat | that’s boxthat big boat | that’s a boxthat’s a big boat |
| interrogative | see shoe?truck here? | mommy see shoe?truck’s here?or where’s truck? | do you see the shoe?is the truck here?where’s the truck |
| imperative | want baby |  |  |
| negative | no play | I no play |  |

Source: Menyuk (1971)

##

## TELEGRAPHIC STAGE – 2-3 years

From the age of about two, children begin producing three- and four- word utterances. Some of these will be grammatically complete but most will convey the message at its most economical, without the appropriate grammatical words and accurate inflections (word endings).

 Man kick ball You put it

 Where daddy going Laura broke plate

This condensed structure at the early telegraphic stage omits DETERMINERS (e.g. a, the), AUXILIARY VERBS (e.g. is, has, etc) and PREPOSITIONS (e.g. to, for).

Questions, commands and statements are being used and different clause patterns are evident. By the end of the third year, clause structures of four or five elements can be noticed.

e.g. You give me my toy now.

Progress during the telegraphic stage is rapid. By the time the child is three, sentences with more than one clause start to appear, and co-ordinating conjunctions (‘and’, ‘but’) begin to be used. In fact, many linguists regard the acquisition of the co-ordinator ‘and’ as a major linguistic milestone. What this allows a child to do is talk forever! It is also the birth of the COMPOUND sentence.

“I falled off my bike and it breaked and I cried and… and… and Ben comed and helped me and my hand’s all sore and …”

Up until now utterances have been simple but now they can be over twice as long. Non-fluency is bound to occur as the child copes with new linguistic skills. There will often be a slow-slow-quick-quick-slow rhythm as the child PLANS what to say next. The repetition (or stammer) is not a speech defect, merely thinking time.

 Child: Falldown Sam

 Mother: Where has Sam fallen down?

Child: In garden falldown Sam

 Mother: Sam has fallen in the garden? Is he all right?

 Child: Sam nose sore.

A great deal of grammatical knowledge is required before constructions are used correctly. Utterances like the following are very common:

Are there much toys in the cupboard?

That’s more better

It got brokened

* **Bellugi (1967)** suggested that there were three stages for **forming negatives.**
* **Stage One** (2 years-telegraphic stage): The words No and Not are used singly or with one other word (no want, no go bed). Negatives appear at the beginning or end of two-word sentences.
* **Stage Two** (2 years, 3 months): *Don’t* and *Can’t* are used but without a change in tense. *No* and *Not* are used correctly, usually before the main verb. The negative is used, though not necessarily accurately, for: non-existence (*not there*), refusal (*no drink*), and denial (*not Sam*).
* **Stage Three** (2 years, 9 months): Negative constructions are used more accurately, and are included in the middle of sentences. *Didn’t* and *Isn’t* are acquired much later (4 years).

## POST-TELEGRAPHIC STAGE – 3 years

**Pronouns** start to be used effectively in terms of subject and object distinctions, as do **questions, inflections** and **auxiliary verbs**.

* **Clarke (1985)** et al, suggest that in the third year, auxiliary verbs begin to be used and subject-verb word order is reversed (inversion). As sentences are longer, so are questions. Where Daddy going?+aux=Where Daddy is going? Inversion: That is a car=Is that a car? Children learn inversion of yes/no questions relatively quickly but Wh questions present more of a problem, possibly because there are two markers indicating an interrogative. Possible errors involving inversion:
* Lack of inversion: Where I should put it?
* A copy of the moved auxiliary remains in its original position: Can he can look?
* No inversion in negated questions: Why you can’t sit down?
* **Roger Brown’s Stages of Morpheme Acquisition:**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Term** | **Example** |
| Present tense progressive | -ing |
| Prepositions | In, on |
| Plural | -s |
| Past tense irregular | Run/ran |
| Possessive | ‘s |
| Uncontractible copula | Is, was |
| Articles | The, a |
| Past tense regular | -ed |
| Third person regular | Runs |
| Third person irregular | Has |
| Uncontractible auxiliary verb | They were running |
| Contractible copula | She’s |
| Contractible auxiliary | She’s running |