

*Talking and
Learning
with Young
Children*

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CHAPTER 1

HOW AND WHY DO CHILDREN LEARN TO TALK?

This chapter will

- Give a brief overview of the main theories on how and why children develop language
- Introduce a perspective that places interaction and conversation between children and adults at the heart of communication, language development and learning in early years

Example 1.1 Amy and the combine harvester

Amy was seven years old when she decided that she was going to learn French, and now has a degree in French Language and Literature. It all began while she was on holiday in France with her parents and four-year-old brother, Ben. The very first French word she wanted to learn was 'moissonneuse-batteuse' (combine harvester). This was the

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largest thing she could see at the time, as she looked out from the garden of her hotel to the combine harvester in the field across the road.

At bedtime, Amy and her Mum were having a chat. Amy looked worried.

Amy: I'm never going to learn French.

Mum: Why not?

Amy: 'cos I can't remember how to say the word for that big tractor thing! It's so hard to learn one word ... so how can I learn lots and lots?

Mum: There is an easier way. You know that song you learned in nursery, 'Frère Jacques'? Let's sing it.

Frère Jacques, frère Jacques/Dormez-vous? Dormez-vous?

Well 'dormir' means 'to sleep' and 'dormez-vous' means 'Are you sleeping?' 'Bien' means 'good' or 'well'. So if I tuck you in, give you a kiss and say, 'Dormes bien ma chérie', What do I mean?

Amy: Sleep well, my cherry?

Mum: It means 'Sleep well, my darling'. (Tucks her in and gives her a kiss.) Dormes bien, ma chérie.

Amy: And can Ben learn to speak French, too?

Mum: Yes, of course. And we can start tomorrow by telling him 'The Three Bears' in French.

Amy: And ...

Mum: No more questions. Dormes bien, ma chérie.

Amy: Dorma ben, ma cherry.

It's not unusual that Amy and her mother should be thinking about how to learn language. Anyone learning a second language will use the knowledge that they have already gained from developing their first language, whether they are consciously aware of that knowledge or not. This example highlights the key perspectives in a debate that has involved philosophers, psychologists, linguists and educators for centuries, as they seek to answer two questions: 'How do children learn to talk?' and 'How does a baby with no verbal language at birth come to possess an almost

complete set of communication and language skills by their fourth birthday?’

Amy assumes that if she starts by learning, one at a time, the names of the biggest objects she can find, and keeps repeating their names until she can pronounce them correctly, then she will learn, in double-quick time, all there is to know about French. She imagines her mind as an empty box that has no French in it, just waiting for her to fill it up with key vocabulary. Amy’s conceptualisation of language learning is not as naive as it may seem: repetition is an important part of developing language, and when children begin using words, at around 12 months of age, they do generally use one word at a time. But children will not get very far if they only imitate what is said to them, or merely repeat words to themselves. Amy has advantages that will support her learning, including a drive to learn and a good role model who understands the language and knows how to teach it. However, one suspects that unless Mum steps in and makes the whole process rewarding, through praise and encouragement, then Amy will give up and concentrate on her other holiday projects, like how to do ‘cat’s cradle’ or perfecting the art of using a skipping rope.

Amy’s mother has absolutely the right approach to language teaching:

- Let’s find some words that we can use meaningfully as part of daily life, e.g. ‘sleep’
- Let’s say them as part of a pleasant experience, e.g. as part of our cosy bedtime routine
- Let’s learn a song that links words to ideas. If the song has a catchy tune and some actions, then it will be easy to remember and the key words will be repeated many times
- Let’s share a simple story, in French, that the children already know, so that they can link new words to familiar ideas

So we have the feeling that French is going to make sense for Amy, and that the process of learning will be fun and, most importantly, will take place as part of a loving relationship. As a teacher of language, it is likely that Amy’s Mum will have thought carefully about how she will introduce French to her children; i.e., that the children can be helped to develop language if the process is meaningful and fun and based around activities and ideas that are relevant for the children’s intellectual levels. Amy’s seven years of experience in becoming a successful communicator and talker in English have given her an intuitive ‘feel’ for how language works, as well as the ability to talk about it. This knowledge will provide her with strong foundations for learning French. What is remarkable is the fact that Amy absorbed all of this knowledge of English without anyone sitting down with the express purpose of teaching her how to talk. So how can we explain very young children’s extraordinarily rapid growth in knowledge and skills?

