UNIT 14 LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT: FROM WORDS TO SENTENCES

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14.1 INTRODUCTION

In your interaction with children you would have seen that once they begin to utter words, the growth in vocabulary is rapid. Gradually, they learn to put words together into grammatically correct sentences. The language of the child develops very fast. Learning to speak seems to happen in the course of things. We delight and take pride in the child's accomplishments, but rarely do we think how the child manages this. It does not seem that we have to make an effort to teach language to the child. One of the things we cannot remember about our early childhood is how we ourselves learned to use language.

Linguists have determined the sequence of language development by recording children's speech in natural settings and analysing their verbal output. They have focused on how the child's language gradually acquires the characteristics of adult speech, how the child attributes meaning to words, what the reasons are for differences in the rate of language development and why children differ in the style they speak. Studies carried out in many countries with children speaking different languages have shown that the stages in the development of language are universal, regardless of the language being spoken or the socio-economic status and the cultural background of children. In this Unit we will read about the development of language during the years of toddlerhood. While we have specified the average age when most children reach a particular stage of language development, you know that there are wide individual differences in this aspect, as in most others.

A question may come up at this point. Do children acquiring different languages go through the same stages of language acquisition? The early stages of language acquisition are universal and apply, by and large, to all languages. However, once children start adding grammatical forms to their speech, the sequence of development varies from one language to another, depending upon the rules of its grammar. This point will become clear as you read further. The examples that we have described in this Unit are from the English language.

Objectives

After studying this Unit, you should be able to

- describe how toddlers begin to use words to convey meaning and to communicate
- explain how toddlers begin to form two-word sentences and describe the characteristics of these sentences
- understand how the language of the toddler acquires a grammatical structure
- describe how children use language, i.e. state the functions of children's speech
- identify some common 'mistakes' that children make while learning language
- know that there are individual differences in acquiring language.
14.2 ADDING WORDS

In the last Block we traced the development of language till the stage when the infant utters the first word. This usually happens around the first birthday. After the infant speaks the first word, she adds a few more words in the next three to four months. After this period, the increase in vocabulary is rapid and the toddler adds a new word every few days. By the second year, most toddlers know about 300 words and by the third year about 900 words. This does not mean that all of these are spoken. As is true at all stages of language development, the toddler understands more words than she is able to speak. While children generally begin using words after the first birthday, some may take a little longer to speak.

As you have read in Unit 9, children usually first talk about familiar things. Their first words name those people and objects that are most important to them. Usually, toddlers use "Mama", "Papa" and "Milk" ("Dudu" or "Pal" or "Mum Mum") first. Since toddlers are attracted to movement and change, many of the first words that they acquire refer to things that move, their own actions and the things that they can manipulate. Therefore, words like ball, doll, bottle, dog, cow, boat, cycle, car and the names of their toys, may occur frequently in their speech. Objects that are simply there, like tables, windows and beds are seldom named. The toddler may understand the words table, beds, trees and house but because she cannot do anything much with these objects, she does not find them interesting enough to use in her speech yet.

Most toddlers begin by using nouns, i.e., words that name objects and people, as their first words. On the other hand, some toddlers when beginning to speak, first acquire those words that are used in social interactions and inter-personal relations. These words convey a demand or a need or a greeting or express feelings. Examples of such words are "want" ("चाहिए"), "please", "go away" ("बिना चलिए"), "do it", "no" ("बहुत हर्सते"), "yes" ("हाँ"), and "stop it". In other words, the first words these toddlers learn are verbs and other non-noun words used to express feelings and regulate social interactions. Thus, there are individual differences even in the kinds of words toddlers acquire first.

You will remember from your study of the last Block that these single words function as sentences—through one word toddlers name objects, make requests and express emotional states like fear, anger or surprise. The meaning of these one-word utterances is usually understood by the mother. She knows the setting in which the word was spoken and is responsive to the emotional tone of the child’s speech.

When the toddler learns words, she may not be able to pronounce some of them correctly as some consonants are difficult for her to produce. So she makes substitutions or deletions for the sounds she cannot say. ‘Ball’ may be pronounced “baw” because ‘l’ is difficult to say at this stage and the toddler usually substitutes it with ‘W’. ‘Stop’ becomes “top” and ‘banana’ gets shortened to “nana”.

Often children make-up words. One of the ways they do so is by imitating the sound associated with an object and use it as a word. In fact, adults talking to children often coin such words and use them. For example "rhum-rhum" for bus, “baa” for goats and “bhow” for the dog.

