Unit 14

Language Development: From Words to Sentences

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Adding Words

- 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 words are spoken. The toddler understands more words than she is able to speak.
Children Communicating Through Words

- Children usually first talk about familiar things. Their first words name those people and objects that are more important to them. They begin by using nouns.
- 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.
- Objects that are simply there like tables, windows and beds are seldom named. The toddlers do understand these words but do not use them in their speech yet.
Some toddlers when beginning to speak, first acquire those words that convey a demand like “give”, or a need like “please” or express feelings “go away”, “do it” “no” and “yes”. These are verbs or other non-noun words used to express feelings and regulate social interactions.

These single words function as sentences. When the child says the word for e.g. “mummy” and lifts up his/her hands, the mother understands that the child wants to be picked up. Therefore, the single word has functioned as a sentence “Mummy, pick me up”. Hence, the caretaker understands the meaning of these single words in terms of the context in which these words are spoken.
Common Mistakes of Children While Acquiring a Language

- When the toddler learns words, s/he may not be able to pronounce some of them correctly as some consonants are difficult for her to produce. So, s/he makes substitution or deletions for the sounds s/he cannot say, “ball” may be pronounced “baw” because “l” is difficult to say at this stage and the toddler usually substitutes it with “w”. Similarly, “banana” may get shortened to “nana”.

- Often children make up words. They may imitate the sound associated with an object and use it as a word. In fact, adults coin such words while talking to them. For e.g., “bhow” for dogs and “rhum-rhum” for bus.
The next step in language learning is combining words into sentences. The first ‘sentence’ appear between 18 and 24 months of age. Toddlers form these ‘sentences’ by combining two words. Some examples of these two-word sentences are “give water”, “bus go”, “come mummy”, “where baba”, “play car”, “drink milk”.

In these short and simple early sentences, toddlers use only the essential words to convey her meaning- the noun, the verb and the adjective and omit the rest. It is like what we say when we send a telegraph, hence, referred to as “telegraphic speech”.

Telegraphic Speech
Characteristics of Children’s Telegraphic Speech Across Cultures

- Toddlers across the cultures and languages speak in such two-word sentences.
- The early language of children has many common features no matter what language they speak.
- Toddlers across cultures and across languages express same grammatical relationships in their two-word forms.
How Children’s Telegraphic Speech Acquires Grammatical Structure:

- This telegraphic speech is not a random association of the 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. Nouns, verbs and adjectives are stressed when adults speak and not prepositions and conjunctions.
- In these two word sentences, we can see the origins of the rules of the grammar.
Functions of Two Word Sentences

- These two word sentences express many relationships similar to ones we use in our speech.
- Relationship between possessor and the possessed object: “Mummy bag”
- Relationship between agent and an object: “Neena milk”.
- The toddler also begin to use adjectives to describe the qualities of objects so that you hear sentences like “red car”, “hot water”, “big tree”.
The toddler also varies his/her tone and rhythm while speaking.
This makes her speech expressive and easier to understand.
One cannot mistake the child’s requests and refusals as s/he says “more milk”, “want toy”, and “no eat”.
A rising tone at the end of the sentence indicates a question: “Daddy office?, “Want toy?”.
At this age questions about names of people and objects and their location are frequent- “Where mummy go?”, “Where toy?” etc.
Thank You