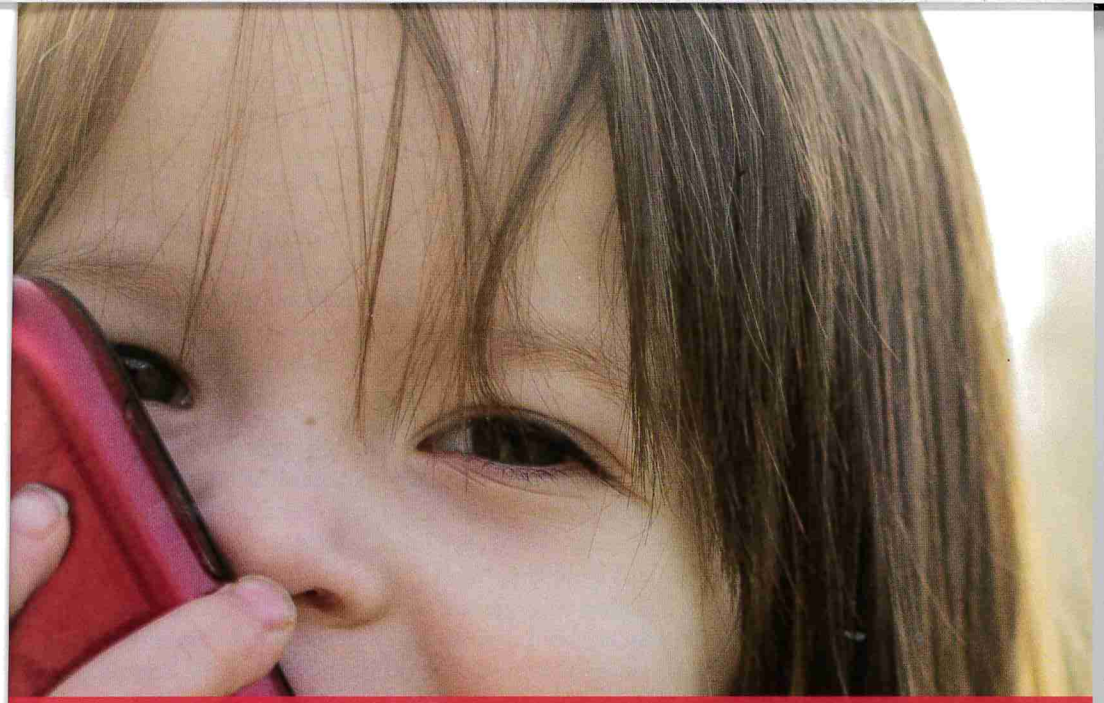


Chapter 1
Learning to talk

In this chapter you will:

- Understand the typical stages of lexical and grammatical speech development in children
- Appreciate the ways in which language develops with a focus on phonology and semantics
- Explore the central role of discourse in children's language development

1.1 Stages of development in young children

Language sets humans apart from other animals. More straightforward needs, wants or feelings can be communicated through facial expressions, gestures and non-verbal noises, whereas language enables complex thoughts and innermost feelings to be shared. In the English language alone, there are estimated to be between one and two million words in use. This hints at the complexity of the task ahead of new born babies in their development of one or more languages.

Communication is not limited to verbal language. A child must also navigate the complex systems of signs and symbols that communicate messages and ideas in print, face to face and digitally. At birth, a baby can do little more than cry to communicate basic needs. Within five years, a child is likely to be fluent in at least one and perhaps more languages. This rapid progress indicates an extraordinary rate of neurological, cognitive and linguistic development. It is accepted that a child is usually born receptive to language and that in early language use the child has more sophisticated comprehension of the language in use than the capacity to actually create language in a way that it can be understood.

1.1.1 Pre-verbal language development: production

There are a number of theories about the capacity of an unborn baby to recognise the sound of a parent or sibling's voice. It is often suggested that when the baby kicks or moves prior to birth, it can be an early way of responding to external stimulus, which could be loud noises as well as people's voices.