The role of imitation and rewards

From the 1950s, learning theory has proposed that language, like all other aspects of children's learning, is largely the product of imitation and reward. The theory put forward by *behaviourists* suggests that, for example, babies hear a variety of common speech sounds around them and when they accidentally use some of these sounds, parents respond with delight and praise, which rewards the child and spurs him on to repeat the behaviour (Skinner, 1957). The child then starts to regularly repeat these sounds because they are rewarded, or 'reinforced', for doing so. The process of giving rewards for behaviour is known as 'extrinsic reinforcement'. As well as being rewarded by praise from adults, children also receive internal rewards or 'intrinsic reinforcement', from feelings of achievement and wellbeing from communicating successfully. Vocabulary, speech sounds and grammar are introduced in the same way, so that children eventually learn to use the language, sound system, grammar and *accent* that their parents use.

Example 1.2 Tanaz, Fouad and the Scottish, Iranian and Geordie accents

Tanaz (4;7) and her brother Fouad (3;2) live in Newcastle, with their Scottish mother and Iranian father. They occasionally visit Scotland but have never been to Iran. Both children are being brought up as English- and Farsi-speakers at home. Mum has a pronounced Scottish accent when she speaks Farsi and English, while Dad has an equally strong Iranian accent when he talks in both languages. Both children attend a local pre-school, where the majority of staff and children speak with a distinctive regional 'Geordie' accent.

When Tanaz speaks English or Farsi, she does so with a Scottish accent, while her brother speaks both languages with a Farsi accent. When Tanaz plays 'being in pre-school' at home, which involves her pretending to be various members of staff, she uses a Geordie accent.

It is inconceivable that an adult should sit a very young child down and try to teach them how to speak with a particular accent. In order for Tanaz and Fouad to have developed their respective accents, we can assume that some form of imitation must have taken place, though probably not at a conscious level. So imitation is important. Yet the behaviourist model of imitation and reward can only explain a relatively

small part of the process. It can't explain, for example, how Tanaz and her brother have developed different speech patterns, because they have never been rewarded for talking like a Scot or an Iranian or a Geordie. They will have learned their accents naturally, through listening to the accents of those around them.

Imitation and reward feature in many daily activities that are planned by adults for young children. These include singing and rhyming sessions, where children are encouraged to imitate, repeat and memorise as many songs and rhymes as they can. Looking at this valuable experience from a behaviourist standpoint, the children are receiving external, extrinsic rewards, in the form of praise from the adults, for joining in the session, and making progress towards mastering the tune and the words. The children also experience internal, intrinsic rewards from feelings of wellbeing they gain from being part of a fun group activity, as well as pleasure from the process of learning the tune and words.

We need only to think of the popular 'ABC Song' to further illustrate this point. Tanaz and Fouad are learning a version sung to the tune of 'Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star', ending with the lines, 'Now I know my ABC/ Aren't you very proud of me?' Their parents are rightly very proud of their children's accomplishment, and respond by exclaiming, 'Well done! You are so clever! Show Granny what you can do!' The song may not make too much sense at the moment, but the children are developing a feeling that learning to talk, as part of learning in general, is something that their parents value. A year later, the parents will not be reacting in the same way when Tanaz sings the song. In fact, they may choose to ignore her as a way of getting her to stop doing it! However, they will be equally excited when she comes home and says, 'I can speak French!' and sings the first two lines of 'Frère Jacques'. This example gives credence, in part, to the behaviourist view that adults systematically reward learning by providing praise for certain behaviours and by ignoring others.

But can we realistically explain children's rapid growth of language by imitation and reward alone? Learning to communicate meaning is not the same as learning the words to a song by rote. Young children – or older children learning English as an additional language, or those with speech and language delay – could learn the words of the songs without being able to make any sense of the meaning of the words (as do adults apparently 'learning' words of pop songs, only to realise that they have totally misinterpreted the songs' actual lyrics!). However, unlike learning songs and nursery rhymes, language has to make sense if we are to understand what is being said to us and for us to be able to say what we mean. And how do we explain what is happening when children spontaneously say, 'My goed to the shops' for 'I went to the shops'? It is most unlikely that they would have heard their parents use a sentence like that, and the children wouldn't be praised for doing so. We need to see imitation and reward as only one part of our model of language development.



Point for reflection and discussion

How much do you use praise and rewards in everyday conversation with children? ('Praise' does not have to involve words, or physical rewards such as stickers. It could be your smile, or making an effort to stay with the child even though other children are calling for your attention.)

When Amy was three, she said to her granny, 'Granny. A baby cat is a kitten.' Grannie replied, 'Goodness, you are a clever girl for knowing that. Come and tell Granny lots of other things that you know about.' Amy got a big hug and a kiss, too. Did Granny need to tell Amy that she was a 'clever girl'? What impact might this have had on Amy?

How much do you praise children for knowing about language or for having learned something new? Is it necessary?



