Stages of Language Development: First Words, Multiple Word Utterances, Grammatical Morphemes

First Words

Around age one, children begin to produce their first words. These, of course, often do not sound much like adult words, but they bear some phonetic resemblance to them and, more important, they are sounds consistently produced in association with a particular meaning. First words often name things in the child’s immediate environment, such as caregivers, pets, articles of clothing, and toys, or are terms related to social interaction, such as hi and bye-bye. The meanings of first words may be overextended to other objects as well, often similar in shape: [ba] for ball, apple, sun, moon, for example. One child used [bu] for both balloons and lollipops (a round shape with a vertical line extending from its bottom). Children’s first words typically employ the same consonants children favor in the late stages of babbling: stops [p, t, k, b, d, g], nasals [m, n], and glides [y, w], and often use consonant-vowel syllable structure. The most preferred first vowel is a low back [a]. If you think about some of the child’s names for caregivers, you will see how these preferences get played out in child speech: mama, dada, papa, nana all fit children’s phonetic preferences. It has been observed, furthermore, that although children do not pronounce words the way adults do, they have certain predictable strategies for approaching adult pronunciation (Stoel-Gammon & Menn 1997, pp. 93–97). One child might make all her initial stops voiced and pronounce cat as [gæt], for example.

Children's one-word utterances have been referred to as holophrastic, because they seem to have the same intents as longer utterances produced by adults. The one word [ba] uttered in this stage of development might mean “Give me my bottle, I see my bottle, I dropped my bottle,” and so forth, and it is left up to others to figure out the intended meaning in context. More will be said about conversational intent later in the chapter.

Multiple Word Utterances: The Idea of Syntax

The next milestone in a child’s acquisition of language is the combination of more than one word per utterance. This stage marks the realization that words can combine in systematic ways to express meaning that they cannot express in isolation. Children typically begin this stage by juxtaposing two words with equal intonation on both and a pause between them, as if each were a word being pronounced in isolation. Mommy . . . Sit. Following that, children combine words into what appear to be rudimentary sentences, with no pauses between the words and falling intonation at the end. Some examples are given in Tager-Flusberg, (1997, p. 170): more car, more read, no pee, bye-bye Papa, there potty, Mommy stair. You will notice that these utterances tend to be dominated by content words, often nouns, adjectives, and verbs. For this reason, these forerunners of adult sentences have been labeled telegraphic, because they exhibit the same economy of expression that telegrams did when they served as a form of urgent and expensive communication. Most function words, such as prepositions and helping verbs, are missing from children’s initial two-word utterances, but some of the more salient ones do occur, such as more, no, and off.

Two-word utterances show consistent patterns and are not merely random combinations of words. Some of the consistency has been described according to the meanings children express in the two-word utterance stage. They talk about actions, agents (doers of actions), patients (receivers of actions), locations, and possession, and they point out and describe things. Furthermore, two-word utterances exhibit consistent word order, which has been described in terms of pivot and open words. Pivot words appear consistently at the beginnings or the ends of utterances, while other words plug
into the vacant slot. More, for example, is a common pivot. Some examples given in Goodluck (1991, p. 76) are: more car, more cereal, more fish, more walk. Other, all, no, and all gone are other initial pivots. Off can be a final-position pivot, as in boot off, light off, pants off, water off. The words that occur with pivots are termed open words.

There is no recognizable stage that marks the transition from two-word to multiple-word utterances. Once children get the idea of syntax, they may combine more than two words at a time, as in Goodluck's examples: clock on there, kitty down there, other cover down there, up on there some more (1991, p. 76). Children's syntactic growth during this period is measured by the mean length of utterance (MLU), calculated according to the average number of morphemes per utterance. Although children may develop at very different rates, when their utterances approach a MLU of about 2.0, they begin to add the grammatical “glue” that holds together adult sentences, such as tense and number markers, possessive markers, helping verbs, and certain prepositions. This marks the transition to the next stage of development, what we might term the grammatical morpheme stage.

Grammatical Morphemes: Fleshing Out the Telegram

Although the particulars of this stage will, of course, vary from one language to another, evidence from children learning English suggests that the grammatical morphemes of a language are learned in a fixed order. Brown (1973) studied the acquisition of fourteen grammatical morphemes in English and found, for example, that children learned the -ing of the present progressive (jumping) before they learned the plural of nouns; they learned plurals and possessives of nouns before they learned the articles (the, a); and they learned articles before they learned the regular past tense of verbs. Helping verbs were far down the list. He also found that children learned some irregular past tense forms, like broke and went, before they learned the regular ones.

It is important to understand what children are actually learning when they begin to produce grammatical morphemes. Are they merely adding more vocabulary to their stock of words, cookies alongside of cookie? The answer to this question emerges when we look at children's overregularizations. That is, children will use regular morphology in places where the adult language requires irregular morphology. We are all familiar with children's foots, comed, holded, and mouses, for example. It is unlikely that children hear these overregularized forms spoken by the adults around them; rather, they apply a rule that they have gleaned from the language they hear long before they learn that certain words are irregular in their morphology.

The fact that children apply morphological rules productively can be verified by a test devised by Jean Berko (1958), known as the wug test. In this type of experiment, children are shown pictures that are described using nonsense words, such as the noun wug. A child might be shown a picture of one of these and then be asked to describe a picture with two. If the child says they are two wugs, then we know he/she has learned the rule for making plurals, since no adult has ever said wugs to the child before. Similarly, the rule for forming the past tense of verbs might be tested by showing a picture of a man blicking and then asking what the man did yesterday. If the child says he blicked, we know a rule is being applied.

These rules are learned by children, becoming part of their internalized grammars of their language, but the rules are not taught to them. Adults know the rules, of course, or they would not be able to produce the correct morphology. But their knowledge is not conscious. And even if you do know the rules in some conscious way (as you now do), you would not be able to teach them to a preschooler. Think, for example, about how you might teach the distribution of the allomorphs of the plural or the past tense using vocabulary that a preschooler would understand.