Once a baby is born, crying is the most obvious form of communication. Crying might express a range of different needs and could indicate hunger, discomfort, pain, loneliness or being over- or under-stimulated. Crying is most frequent in the first few weeks after birth, but the cries are gradually replaced with a wider range of sounds such as gurgling, cooing and babbling that develop and mature in complexity prior to the child uttering their first recognisable word (sometimes as early as 9 months but more commonly at about 12 months old). Whilst cooing is more detached from recognisable language, babbling gradually becomes more similar in sound to the letter combinations a child will later use. Reduplicated babbling involves repetition of the same consonant and vowel combinations (for example, 'mamamama'), whereas variegated babbling comes later and shows progression since it will use differing vowel and consonant letter combinations which are vocally more challenging to produce and require greater mouth movement (for example, 'bemo'). This will then develop into the use

of proto-words, utterances that might represent meaning to the child and be used consistently, or have meaning imposed upon them by a caregiver. It may be that the desired word is physically too complex to articulate. For example, 'blanket' might consistently be called 'baa baa'. The combination of vowels and consonants in 'blanket' can be difficult to articulate and so make 'baa baa' a manageable alternative.

KEY TERMS

Cooing: distinct from crying but not yet forming recognisable vowels and consonants

Babbling: vocal play that involves forming vowel and consonant sounds

Reduplicated babbling: vocal play that involves repeated sounds

Variegated babbling: vocal play that involves different sounds placed together

Proto-words: 'made up' words that a child will use to represent a word they might not yet be able to pronounce, for example, 'rayrays' for 'raisins'

Desmond Morris (2008) suggested that for the first six months of a baby's life these gurgles and babbles will be the same regardless of the baby's nationality or how much parental input the child has had. Deaf children will also create the same sounds. By six months, the child will be increasingly attuned to variations in rhythm of the particular language being used around him or her and the babbling will then resemble this language more closely.

What happens then, for babies born in households where more than one language is spoken? Francois Grosjean (1989) has been researching bilingualism for over thirty years and recently cited an American Community Survey of 2007 that identified 51 million Americans as bilingual, with both English and another language being spoken at home. Simultaneous bilingualism refers to the acquisition of two languages at the same time when both languages have been introduced prior to the age of three. Contrary to some commonly held misconceptions about language development being slower for these bilingual children, it is thought that children born into bilingual households will achieve language development milestones within normal parameters and will not confuse the two languages but learn them discretely from the outset.

Patricia Kuhl (2011) has researched the human brain and language development, and suggests that at birth, babies are 'citizens of the world', but by the age of

12 months they have become 'culture bound listeners'. This suggests the critical importance of language in the first 12 months when children are less vocal but are receptors to the language being used around them.

1.1.2 Pre-verbal language development: reception

There is a growing body of research to suggest that, prior to a child uttering their first recognisable word, a huge amount of language development has gone on. Not only is the child experimenting with the creation of sounds but also continuously processing the language around him or her and becoming familiar with the social interactions that underpin talk within his or her immediate surroundings.

Patricia Kuhl and Andrew Meltzoff (2016) have used developments in neuroscience to begin exploring the social development in a baby's brain and have suggested through brain imaging that social interaction is critical in a child's language learning journey and that early language exposure can actually correlate with a child's readiness for school a number of years later. Brooks and Meltzoff (2008) conducted a longitudinal study into the capacity of a child to follow eye gaze (the direction in which an adult is looking steadily with an opened eye) and its place in non-verbal social cues. They suggest that if a child is skilful in following eye gaze at 10 or 11 months, this correlates to an increased vocabulary size at two years old. Language acquisition evidently requires engagement with other language users and the child's immediate environment. This could go some way to explaining why some infants who are diagnosed with autism (a disorder with its name deriving from the Greek *autos*, meaning 'self') will sometimes have delayed language development. If the disorder means that eye contact and interaction with others is difficult for a child, then delayed language development might be a consequence of this.