Practical task

Adults often praise children by saying, 'Well done' when a child has learned something new, e.g. completed a new puzzle. Sometimes, we say this when children have learned a new word, e.g. colours, shapes or numbers. Experiment with other ways of praising and rewarding children for developing their language. Choose a child who is quiet and possibly unsure about talking. Use the style of praising used by Amy's granny by overtly praising and rewarding the child's efforts and knowledge of new words and ideas, e.g. by spending a bit more time talking with them or praising their 'cleverness'. This might increase a quiet child's sense of wellbeing and be a powerful 'intrinsic motivator'. (NB: Don't go 'over the top' by being loud and enthusiastic. Talk in a calm and interested voice, which is what quiet children prefer.) Observe the child's reaction.

Noam Chomsky and language as a genetically determined 'organ of the mind'

Seven-year-old Amy, our second language learner in Example 1.1, already knows, at an intuitive level, how language operates. This gives her a distinct advantage when it comes to learning French. Her parents have never sat her down and told her about the facts of language: e.g. that 'horse, cat, dog' are all nouns, but 'run, jump, climb' are all verbs, or that

verbs have participles. By being successfully involved in the process of becoming a fluent English-speaker, Amy has reached the point where she has an informal understanding of these rules of English grammar. She 'just knows' about these rules.

At school, Amy's teacher wrote a string of words on the board: 'brown the cat little chair the on is sleeping', and asked the children to use all of these words to make up a sentence that made complete sense (but making sure that the words 'brown' and 'little' are next to each other). Most of the children in the class could do this very quickly. Some wrote, 'The little brown cat is sitting quietly on the chair', while others wrote, 'Is the little brown cat sitting on the chair?' However, the children learning English as an additional language (EAL) were unsure about where 'little' and 'brown' should go in relation to each other. If you were to ask Amy, 'How did you know that "little" comes before "brown" and not the other way round?' she would reply, 'I just know.' However, there is no harm in Amy's mother explicitly explaining the rules of English grammar when describing how her new language operates, e.g. 'In English we say "I walk" but in French they say "Je marche." "Je" means "I" and "marche" means "walk"'.

Example 1.3 'sheeps' 'falled over': examples of overgeneralisation

Ryan is 3;4 and from an English-speaking family. He enjoys talking and has a very large vocabulary. The following examples are from conversations with his father:

Dad: I saw five sheep. How many did you see?

Ryan: I seed three sheeps.

Dad: England were great. They won the football match.

Ryan: Yeh. England winned at football.

Dad: Which train do you like best? I like the red one best.

Ryan: My blue train is bestest.

Dad: Whoops! Teddy just fell over.

Ryan: That teddy falled over.

Dad: Teddy fell over.

Ryan: Yeh. He falled over.

Dad: He fell over. Not falled. He fell. Ryan, say 'fell over'

(Continued)

(Continued)

Ryan: Fell over.

Dad: Now say teddy ... fell ... over.

Ryan: Teddy ... fell ... over.

Dad: Good boy! Well done! What did teddy do?

Ryan: Teddy felled over!

The phenomenon illustrated here, known as *overgeneralisation*, occurs when children try to apply a regular rule of grammar to a verb or part of speech that is irregular.

However, six months later, with no formal teaching at all, Ryan spontaneously began using 'fell', and never used 'felled' again.

Example 1.3 illustrates parts of linguist and philosopher Noam Chomsky's theory that all children have what is a uniquely human capacity to 'acquire' language, by 'creating' new sentences, using vocabulary that they have learned. His theory emphasises the central role of the child in creating language for themselves, as opposed to learning by imitation and direct teaching. He argued that children's *language acquisition* follows set patterns, as they acquire, or gain, the rules of grammar in their first language. Chomsky used the universal phenomenon of overgeneralisation to illustrate how children create their own rules of grammar, based on logical assumptions they make from hearing adults talk. He argued that they do this by using an innate *Language Acquisition Device (LAD)*, which is an 'organ of the mind' operating separately from other brain functions (Chomsky, 1975). Like physical organs, it grows due to a uniquely human genetic blueprint, i.e. it is *genetically determined*.

Chomsky argued that children's language acquisition cannot be explained solely by imitation. If children only imitated what adults said, then how can we explain Ryan's use of completely unique sentences such as 'That teddy just felled over'? He certainly wouldn't have heard that sentence from his parents. According to Chomsky, Ryan's Dad is exceptional, because Chomsky suggested that, in general, much of the spoken language that children are exposed to is imperfect and even 'degenerate' (Chomsky, 1965). This is largely due, Chomsky asserts, to the stops and starts, revisions and hesitations that are a feature of conversation. Yet, children are somehow able to construct and apply their own rules of grammar to understand what is said to them and to express themselves in what seems to be an entirely logical way.