14.3 THE FIRST SENTENCES

The next step in language learning is combining words into sentences. The first ‘sentences’ appear between 18 and 24 months of age. Toddlers form these ‘sentences’ by combining two words. Some examples of these two-word sentences are “see cat”, “where Baba”, “more milk”, “bus go”, “give me”. If you analyse these utterances you would see that the characteristic of these short and simple early sentences is that the toddler uses only the essential words to convey her meaning. Plurals, tenses like ‘ing’ and ‘ed’ to indicate past or present, articles, pronouns, conjunctions and prepositions are not used. Thus to convey the meaning: “I am playing with the car”, the toddler would probably say: “play car” or “I play car”, thus omitting the preposition (with) and article (the). If you ask a two-year-old to repeat the sentence: “I am drinking milk”, she is most
likely to respond by saying: “Drink milk”. The two-year-old’s language sounds like what we say when we send a telegram. We keep only the critical/important words—the noun, the verb and the adjective—and omit the rest. The same is true of the toddler’s two-word utterances and so the toddler’s speech at this stage is also referred to as telegraphic speech.

Toddlers across all cultures and languages speak in such two-word sentences. This telegraphic speech is not a random association of words. Toddlers create these two-word sentences according to some rules. They focus on certain words and put them together in a particular order. Across all languages it has been found that these early two-word sentences primarily include those words that are usually emphasized in the speech of adults using that language. If you think about speech, you would find that it is the nouns, verbs and adjectives that are stressed when you speak and not prepositions or conjunctions.

If you look at the content (meaning) of the toddler’s two-word utterances carefully, you would see that these sentences express many relationship similar to the ones we use in our speech. For example, when the toddler says: “Mommy bag” to convey the meaning that: ‘This is Mommy’s bag’, she is describing a relationship between the possessor (Mommy) and the possessed object (bag). Another sentence: “Neena milk”, conveys the meaning: ‘Neena is drinking milk’, which conveys the relationship between Neena (the agent) and milk (the object). The toddler also begins to use adjectives to describe the qualities of objects so that you hear ‘sentences’ such as “red car”, “hot water”, “big tree”. She also varies her tone and rhythm while speaking. This makes her speech expressive and easier for others to understand. One cannot mistake the child’s requests and refusals as she says “more tea”, “want toy” and “no eat”. A rising inflection at the end of a sentence conveys a question: “Didi go?”, “Want book?” At this age questions about names of people and objects and their location are frequent—“Where papa go?”, “What that?” Thus in these two-word utterances we can see the origins of the rules of grammar:

Samples of speech taken from toddlers speaking widely different languages show that toddlers across cultures and across languages express such grammatical relationships in their two-word forms. The early language of children has many common features no matter what language they speak.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

Answer the following questions briefly in the space provided below.

1) What are the characteristics of the first words that toddlers acquire?

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2) Why are the ‘two-word sentences’ called telegraphic speech?

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3) Listen to a toddler between 18 and 24 months of age as she speaks to a person. You can observe a toddler speaking any language. Write down some of the words and the ‘sentences’ she speaks. What are the meanings that the toddler expresses through them? Does she ask questions, make requests, use adjectives, convey a relationship between subject and object?
To do this question, you may talk to a toddler yourself or if you have had a conversation with a toddler recently, you may write from your memory what the child spoke.

14.4 ACQUIRING GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURE

In the next stage of language acquisition the toddler starts to include more aspects of adult speech. Within the two and three year period, most toddlers start to add the easier grammatical forms to their speech. Their language now becomes easier for us to understand since plurals, tenses and articles (i.e., grammatical forms) begin to be used. The sentences become longer and more complex. This change is gradual.

Within a particular language there is a definite sequence in which children add grammatical forms. This sequence will vary from one language to another. In the following text, we have described the sequence in the acquisition of the English language. In English the earliest form to appear in toddlers’ sentences is the present progressive “ing” form of the verb, so that they form sentences like “you eating”, “doggie running”. The toddler acquires the present tense first and uses it the most. Towards the end of toddlerhood she begins to use the past and the future tense. However, her usage of the past and the future tenses is not consistent — she uses them in some cases and not in others. The child’s skill in using the tenses appropriately improves during the preschool years.

Between two and three years of age, toddlers are able to use a few prepositions like ‘in’, ‘on’ and ‘under’ so that you have sentences like: “I sit on chair”, and “Toy in box”. Using these prepositions toddlers are able to talk about the location of objects. (i.e. where a particular object is) Then come plurals formed by adding ‘s’ to nouns such as cats and books. By the second birthday the toddler begins to use personal pronouns like ‘I’, ‘me’, ‘you’, and sometimes ‘mine’. The use of these pronouns shows that the toddler sees herself as separate from others — she differentiates between herself and other people. She uses these pronouns to indicate her possession of some object and to refer to her actions, such as “Me eat”, “Me do myself”. However, the toddler does not always use these pronouns in grammatically correct ways. The usage of pronouns improves during the preschool period. Towards the third birthday, the toddler begins to use the words ‘this’ and ‘that’ appropriately as in “This book” and “That book”.