1.1.3 Early physical development

A number of physical developments must take place before a child can actually talk. At birth, a baby's larynx is only one third of the size of an adult's and positioned differently in the neck. Until some growth and movement have taken place, it is physically difficult for words to be created. Adult speech requires the use of over seventy muscles and these are gradually developed through early vocal play that enables tongue, lips, mouth and vocal chords to move so that sound formation is practised as a precursor to speech.

1.1.4 Beginning to convey meaning

At around 9–12 months old, children will begin to communicate in such a way as to make their meaning evident, through individual words accompanied by non-verbal communication. In 1973, the linguist Michael Halliday proposed

that there were seven reasons why language is initially used. These 'functions' are explained in Table 1.1, each with an example to demonstrate how it might appear in early language:

Table 1.1: Functions of language

Function	Explanation	Example
Instrumental	Language used to try to fulfil a need.	'Nana' (gesturing for more banana)
Regulatory	Language used to influence others – to command or persuade.	'Come' (when wanting to enter a playground with caregiver)
Interactional	Language used to build and strengthen social relationships with others.	'Love you' (aimed at sibling at bedtime)
Personal	Language used to develop a sense of self, express preferences, opinions etc.	'No like it' (describing a new food)
Representational	Language used to request information from, or give information to, from another participant	'I eating all my dinner'
Heuristic	Language used to explore the world around oneself.	'Who that?' (when hearing a knock at the door)
Imaginative	Language used to play and be imaginative	'Dragon'

1.1.5 Stages of lexical and grammatical development

There is a commonly held view that language develops in a series of sequential steps. This can be loosely attached to ages, but children vary considerably in the rate and nature of their language development. Each child is unique in how language develops and the variety that exists will often be determined by the unique context in which a child lives. For example, a baby who is the third child within a family with pets and close relatives nearby will probably have a large proportion of nouns in his or her early lexical repertoire that are the names of siblings, pets or other relatives.

1.1.6 Holophrastic stage (12–18 months)

A child's earliest recognisable language will be at the holophrastic stage, when one word can convey a complete idea or a large amount of meaning. In order to avoid confusion, it is important for other participants to be looking for non-verbal communication or contextual clues in order better to understand the child's precise meaning. For example, if a child says 'ball', it could mean the child wants the ball, has found it, likes it or is annoyed that another child has taken the ball. A caregiver will often ask further questions of the child to elicit their exact meaning.

This early lexical development, when language is distilled into individual words to convey units of meaning, inevitably comes before words are placed together and interrelate to create more complex meaning. Katherine Nelson (1973) found that first words were most commonly nouns (60 per cent of first words) followed then by actions, modifiers or what might be called social and personal words (for example, 'hello' and 'bye bye'). These first words will usually be associated with the child's immediate environment. Even if a preposition is used, it is likely to be used as a verb (for example, 'in' to explain the movement of an object to a particular place, as opposed to 'put' which is less clear).

Early words will often be reduplicated for ease of articulation and the child might pick this up from the caregiver who has simplified words in this way (for example, 'bobos' for 'bedtime' or 'mama' for 'mother'). Diminutives might also be used by caregivers and then appear in a child's early vocabulary (for example, 'kitty', 'doggie', 'dolly'), acquiring an unnecessary *-y* suffix to suggest the diminutive nature of the object but perhaps also to provide a vocally pleasing word.

KEY TERMS

Holophrastic stage: the point in a child's development when a child uses just individual words to communicate more than the single word's meaning

Diminutive: a name, formed through the addition of a suffix, that is used informally to show some degree of relative smallness

Whilst initial acquisition of key words will focus on those items or people most important to the child, it is not long before a spurt in vocabulary use occurs. Jean Aitchison (1997) suggested that at about 18 months, a child will realise that every object, person or place has a word or label attached to it and therefore will develop a 'naming insight'. This is then followed by a 'naming explosion' when children rapidly develop new vocabulary, in order to fill the gaps in their lexical knowledge. Although much of the vocabulary building is done by the age of three, a child will continue to acquire new words into adolescence and beyond (see Chapter 5).