Linguists influenced by Chomsky, listening to Ryan in Example 1.3, might analyse his expressive language, or 'performance', including what would be

described as Ryan's 'errors'. From this they could make assumptions about what Ryan actually understands about the rules of English grammar, i.e. his 'competence' (Fletcher, 1985). Competence and performance expand as the child's LAD grows, as illustrated by Ryan automatically dropping his use of 'falled' in favour of 'fell'. Chomsky used children's move from immature to mature use of grammatical rules to argue that the LAD expands as the child matures, and in doing so allows the child to acquire understanding and use of new grammatical features, as part of an entirely automatic growth in brain structure (Chomsky, 1980).

Chomsky's ideas led to a major shift in the study of children's language, moving the focus of interest from the role of the child's environment, and specifically the behaviour of the adults in that environment, towards a theory that emphasised the child's contribution to the process of acquiring rules of grammar. This is described as a 'nativist approach', with its emphasis on what is essentially innate, or determined by genetics. While Chomsky was operating in a purely theoretical context – he didn't actually work with children – he influenced a generation of researchers, who sought to explore his theoretical model through detailed analyses of conversations between adults and children. Roger Brown and his dedicated team of linguists, for example, focused on the language of two children known as Adam and Eve. Brown concluded that children are active and creative in their language acquisition, and that children's acquisition of the rules of grammar follows a sequence that is essentially universal (Brown, 1973).

Chomsky and adherents to his theory emphasise that language acquisition is an innate feature of human development, i.e. genetically determined. They also argue that much of children's language is acquired despite the seemingly chaotic nature of what they hear being said to them and around them. But there are some important considerations that suggest that the child's LAD, should it exist, can only partly explain how most children come to be fluent speakers and communicators so quickly. For example, why do Japanese children learn Japanese and not English? There must be an element of imitation. How do we explain other aspects of language, such as the rapid growth of children's vocabulary? Again, there must be an element of imitation. And is the language that children hear directed to them really as unsystematic as Chomsky suggests, particularly when we discover that his opinion was based on analysis of how adults talk to each other, and not to children?

As we explore below, research based on analysis of interaction between young children and their carers shows that adults and older children systematically adjust what they say to babies and young children, to ensure that children are fully involved in conversations and can understand exactly what is being said to them. Furthermore, adults actively change the way they talk to individual children as the children's language use matures. This shifts our thinking towards an exploration of what the 'adult' does that is so helpful for the developing child. Chomsky's theory and behavioural theory may explain, to a certain extent 'how' children learn to talk

and acquire the rules of grammar, but an essential question is, 'why do children do it at all?'



Points for reflection and discussion

Much of our understanding of the correct usage of spoken grammar is intuitive and we may not be able to explain it unless we have actually studied grammar. Many so-called 'rules' of English written and spoken grammar are hotly debated. Yet, most children seem to absorb these rules effortlessly, through sharing conversation and reading informally with adults and older children.

To what extent do you expect children naturally to 'pick up' the rules of grammar?

Are there any fun activities and resources, including interactive websites or apps, which could help all children in the setting become aware of English grammar?



Practical tasks

Spend time talking with a child like Ryan in Example 1.3, who overgeneralises and says things like, 'I swimmied'. Try, like Ryan's Dad, to see if he can learn the mature form of the verb, e.g. 'I swam'. You might do this by saying, 'Oh, you went swimming?' Does it make any difference? (NB: The child should have English as his only language.)

Make regular observations of this child talking spontaneously. Does he change to using mature forms of verbs? How long did it take? Did it happen naturally, or did someone teach him how to 'speak properly'?

Now observe a child who is learning EAL. Does he use overgeneralisations in his use of English verbs? If not, what does this mean? For example, might it be because he already has a 'feel' for grammar in his first language and is learning English grammar by thinking about it, as opposed to naturally 'acquiring' the rules? (Beware: this could turn into a massive area for theoretical study!) This type of observation illustrates just how difficult it is to make generalisations about how children or individual children are learning to talk. However, speech and language therapists are trained to do this, based on observations of individual children, and to make recommendations for how to help them.

Why do children learn to talk?

Important is grammar. That sentence makes no sense, because the word order is incorrect.

Full blue notions wake anxiously. That sentence is grammatically correct, but makes no sense either, because it has no obvious meaning. ‘Meaning’ is one of the most important words used in this book, because it points us towards the essential reason why humans talk, i.e. in order to communicate meaning. During the 1970s, linguists moved away from a wholly theoretical focus on language acquisition to explore, through detailed observations, how children and their carers actually communicate. This led to the establishment of what is often described as a ‘non-nativist’ perspective, based on the premise that the environment, and specifically the way that adults *interact* with young children, has a major impact on how communication and language develops (Saxton, 2010). This perspective is also referred to as ‘empiricist’ or ‘empirical’, in the sense that it is based on the interpretation of observable, empirical data, as opposed to pure theory (Stilwell Peccei, 2006).