The toddlers’ sentences become longer over the two to three year period. She can now use as many as four words in a sentence in the sequence of ‘subject-verb-object-location’. We said earlier that the toddler does not simply string together words in a random manner. She forms sentences according to the rules as she has understood them. Let us understand this once again by seeing the development of sentences. At the two-word stage the toddler forms a sentence by combining a verb and an object. She says, for example, “Hit ball”. Then she adds the agent (the subject) and says: “Radha hit ball” or “I hit ball” as the case may be. This sentence is more like adult speech and states who performed the action, what the action was and on what the action was done. In the next stage when she adds the location of the object to her sentence you will hear sentences like: “Radha put book chair”. Then as prepositions and tense endings are added, the sentences begin to resemble adult speech more and more. Some examples of sentences that children can make by the end of toddlerhood are: “I see you”, “I am drinking milk”, “Maia is in school”, “This a cycle”.

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The next step is forming complex sentences. There is a great variation in the age at which children make such sentences, with a few children forming these sentences before they are three years old. Examples of such complex sentences are: "I see you sit down", "I hope I don’t hurt it", "When I get big, I can drive a bus." Some toddlers start using 'and' and 'but' to join two simple sentences and form sentences such as: "You take some and I take some." Such sentences show that the child is developing an awareness that events are sometimes related to one another. In other words, she is understanding cause and effect relationships. Thus you can see how the child’s use of language reflects the level of her cognitive development. The child’s speech acts as a mirror for her thinking. The use of 'because', 'so', 'before' and 'after' comes later—during the preschool years.

It is important to bear in mind that the order of acquisition of grammatical forms that has just been described applies only to the English language. For other languages the order of acquisition would vary, depending upon the rules of its grammar.

If a child has acquired a grammatical form, it does not mean that she will use it consistently. For example, having learnt the use of plurals, she may not use them each time. The child is still learning its usage and, therefore, uses it in some instances and not in others. The child’s use of language improves over the preschool years.

14.5 LANGUAGE LEARNING: CHILDREN’S ‘MISTAKES’

Toddlers often use a single word to refer to different objects in which they note some commonality. One child used the word "kitty" to refer to cats, dogs and sheep. This toddler had associated the word "kitty" with ‘furriness’ and so all furry animals were labelled ‘kitty’ by her. This ‘error’ in language learning is called overgeneralization. Here are some more examples of overgeneralization. One child used the word “moo” for moon originally and later applied it to cakes, round shapes in books, letter ‘O’ and the white round street light. Another used the word “ball” for ball, grapes, eggs, apples and any other round object. When toddlers overgeneralize, it is not that they cannot discriminate between different objects visually. They can, but they lack the vocabulary to express them separately. As they discover the names for objects, they will use them appropriately.

All children overgeneralize. But the over-generalizations which a particular child uses are unique. It is not as if all children will use the word “ball” for grapes and apples. The child in the above example had generalized the meaning of “ball” to round and, therefore, called all round objects “ball”. But for another child the salient characteristic of the ball may be that it bounces, and so she may not overgeneralize the word “ball” to grapes and apples, as these do not bounce. Thus each child’s errors appear to follow distinct rules.

Children also overgeneralize while using verbs. When, for example, the toddler learns that past tense can be formed by adding ‘ed’ such as in ‘played’, she overgeneralizes this rule and applies it to other verbs as well. So she says “falled”, “flied”, “eated”, and you hear sentences like: "My dolly falled", “I runned to my uncle”. Such errors reflect the level of the child’s language development. They tell us that the child has learnt a rule—that past tense can be created by adding ‘ed’. Now she has to learn that not all past tenses are created in this way. Similarly, once the child learns that plurals can be formed by adding ‘s’, she confidently says “toys”, “shoes” and “cats”, but she also incorrectly says “foots”, “sheeps” and “hairs”.

Children also underextend a word, i.e., they use a word to refer to one particular object. One child used the word “cup” to refer to her own cup only. Another used the word “doggie” only for the family pet. These are cases of underextension.