ACTIVITY 1.1

First words

Below is a list of first words acquired by different children (excepting equivalent names for the child's parent or caregivers like 'papa', 'mommy' etc.).

1. more
2. teddy
3. ce ce
4. vroom vroom
5. duck
6. cat
7. here y'ar
8. no
9. door
10. der
11. moon
12. hiya

1. Try to match the words (1–12) with the appropriate contextual information (a–l):
   a. First independent word uttered to a caregiver who had got distracted whilst feeding the child
   b. Whilst looking at the domestic pet
   c. On seeing a full moon outside the kitchen window
   d. Because the child would often go and feed the ducks in the pond in the local area
   e. To one of her siblings
   f. To mean 'Lucy', the child's big sister
   g. The child liked opening and closing doors
   h. Pointing at a teddy on the shelf that the child wanted at bedtime
   i. As a greeting to people the child knew
   j. Meaning 'there' – to indicate something of interest around her
   k. To imitate the noise of a car
   l. Just before dropping a plate or dish over the side of the high chair
2. What do you notice about the types of words that are uttered first?
3. What comment can you make about the functions of these first words? Why has the child uttered this particular word?

1.1.7 Two-word stage (18–24 months)

Not only is there a vocabulary explosion as a child approaches approximately 18 months, but a development in grammar also emerges. Up to about the age of two, the child will be in the two-word stage of development when there is an emerging recognition of some syntactic relationship between two words being uttered. These two words will usually be the most significant content words that convey essential information rather than grammatical words that appear later. Examples of these utterances might be 'dolly gone', 'water out' or 'milk table'. Usually the words are accurately positioned as they would be in a more complete sentence.

KEY TERMS

Content words: a word within a sentence that is vital to convey meaning

Grammatical words: words within a sentence that are needed in order to indicate the relationship between content words

Roger Brown (1973) conducted a longitudinal study focusing on three American children and their grammatical development. Through this, he identified the syntactic structures of two word utterances, analysing the function of one word to the other. Brown suggested that combinations of words placed together follow a limited range of patterns, as outlined in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2: Word combinations

Combination	Example
Agent + action	'Daddy go'
Action + object	'Make cake'
Agent + object	'Billy bike'
Action + location	'Run garden'
Object + location	'Teddy chair'
Possessor + possession	'Granny gloves'
Object + attribute	'Coat soft'
Demonstrative + object	'Here chair'

1.1.8 Telegraphic stage (2–3 years) and post-telegraphic stage (3+ years)

Between approximately the ages of two and three, a child's utterances will gradually get longer. The telegraphic stage is the point at which sentences make sense but are not grammatically complete. Language at this point resembles a telegram (a form of communication once used to convey important information briefly and promptly). Utterances are likely to incorporate key content words that are needed to convey meaning but some of the grammatical words will still be omitted.

The post-telegraphic stage (approximately 36 months and beyond) is also sometimes called the pre-school language stage. By this point, both content and grammatical words now appear and utterances more closely resemble adult speech. It is particularly evident during this stage that a child's mean length of utterance will also be growing.

KEY TERMS

Telegraphic stage: period of time when a child's utterances will tend to be three words and more; there might still be omission of some words, with the content and grammatical words included

Post-telegraphic stage: period of time when a child's language will include both content and grammatical words and more closely resemble adult speech

Mean length of utterance (MLU): the way a typical utterance length can be calculated. In any given transcript, add up the total number of words spoken by a participant and divide this number by the number of utterances

Syntax: the study of how words form larger structures such as phrases, clauses and sentences

As the child begins to speak with greater fluency, more complex learning around grammar (and syntax in particular) will also take place. The importance of syntax to meaning can be demonstrated by looking at the following two statements:

The owner walks the dog.

The dog walks the owner.

By inverting the subject and object within this sentence, meaning is changed entirely. The second sentence might be used to convey humour or communicate a message about how difficult it is to walk the dog. By the time a child has

reached the post-telegraphic stage, such complex understanding about subject and object and positions within an utterance are embedded.