M.A.K. Halliday and the uses of language

Linguist M.A.K. Halliday rejected Chomsky’s theory of acquisition of grammar. He suggested that children learn to talk in ever more complex ways as a result of using language to fulfil different functions, and particularly to convey meaning to other people (Halliday, 1975). He proposed that there are seven main ‘functions’ or reasons why young children use language to talk to other people:

- Instrumental: to get what I want, e.g. ‘Want teddy’
- Regulatory: to control what others do to me, e.g. ‘No buggy!!’
- Interactional: to make contact with other people and build relationships, e.g. ‘Hello, Daddy!’
- Personal: to say how I feel, to express my opinion and to talk about myself, e.g. ‘My like biscuit,’ ‘Me big boy’
- Heuristic: to find out about my environment, e.g. ‘What that dog do?’
- Imaginative: to tell stories, make jokes and create imaginary worlds
- Representational: to convey facts and information

Halliday’s perspective is that children use language in different ways as they mature, physically and cognitively, and gain experience. His work helped create a balance in the study of language development, between focusing on grammar and exploring children’s growing ability to use talk in different ways. Halliday’s ideas reflected a growing interest in the study of pragmatics, how children use language and their understanding of non-verbal communication to convey messages and understand other people. This influenced the

exploration of how children with additional learning needs could be supported to use language socially and to learn. For example, as the understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) increased, psychologists became aware that some children might acquire the skills of using accurate grammar and phonology, but be unable to use them in a meaningful way. A specific language impairment, Semantic-Pragmatic Language Disorder, was also identified, where children have particular difficulties with understanding the meanings of words and how they are used to communicate ideas, although their grammar and pronunciation are relatively well developed (Bishop, 2000; Bishop and Norbury, 2002). Therapists with an increased understanding of the functions of language were able to support children with speech and language difficulties to extend how they used language, as well as focusing on their grammar, vocabulary and phonology (Dewart and Summers, 1989, 1995).

Introducing interaction: 'Motherese' and Child Directed Speech

In the 1970s, Catherine Snow made recordings of mothers playing with their infants in a laboratory setting. She then analysed in detail how each mother and child pair, or 'dyad', behaved as they played. Snow and subsequent researchers confirmed that, far from being fragmented and difficult to make sense of, the language that the mothers used with their babies and older children is designed not only to make sense, but changes systematically as children's language develops (Snow, 1977). Initially, the mothers' speech patterns contained highly exaggerated tones of voice, and a type of made-up vocabulary, including words like 'diddums', 'boo', 'wasamatta?' and 'there, there'. Snow observed that this type of talk had an identifiable structure that was used by many of her adult subjects. This suggested that there was a particular *register*, or style of speaking, that was being used specifically with babies. This register became known as 'Motherese'.

Mothers in these studies generally used Motherese to arouse their babies, and specifically to make them laugh and smile, or to calm baby down when he became overstimulated or fretful (Snow, 1977). As well as observing a specific register, analysis of film and transcripts showed a pattern of behaviour between mother and child that showed that the interactions involved a mutual turn-taking. Analysis of turn-taking showed that the majority of mothers in the studies responded to their children's sounds and movements, as well as trying to start verbal sound play with their babies (ibid.). Typically, baby would make a sound and mother would respond, then baby made another sound, which led to another response. Snow found that the mothers also gave meaning to apparently meaningless sounds emanating from the babies: so-called 'vegetative' sounds, such as burping or gurgling. It was suggested that these positive adult reactions, which are usually highly exaggerated in tone of voice and pitch, give babies a sense that making

vocal sounds is not only pleasurable, but will create an enormous response from adults (Soderstrom, 2007). As we explore in detail in Chapter 2, extensive research in the field of adult–child interaction suggests that these types of playful encounters are not only important for communication and language, but crucial in developing the child’s emotional wellbeing as part of the process of building early social relationships.

What was initially called ‘Motherese’ is now widely referred to as *Infant Directed Speech (IDS)*, in recognition that fathers and other carers also use this specific register, or style of talking, when playing with infants (Soderstrom, 2007). Extensive research into interactions between carers and children shows that adults alter their register as infants move towards using their first words, so that adults and children engage in less verbal play and have more exchanges that can be accurately described as ‘conversation’. It was more appropriate to label the type of register that adults use with children who are now talking as *Child Directed Speech (CDS)*. Detailed analysis of CDS shows that it has an identifiable structure, including simplifications to vocabulary, changes in grammatical complexity and length of sentences. Significantly, it was found that the main reason for adults changing the way in which they talk is to achieve understanding (Fletcher, 1985).