These mistakes of overgeneralization and underextension appear between two and five years of age and gradually disappear after that. Children speaking different languages would make different kinds of mistakes. If you were to listen to toddlers’ speech you would find many examples of these. Have you ever noticed children making these
mistakes or others of a similar nature? It would be interesting for you to note these down. Note down such mistakes in whatever language the children speak.

The variation in toddlers' speech shows that from the earliest words their language is creative. They are not just copying sentences they have heard, but are creating new ones according to the rules of grammar as they have understood them.

14.6 HOW CHILDREN USE LANGUAGE:
FUNCTIONS OF LANGUAGE

Once the child begins to speak, she discovers that language has many uses. Using language she can express her needs. She makes requests and demands—"More water", "Want doll", "Give me". If she does not want to do something, she makes it clear in no uncertain terms—"No eat!", "Not this frock". She also uses speech to direct the attention of others to herself and influence their behaviour. While playing with his grandmother, Oliver was not satisfied with the way his grandmother was making a toy train and said: "No!.. Put this on top!".

The child uses speech to give information—"See cat", "Book there", "Didi in market"; to express the quality of an object or person—"Big book", "This red car", "Nice prett girl"; to express feelings and give judgements—"Me like banna". "I like you", "I not cry next time". A rising inflection at the end of a sentence conveys a question—"Where papa go?", "What that?". 'Why' questions are very common at this age. In fact, one of the major purpose that language serves in the early years is that it enables the child to ask questions.

When children learn to speak, they find out that their speech behaviours are rewarded with adult attention. They often ask "why" questions to sustain conversation, as Bindu did in the following anecdote.

Bindu, while going towards the market with her mother, points towards the bus and says: "Mama bus?"

Mother—"Yes, that is a bus. People are sitting in the bus."

Bindu—"Why people sit?"

Mother—"People sit because they have to go somewhere."

Bindu—"Why?"

Mother—"Why do they have to go?..... They have to go to their school, their office, their homes."

Bindu—"Why?"

Mother—"Papa goes to office, doesn't he? Didi goes to school. So other people also have to go to work."

Bindu—"Why papa go to office?"

Bindu's mother, who now wanted to buy fruits distracted her attention thus: "We will ask Papa today why he goes to office, O.K.?... Bindu! Look apples. We will buy some."

Besides using speech to communicate with others, the child also uses speech to direct her own actions. The toddler while playing with her doll says: "Dolly eat!... sleep". The preschooler's speech during a similar play will be more extensive. She may say: "Dolly, go to sleep... Get up! It is morning..... Now we will play." These conversations which
The child carries on with herself help to sharpen her understanding of ideas and make the relationship between events more clear. As the toddler examines two balls of different sizes and says to herself: “This ball big”, it helps her to form an idea of size.

The child uses speech to direct her actions in many other situations. You may have come across a child carrying some mud in her/his hands. You can make out that she wants to eat it, but she stops herself by saying: “No, not eat. Bad. No!” She has been told not to eat mud on many occasions earlier and now, by speaking out aloud, she is stopping herself from doing it. In the same way Priti, who was about to go down the stairs when she had been told not to, stops herself by saying: “No, no. No stairs. Fall.” In both these cases the children are trying to control their actions by talking to themselves. The younger child talks out aloud. As she grows older, this guidance of her own actions through speech still goes on, but now it happens silently. This speech to oneself, used to guide one’s actions, is called private speech. We adults also often converse with ourselves silently to guide our actions.

Toddlers have begun to grasp the humour in a situation as is reflected in the following example.

Abdul, who is a year-and-a-half, speaks in a mixture of babbling and some words. His language usually sounds like: “Zoomsmshoopa....” and similar sounding ‘words’. These ‘words’ have the intonation of adult speech. While Abdul was playing with his elder sister one day, the latter began imitating him. Abdul, very surprised at such words from his sister, looked at her in amazement for some time. Then he laughed out aloud and spoke his ‘word’ again waiting for his sister to imitate him, thoroughly enjoying himself as she did. This become a game and they continued for sometime.

Through the preschool and middle childhood years, as the child’s language develops, she uses language more effectively for an increasing variety of purposes. We will continue this discussion on functions of language in the next Block.

14.7 VARIATIONS IN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

You know that there are individual differences among children in language development. The following example brings this out clearly.