A child will also be gaining confidence with inflectional functions and understanding the ways in which particular words might have different endings according to quantity, scale or time. Open word classes are nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs and are subject to inflections in a way that closed word classes might not be (for example, the preposition 'under' does not inflect to convey a different meaning).

KEY TERMS

Inflectional functions: the way that an affix shows a grammatical category such as a verb tense or a plural noun

Open word classes: a word class that is generally open to new membership

Closed word classes: a word class which doesn't readily admit new members

To understand inflectional functions, Table 1.3 gives some indication of the complexity of grammatical development for an early speaker. Not only are there regular inflections, but many words take irregular inflections too.

Table 1.3: Grammatical development and inflectional functions

Word class	Variations – regular	Variations – irregular	Differing meaning
Nouns	dog/dogs	child/children	Singular or plural
Verbs	walk/walks/ walked	go/goes/went	Past or present and singular or plural
Adjectives	big/bigger/ biggest	difficult/more difficult/most difficult	Degree of scale: comparatives or superlatives
Adverbs	fast/faster/ fastest	gently/more gently/most gently	Degree to which something is being done: comparatives or superlatives

Sentences by the post-telegraphic stage will be grammatically standard in the main but with occasional virtuous errors. For example, a six-year-old who is trying to get a tricky coat zip done up says, 'I am perseverancing'. The child has used the familiar *-ing* inflection in order to suggest an ongoing action but has incomplete knowledge of the way the verb 'to persevere' is represented as a present tense continuous verb and has become confused with the abstract noun 'perseverance'. Ambitious lexical features that lack grammatical accuracy are likely to be recast by a caregiver. This enables the child to hear the word used correctly. In this example, the reply might be 'Well done for persevering', so that the child is aware of the correct inflection in future talk. Such examples are quite common during this stage of development as a child attempts to apply regular rules to irregular words.

KEY TERMS

Virtuous error: grammatical and semantic errors that are understandable and logical through an incorrect assumption being made about grammar rules

Recast: the grammatically non-standard utterance of a child is spoken back to the child but in the standard form

Brown's 1973 study also identified typical features of grammatical development and when such features might emerge. He considered the emergence of 14 morphemes and the conclusions drawn in this study are often seen as a benchmark for typical development patterns. A sample of these can be seen in Table 1.4.

Table 1.4: Typical development patterns in spoken language

Feature	Example	Typical time of development (later added by Harris 1990)
Inflection *-ing*	'playing'	19–28 months
Plural *-s*	'trains'	24–53 months
Possessive *-s*	'Billy's book'	26–40 months
Definite and indefinite articles	'the/a'	28–46 months
Past tense *-ed*	'walked'	26–48 months
Third person singular inflection	'She walks'	26–46 months
Contraction of the verb *be* alongside an adjective, preposition or noun phrase	'He's happy'	29–49 months

ACTIVITY 1.2

The stages of development

1. Read the utterances below produced by eight different children at various points in their development of spoken language. Identify the stage that each speaker appears to have reached in their language development.
2. Write a brief commentary for each speaker, including comments on lexical choices and grammatical accuracy and detail.

Ruby:	Grampa
Thomas:	Her gone
Sarah:	Why Susie not going to school today.
Bobby:	Doggy
Matilda:	My no want to.
Brett:	Cat sleep
Stuart:	Leg owee fell over Mummy
Martha:	I want some sweeties please.

1.2 Further development: grammar and phonology

Having considered the broadly accepted stages of language development, areas requiring further consideration and investigation are grammatical, semantic and phonological development.

1.2.1 Grammar development: pronouns

Alongside the development of syntactical and inflectional awareness, a child must also learn to differentiate between a subject and object pronoun. The following two sentences identify a point of confusion for many children:

1 I like bananas.

2 She ran to me.

In the first sentence, 'I' is being used as a subject pronoun ('I' is the subject or main focus of the sentence). In the second sentence, the first person pronoun is not 'I' but 'me', since the position of the speaker has changed to being the object of the preposition. Young speakers will often confuse these two pronouns, perhaps saying 'me like it' or 'She comes with I'.