Example 1.4 Child Directed Speech (CDS) with a child at different ages

- (a) Two-year-old Isabelle is getting ready to go outside with her grandma:

Grandma: Give me my shoes, please. (Isabelle picks up her own shoes.)

Grandma: No. Not yours. I mean my shoes. (Isabelle stands still, looking slightly confused.)

Grandma: Pass me Grandma’s shoes. Not Isabelle’s shoes. No. Grandma’s shoes.

Isabelle: Grandma shoe.

Grandma: That’s right. Give them to Grandma. Well done. Good girl.

- (b) Isabelle at 3;6 is getting ready with Grandma again.

Isabelle: Grandma, where your shoes? You put them downstairs? My shoes are over there.

Grandma: Yes. Mine are downstairs. Isabelle, have you seen my bag?

Isabelle: It upstairs. In the spare room.

Grandma: Can you get it for me please?

In Example 1.4a, Grandma gives her instruction in a mature adult form. When Isabelle clearly does not understand, she changes her register. The meaning is exactly the same, but instead of using ‘my’ and ‘yours’, she uses ‘Grandma’s’ and ‘Isabelle’s’ to refer to who owns the shoes. Grandma does this automatically, in order to quickly get the result that she wants, i.e. ‘I want my shoes, but I also want my granddaughter to develop her language and enjoy talking with me.’

In Example 1.4b, Grandma’s language reflects how Isabelle is now talking. She now uses ‘my’ and ‘your’ correctly, so Grandma no longer needs to use the simplified register that avoided these words. Again, Grandma’s change in register is automatic, as she matches her use of language to Isabelle’s.

Are Infant Directed Speech and Child Directed Speech necessary?

Across cultures, within communities and within families, there are wide differences in parenting styles, including ways in which parents interact with their young children. The extent to which using IDS and CDS influences language development, or whether they are needed at all, remains a subject of debate. Some linguists have argued that IDS and CDS are unimportant for language development, citing examples of children developing language despite the fact that their parents claim that they never used CDS when talking with their young children. Shirley Brice Heath, in her classic anthropological study of two communities in the US, observed that many children in one of the communities seemed to grow up without any CDS speech being addressed to them at all (Heath, 1983). Another study, involving interviews with parents in Kuwait, suggested that the parents claimed not to have used CDS. However, when these same adults were observed talking with their children, it was clear that they did adjust the way they spoke to their children by, for example, simplifying the vocabulary that they used (Haggan, 2002). This suggests that the main motivation of the adults in changing how they spoke with children, even if they were not aware of doing so, was to make sure that the children understood the meaning of what was being said to them (Pine, 1994).

Example 1.5 Cultural influences on parents talking and playing with babies

While leading a session on language development with a group of parents, I came across some very contrasting views. One mother from a West African country, with two children aged three and

seven, expressed a view that she had been right to pay attention to her children as babies only when they were hungry, needed changing or were either too hot or cold. She said that she didn't pick them up when they cried for any other reason, as this would 'spoil' them.

This caused a heated discussion among the parents about different parenting styles. The central issue was whether or not babies should be picked up and comforted when they cry. The parents were from many cultures, but the general view was that as a parent you make your own decisions about how you bring up your children. This includes how much you play and talk with them, though you will be influenced by the advice that your parents and parents-in-law give you.

A father from Ghana spoke to me after the meeting and expressed his own views about culture and parenting. As a father living in the UK, he knew that he was expected to play with his children and use what he described as 'baby talk'. However, he felt uncomfortable doing this because he worried that this type of interaction would make him 'lose my authority over my children' and that they would become 'undisciplined'. He much preferred to sit down at a table and teach them how to do puzzles, to read and to write their names. He also took them to the park, and the whole family attended church and regularly took part in large gatherings of family and friends. All of the family enjoyed singing together whenever they could. He felt that the time he spent with his children was helpful for their general learning, including language development, and would prepare them for doing well in school. He said that his wife felt the same, but pointed out that had the family been living in Ghana, much of the childcare would have been carried out by the grandparents, who would probably have spent a lot of time playing, singing and laughing with the young children, while the parents went out to work.

This example illustrates that parenting is an intensely personal and emotional experience. Parents' views on childhood and how they should respond to their children, including how they talk and play with them, will be influenced by their own experiences. This will include their experience of growing up within a particular culture. From my experience, some parents, and many fathers, are very self-conscious about using IDS, but still play and communicate with babies and very young children in a natural, positive and pleasurable way.