As you have read, most two-year-olds speak in two-word sentences. However, Shikhar, who was two years old, did not speak much. He had a vocabulary of four words. These were: “mama”, “Papa”, “kaj” to signify car and “bhow” for dog. Beyond this he had to be cajoled into saying something, and even then he spoke not more than a word at a time. He understood all that was said to him and communicated with his parents using gestures and signs. Once when he wanted to eat an orange, he attracted his aunt’s attention by calling out to her and then pointed towards the orange he wanted to eat. His aunt looked at him and said: “You want to eat the orange?” Shikhar nodded to say yes. His aunt said: “I won’t give you the orange till you ask for it.” Shikhar smiled and he seemed to indicate: “I know the word ‘orange’ but I won’t say it.” His aunt persisted and finally Shikhar said: “Ong”. One day when a cat came into the house, he communicated this to his mother by putting his hands on his cheeks and spreading out his fingers to indicate the cat’s whiskers and said: “Meeow”. Unlike most two-year-olds, who seem to talk incessantly, Shikhar seemed to prefer to be quieter. However, by the time Shikhar was three years old, his vocabulary and speech was like that of any other three-year-old child.

There is another instance of a child who was exposed to three languages, but spoke not a word for the first four years. Then, to the amazement of everyone around, he spoke in complete sentences all of a sudden. Once he started speaking, he picked up all three languages.

You are aware that the acquisition of language is sensitive to the experiences the child has. This is clearly evident when we trace Babloo’s language development.

Babloo, at two-and-a-half years of age, had started conversing in two-word sentences when his cousin—a girl around four years of age—came to stay with them. She was deaf and mute, and communicated using gestures. Interacting with her, Babloo also gradually started using gestures and stopped speaking. His cousin stayed at their house for about two months and during this period Babloo did not use speech much. However, once she left, Babloo gradually came back to his usual verbal communication.
These examples bring out the diversity in toddlers' language development. Toddlers will differ in the number of words they know and the type of sentences they speak. Even children living in the same family differ in their vocabulary, language styles and the ages at which they reach the milestones of language development. But obviously they are learning to speak and, much later, their speech will acquire the complexity of adult speech.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

1) Read the following statements carefully and indicate in the brackets whether they are 'correct' or 'incorrect'.

a) Children add grammatical forms to their speech in a definite sequence which varies from one language to the other. ( )

b) Overgeneralization means using one word to refer to different objects. ( )

c) Toddlers do not make errors of overgeneralization or under extension. ( )

d) Children's speech is creative and rule-governed. ( )

e) Children can talk about the future events before they can talk about the present ones. ( )

f) Toddlers' language reflects that they understand cause and effect relationships. ( )

1) In the space provided below, briefly write about how language helps the toddler. In other words, for what purposes does she use language?

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14.8 SUMMING UP

In this Unit you have read how the toddler's language develops, both in vocabulary and grammatical complexity. Studies of children from different language communities across the world have shown that the stages in acquisition of language are fairly universal, no matter what the socio-economic-status and the cultural background of the children may be. But there are differences in the ages at which each child reaches a particular stage of language development.

The first words that the toddler learns refer to the salient individuals and to objects in her environment that are relevant for her. Many first words also refer to the toddler's own actions and the things she can act upon. By and large, the first words in the toddler's vocabulary are nouns and only a few of the words are verbs. But there are individual differences among toddlers in the kind of first words they speak. Some toddlers learn those words that are used in social interactions, i.e. verbs and other non-noun words, rather than nouns.

Between 18 and 24 months of age, toddlers begin to combine words into two-word sentences. This speech is also referred to as telegraphic speech. These sentences seem to follow a certain set of rules and convey a specific meaning.

In the next stage of language acquisition, toddlers begin to use grammatical forms in their sentences. Within a particular language, children add these grammatical forms in their speech in a certain sequence. In the course of learning language, children frequently
make 'mistakes' of overgeneralization and underextension which indicate the rules of language that they have learnt. Over the years of toddlerhood and preschool years, the child's language continues to grow and becomes complex.

14.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

1) Toddlers' first words refer to the salient individuals and objects in their surroundings. Toddlers refer to things they can act upon and those that move. The first words also include some verbs. By and large, the early words are likely to be nouns though some children first learn those words that are used in social interactions.

2) The two-word sentences are short and simple and the toddler uses only the essential words, i.e. the nouns verbs and adjectives, to convey her meaning. This speech sounds like what we say when we write a telegram.

3) You will find that, by and large, the milestones of language development of this child will be similar to those described for the English language in the text. Of course, the specific usage of words will be different.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

1) a) correct
b) correct
c) incorrect. Toddlers make errors of overgeneralization and underextension
d) correct
e) incorrect. Children use the present tense (and, therefore, can talk about present events,) before the future tense.
f) correct

2) The toddler uses language to
   — express her needs
   — direct the behaviour of others
   — give information
   — express a quality of an object or a person
   — express feelings
   — give judgement
   — direct her own actions
   — ask questions