Bellugi (1971) suggested a child goes through three stages on the way to using pronouns accurately.

- Initially, a child will use their own name rather than a pronoun. This can also be linked to the way in which caregivers tend to use proper nouns instead of pronouns to avoid confusion (see Chapter 2 for more detail).
- The second stage will involve the child using 'I' and 'me' pronouns but these are interchangeable and do not follow the subject and object pronoun 'rules'.
- Finally, the child will gain mastery of pronoun use and use them accurately.

Interestingly, Lewis and Ramsay (2004) suggested pronoun development during a child's second year will depend on the extent to which the child has a sense of identity and can recognise the notion of self, particularly within the context of imaginative play. This suggests that cognitive development and emergence of a sense of self will impact on a child's grammatical accuracy. There is also evidence (Kirjavainen, Theakston and Lieven 2009) that when children make pronoun errors such as using "me" as a subject pronoun rather than "I" (e.g. "Me help Daddy") there is a correlation with the parent's proportional use of such forms in certain contexts. This might suggest that some aspects of grammatical development are influenced by input from the environment.

1.2.2 Grammar development: negatives

Bellugi (1966) also identified three stages to the formation of negatives. You may well be able to identify the features at each stage based on the example sentences below in the order that negatives will appear.

1 No walk now.

2 I no walking today.

3 I don't want to walk today.

Initially, the negative will be placed at the beginning of the sentence. It will then move within the sentence and finally be grammatically correct and potentially attached to auxiliary verbs or the copular verb *be* accurately.

KEY TERMS

Auxiliary verb: a verb that does not convey the main meaning within a sentence but one that supports the main verb (for example, 'I *was* going')

Copular verb: a verb (e.g. 'to be', 'to look', 'to feel', 'to seem') that joins a subject to an adjective or noun complement: for example, 'I *am* happy', 'She *seems* happy')

ACTIVITY 1.3

Interactions in early conversations

Read Text 1A, a short transcript between a mother and her daughter Susie (aged 2 years and 7 months). They are eating breakfast together.

- Make observations about Susie's language development in relation to lexis and grammar.
- Comment on the caregiver's language to support Susie's further language development.

Text 1A

Susie: all gone molky

Mum: the milk hasn't all gone darling there is a little bit left (.) why don't you drink it

Susie: no want it (6) take off [taking off her bib]

Mum: why are you taking it off (5) so what are you going to do this morning with Daddy

Susie: me go in car

1.2.3 Semantic development

The first few years of a child's life are largely concerned with making specific connections between people, places or things and the words attached to them in language. This development might be seen as a process of refinement. Children show themselves to be quite scientific in the way they approach this meaning making. They will apply a word to objects with similar features in order to 'test' whether the word is accurate in that context too. This 'testing' is described as over-extension and can be either categorical or analogical.

Categorical over-extension occurs when a child applies the same word to all items within the same category. For example, all drinks might be called 'milk' as they all feature within the same category. When a child will only use the word 'milk' to describe the drink that comes out of a particular carton and drunk from a particular cup, this is known as under-extension. The child has not recognised that the word has a wider meaning than within this very specific context. Occasionally, a mismatch will occur when the connection between the label and the object being identified is unclear. For example, a child might see a pencil and say 'shopping' (the connection between the label and activity remaining quite tenuous but perhaps linked because the caregiver always takes a pencil and shopping list to the supermarket).

Analogical over-extension would occur when a child makes connections between items and draws analogies because they have similar characteristics. For example, the following items might all be called 'blankie' because they are made of fabric: socks, coat, blanket, tea-towel and oven-gloves.