The discussion about the relative importance of IDS and CDS is fundamental for this book. If one takes the view that the quality of interaction with a young child has a minimal influence on language development,

then we can assume that the best way to lead a child to the point where she is a competent communicator is to talk to her, from birth onwards, as if she were an adult. Yet, most adults who are successful at talking with children – i.e. adults who children respond to positively, understand and learn from – adapt how they talk to make sure that children understand what is being said to them. My personal and professional opinion is that young children need to spend time communicating with adults with whom they can build a close relationship. This time can involve IDS, but the important element of the time spent together is that child and adult should enjoy being together, so that a positive emotional bond is formed that includes communicating and talking in a pleasurable way. Adults need to feel comfortable in the way that they are sharing talk with children. By ‘comfortable’ I mean that they are able to communicate and explore ideas with children in a style that the child enjoys, responds to and learns from. This influences the child’s growing sense of wellbeing and pleasure in using language. This topic is explored in detail in Chapters 2 and 5.



Points for reflection and discussion

Do we need to use IDS when talking with babies and very young children?

Do we need to use CDS with children who are older?

How can we support colleagues and parents who are not communicating successfully with children, because their language is ‘too advanced’?



Practical tasks

Talk with an older child with speech and language delay, ideally engaging him in conversation when you are doing something together, e.g. completing a puzzle or playing with playdough. Did you automatically simplify your language, and particularly your vocabulary and your questions when talking with him? What was the impact of doing this?

(This skill of ‘tuning in’ to the right level when talking with children at different stages of developing language comes with experience, as well as observing colleagues who are successful at communicating with children. We explore this in detail in chapters that follow.)

Try talking, for a short while only, with children as if you were talking to adults. Did you find this difficult? How did the children respond?

Spend time talking and playing with a baby. Experiment with using IDS and, for a short while, drop the exaggerated features of IDS and talk in a matter of fact way, as if you were talking with an adult.

Could you talk in IDS? How did you feel about it? Did it feel natural, or something you might need to practice? Was there a change in the baby's reaction when you changed the way you spoke? What might this mean?

Language development and learning in general: Bruner and scaffolding

While Chomsky's is a purely theoretical viewpoint and Snow's early observations were made under laboratory conditions, linguists and psychologists recognised that language development takes place within the very real world of everyday life. There was also a growing recognition that language does not develop as an isolated skill, but that children learn to talk as part of a process of intellectual growth, or cognitive development. Developmental psychologist Jerome Bruner was in the vanguard of exploring how children and adults talk together, and how these experiences influence learning, and language development in particular.

Bruner proposed that the development of cognition and language are influenced by how children and adults share experiences (Bruner, 1975). Through the minute analysis of interactions between children and their parents, he was able to show that children use language in order to communicate with other people, and that through this they learn the rules of language, as well as how to share meaning effectively. This 'parent-child interaction' is the context within which adults help children with their learning and language development. They do this by *scaffolding* learning: by showing children how to learn new skills based on what the children already know, while using language that is adapted to support the children's understanding (Bruner, 1983).

The notion of adults scaffolding children's learning was influenced by, and an extension of, Lev Vygotsky's concept of the *Zone of Proximal Development* (1978). This can be described as the distance between what the child already knows and what they could learn with the support of a mature and experienced helper (Conkbayir and Pascal, 2014). For example, this could take place when an adult shows a child how to complete a puzzle of a street scene. The child fits in a car shape first, because he finds that relatively easy to do. The adult, seeing the child struggle with the bus shape, picks up the bus and places it almost to within its corresponding hole. He encourages the child by pointing to the bus, saying, 'I think the bus fits in there. You have a go.' The child now sees where the bus should go and how it fits in place, so the next time he tries the puzzle he is able to fit in the car and bus with little effort, while saying 'bus' to himself. The adult had successfully scaffolded the child's learning by providing support

without actually doing the task for the child, as well as by sharing related language that the child absorbs.

Bruner argues that the help that adults give to children through their social interactions, including meaningful conversation, provides a support system for children's general learning, and language development in particular. He describes this as being an external Language Acquisition Support System (LASS). Through engaging children in meaningful activities, accompanied by appropriate language, adults effectively promote language and learning (Bruner, 1983). Many of Bruner's observations took place in the home, and he is credited with influencing a generation of researchers who based their work on his pioneering techniques for collecting and analysing data (Conkbayir and Pascal, 2014).