KEY TERMS

Over-extension: when a word is used more broadly to describe things other than the specific item to which the word actually applies

Under-extension: the use of a word in a limited way which does not recognise its full meaning (e.g. use of 'ball' to describe the child's own ball but not other balls)

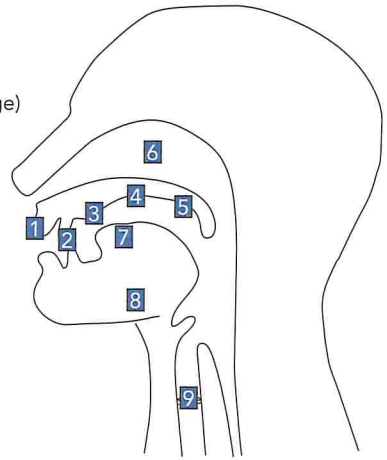
Mismatch: when a label is applied to an object without a clear link

1.2.4 Phonological development

Much of the vocal play in a child's first year will develop control of the muscles vital to producing clear and varied speech. In speech, vowel sounds require no obstruction to the airflow to create the sound. Consonants require some brief interruption to the airflow by articulators in order to create the required sound. Articulators might be the tongue and teeth (dental), lips placed together (labial), or some part of the roof of the mouth (alveolar ridge, soft or hard palate). The variety of ways in which different sounds can be created lends a complexity to the process of phonological development (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1: Places of articulation

1. lips
2. teeth
3. alveolar ridge (tooth ridge)
4. hard palate
5. soft palate (velum)
6. nasal cavity
7. tongue
8. jaw
9. vocal cords and glottis



Consonants can be categorised further according to what type of sound they create. They are defined as voiced if the creation of the sound vibrates the vocal chord and unvoiced if the vocal chord is not vibrated. Furthermore, they might be plosives, fricatives, affricatives, nasals, laterals or approximants. Some of these terms may be more evidently understandable from their label than others. For example, a nasal sound is produced when air travels through the nose to create the 'm', 'n' or 'ŋ' (ng sound).

RESEARCH QUESTION

Consonant sounds

Find out about the different consonant sounds and how these are produced. Use the following list as a starting point for your research:

- Plosive
- Fricative
- Affricative
- Nasal
- Lateral
- Approximant

You might also develop this research further to find out the order in which children are likely to acquire the capacity to produce these sounds. A starting point might be to search online for phonological development charts or articulation development charts. Alternatively, you might explore 'The development of phonology: a descriptive profile' by Pamela Grunwell (1981) or *Phonological Development: The First Two Years* by Marilyn Vihman (2013).

In children's phonological development, a number of typical non-standard features will often appear. In early speech, the importance of ease of articulation should not be underestimated. If a child can distinguish a sound easily and create the sound easily too, then there are less likely to be issues. A number of common phonological issues are outlined in Table 1.5:

Table 1.5: Common issues in phonological development

Feature	Example
Weak syllable deletion – a less prominent sound within a word is not articulated	'Nana' instead of 'banana'
Consonant deletion – either at the beginning or end of the word	'Bi' instead of 'big', 'fee' instead of 'feet' and 'Oast' instead of 'toast'
Consonant cluster reduction – when several consonants appear together, the child will just pronounce one of these to reduce the physical demand of articulating all of them	'Liptick' instead of 'lipstick' 'Pace' instead of 'space'
Assimilation – a sound within a word becomes more like a similar sound within the word	'Babbit' instead of 'rabbit'
Substitution – one sound is swapped for another that is easier to pronounce	'Wock' instead of 'rock'

1.3 Discourse development

1.3.1 Politeness and pragmatics

As a child's language develops, the child will talk more and the caregiver input is likely to decrease. Further exploration of child-directed speech is covered in Chapter 2. It is useful to consider what a 'conversation' looks like between an adult and child. Many of the normal politeness principles seem redundant when in discussion with a three-year-old! All cultures have different notions of politeness and the behaviour and expressions expected of children (for example, 'please', 'thank you' and 'how are you?'). There remains, nevertheless, great variation in relation to particular maxims for conversation according to the culture in which a child is developing.