Adults as teachers of language and social norms

Much of adult interaction with children is informal, spontaneous and takes place as part of play and being involved in routines of everyday life. However, there are instances where adults set out to teach very young children how to talk and behave. Jean Berko Gleason, for example, studied how parents teach their children social routines, such as saying 'hello' and 'bye bye' and how to respond when given a gift (Berko Gleason and Weintraub, 1976; Blank Grief and Berko Gleason, 1980). The findings from this research reinforce the idea that adults have a clear vision for the types of language skills they want their children to learn and use, within the norms of their particular community. These norms are often shared from a very early age. Adults also set out to teach children particular aspects of vocabulary, e.g. colours, shapes and numbers, and set great store by children having achieved such language milestones. Similarly, parents often teach their children songs and rhymes. Indeed, as we explore in Chapter 5, it may be possible to predict children's overall educational progress from the type of 'Home Learning Environment' that parents create for their children, including the quality, quantity and types of interactions and conversations that they experience (Melhuish, 2010).

Language 'acquisition', language 'development' and language 'learning'

Children receive a lot of information about language from adults talking with them. In order for children to develop language effectively, they need the adult to share experiences with them, where the children can be actively involved. If adults adapt the way they talk to an appropriate level, using

vocabulary that is relevant, then children will have enough information to remember what has been said to them, and to use it to help them in their learning. Empiricists would suggest that, rather than children possessing a specific Language Acquisition Device that functions purely to help them with rules of grammar, language develops as part of learning in general: i.e., as a consequence of brain growth and maturation, physical development and sharing meaningful experiences with adults and other children.

The distinction between the acquisition of skills and the development of language processes is an important one. If we use the term ‘acquire’, then we agree with the idea that children gain skills automatically through a process of maturation. If we use the term ‘develop’, then we assume that language emerges through a process of children interacting with their peers and adults, as the child matures. The term ‘learning’ includes language development, but also refers to the process of general cognitive growth, again made possible by appropriate interaction with adults and other children. If one describes children ‘learning’ a language, this suggests a large element of conscious thinking on the part of the child, e.g. Amy in Example 1.1 about the nature of language and how to go about learning it. For the purposes of this book, we refer to the ‘development’ of communication and language, in recognition that it is an active process that involves children and other people interacting together. When interaction is at an appropriate level and meaningful, it facilitates, i.e. provides support for, the acquisition of the skills needed to communicate, such as the grammar and pronunciation specific to the child’s family and community. These skills often emerge automatically with time. How they are used depends on the type of experience children have with communication. In the same sense, children who grow up as bilinguals, by speaking one language at home and then later having to speak another, will ‘develop’ their first language and then ‘learn’ the second. They ‘acquire’ the grammatical rules of one language and then consciously ‘learn’ the rules of a second.

Conclusion

This whistle-stop tour of the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ of language development brings us to an important conclusion: that what adults believe about language development is the biggest influence on how they talk with children. This in turn has a direct influence on how children develop as communicators. These beliefs are shaped by our own experience: within our own childhood, bringing up our own children, working with other peoples’ children and through study.

The perspective that we explore throughout this book is that the most productive way of approaching the question ‘How and why do children develop

language?’ is to look at speech and language development within a social context and ask, ‘What is it that children and adults do together that helps children learn to talk effectively?’ This perspective, that children develop as communicators, talkers and learners through interaction and conversation, is based on the following principles:

- Children are born with an inner drive to make sense of the world. This drive includes developing language and using it to learn
- The type of interaction children are involved in, with adults and other children, facilitates or hinders language development
- Imitation (even if it is largely unconscious) and rewards (even if they are essentially ‘intrinsic’, e.g. through a sense of wellbeing) play a part in facilitating language development.
- Interaction must be pleasurable for all involved
- There is interplay between genetically determined forces within the child and external experiences, supported by sensitive adult interaction. This facilitates children’s language development and their learning about language, their place within the family, the community and society
- Language development is a holistic experience where understanding, speech and expressive language develop as part of the child’s growing ability to communicate and use language to learn

The message developed in the following chapters can be encapsulated in one sentence:

Conversation is the place where children develop as talkers – through learning about language, themselves, the world and their place in that world.



Points for reflection and discussion

A big question (and it is very big) concerns children who for some reason are finding language-learning difficult. Can we expect them to acquire grammar through conversation only, or should we plan to involve activities that set out to teach them the rules of grammar?

This could be a very important discussion to have with a psychologist or speech and language therapist who is working with a child with additional language-learning needs.

Further reading

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- Crystal, D. (2007) *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning and Languages Live or Die*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Levine, L.E. and Munsch, J. (2010) *Child Development: An Active Learning Approach*. London: Sage, particularly Chapter 9, 'Language development'.
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- Saxton, M. (2010) *Child Language Acquisition and Development*. London: Sage.
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