Grice (1975) suggested four conversational maxims or rules by which conversations should be conducted. These maxims were quality, quantity, relevance and manner. Although a child may use those formulaic politeness expressions that have been taught, adherence to these maxims might be more variable. Children will often flout what is expected of them without wanting to

appear rude. They will find it more difficult to recognise when they have been dominating a conversation, for example, since enthusiasm for a given topic might reduce awareness of other participants. Similarly, the lack of response to a distant relative's questions might simply be because a child is immersed in play and not through wanting to be rude.

Leech's later politeness principle (1983) drew attention to the need for tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement and sympathy. For a child these will appear just as arbitrary as Grice's maxims. If a child finds someone's appearance or behaviour different from what they are used to, for example, it is more likely that he or she will ask a question pertaining to this rather than tactfully ignoring something as an adult might do.

1.3.2 Characteristics of adult/child interactions

John Sinclair and Malcolm Coulthard (1975) developed a model for analysing discourse that looked at secondary English classrooms to see the structure of interactions (also, Coulthard [1992]). A three-part structure was identified in classrooms, following a pattern of Initiation (when a question might be asked), Response (when that question is answered), then finally Feedback (when some response or evaluation is offered about the response). This IRF structure can usefully be applied to the examination of interactions between caregivers and children, as below:

- **Initiation:** What are you making with that playdough?
- **Response:** It is a mermaid.
- **Feedback:** A mermaid? That's great, I love its tail.

A large number of adjacency pairs with questions and answers are also prevalent in conversations between caretakers and children. These are usually led by the caregiver in order to encourage language development.

KEY TERM

Adjacency pairs: a simple structure of two turns

PRACTICE QUESTION

Analysis of discourse between caregiver and child

Read Text 1B, the transcript of a conversation between Tabitha (aged 3 years and 1 month), and her mother while looking at a set of four picture books. These books contain images with one accompanying word for each. With very young children, these books provide the opportunity to begin labelling the objects that they might see around them on a daily basis. Tabitha is very familiar with these books and enjoys anticipating the words for each picture. She has asked for the book to be read to her baby doll.

Evaluate what characteristics of discourse you notice within this transcript. You might want to use the questions below to frame your response.

1. Who is in charge of this conversation? How can you tell?
2. What type of utterance does the mother use (e.g. declaratives, imperatives, interrogatives)? Are there any patterns in the sentence type used?
3. What comment can you make about the complexity of the sentences used by both participants?
4. How is the child's understanding developed by the mother's input into the discourse?
5. How does this discourse suggest that early conversations are often learning opportunities for the child?
6. How does the child imitate the caregiver's role in the way that she talks to her dolly? What does this tell us about the child's understanding of discourse?

Text 1B

T: baby loved that she wants another one.

H: go on then, go and choose another story (27) ((*Tabitha leaves the room to find another book and then returns*))

T: she really wants all of these books (2) first can we have this one

H: what's this one about

T: counting

H: ok ooh it's about words it says boy

T: girl

H: and what's that [pointing to the image on the next page]

T: house

H: yeah (1) does that look like your house

T: it looks like mine

H: does it (1) ball

T: ball (.) sun

H: sun

T: flower (0.5) butterfly

H: yeah that's a pretty butterfly isn't it

T: yeah car (2) what's that

H: that's a fire engine

T: fire engine

H: what's that used for (2)

T: rescuing people

H: it is isn't it

T: apple bird

H: very good do you want to show your baby the bird

T: here you go baby look at that pretty bird she likes it

H: does your baby know what noise a bird makes

T: tweet tweet she says that

Wider reading

You can find out more about the topics in this chapter by reading the following:

Aitchison, J. (1997) *The Language Web: The Power and Problem of Words – The 1996 BBC Reith Lectures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Crystal, D. (2007) *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning and Languages Live or Die*. London: Penguin.

MacRoy-Higgins, M. and Kolker, C. (2017) *Time to Talk: What you Need to Know about Your Child's Speech and Language Development*. USA: American Management Association.

Morris, D. (2008) *Baby: The Amazing Story of the First Two years of Life*. London: Hamlyn.

Rowland, C. (2014) *Understanding Child Language Acquisition*. Abingdon: Routledge.