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The content of this topic book is taken from Stephen von Tetzchner’s core textbook *Child and Adolescent Psychology: Typical and Atypical Development*. The comprehensive volume offers a complete overview of child and adolescent development – for more information visit www.routledge.com/9781138823396
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Communication and Language Development

Stephen von Tetzchner
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Communication and language are essential human abilities, and the use of language distinguishes humans from other species. Communication may be non-verbal but language is inconceivable without communication. Language allows humans to share what they think about, stories, desires, ideas, feelings and so on. Humans use language in most activities and language is both part of the culture and a tool for acquiring social and cultural knowledge. Children acquire communication and language skills within a social and relational framework that changes as they grow older.

Development can be defined as an age-related process involving changes in the structure and functions of humans and other species. The 12 parts of this topic book present core issues related to the development of communication and language, building on the models of development and the developmental way of thinking presented in Book 1, *Theoretical Perspectives and Methodology*. Most individual differences in mental and physical features and abilities do not emerge directly from a particular biological or environmental factor but rather as a result of *interaction effects*, where biological and environmental factors are moderated by one or several other factors. Moreover, development is never a one-way process: it is a *transactional process*, characterized by reciprocal influences between the child and the environment over time. Readers may find it useful to consult the part on developmental models in Book 1, *Theoretical Perspectives and Methodology*, or the corresponding chapters in the complete book before reading the present topic book.

The present topic book includes both typical communication and language development, which is the most common course with unimpaired functions and ordinary individual differences between
children, and atypical development, which represents various degrees of unusual or irregular development, including the development of children and adolescents who have communication and language disorders. The issues presented in this topic book are particularly relevant for teachers, special educators and other staff in preschool and school. Their task is to support children’s play and learning, and insight into the development of communication and language is necessary for adapting educational strategies to each pupil’s needs.

Human development to maturity stretches over about 20 years. Basic communication and language skills emerge during the first years of life but language continues to develop through childhood and adolescence. The basic apparatus for communication and language is shared by nearly all humans but there are considerable individual differences in communication and language abilities. Some children are early talkers, while others are slower but reach the same level of language competence. Some children have communication and language disorders with delayed development and some may never reach the linguistic level of their peers.

Communication originates in infants’ ability to focus attention and a sensory system where stimulation from other people has attentional value over other forms of stimulation (see Book 3, Perceptual and Motor Development, Part 1). The infants’ social attention evolves gradually into joint attention with others. Infants and toddlers may follow the gaze direction of adults to find out what they are attentive to, or look back and forth between an object and the adult to be sure they have the same attentional focus as themselves. The theories of communication development focus on the process from attention orienting to attention regulated by social interaction, and the establishment of joint social attention and engagement. Pointing directs attention to particular locations or things and is usually children’s first communicative gesture, soon to be followed by symbolic gestures and the first words.

Theories of language development must be able to describe and explain typical language development and the variation that can be observed in children’s language development. The main theories presented in this topic book differ in their descriptions of linguistic processes, in the role they attribute to genes and experience, in their assumptions about what sets humans apart from species that do not have language, and in how the acquisition process proceeds. Much of the discussion is about grammatical competence. There is a main distinction between nativism and the other theories presented here.
According to nativism, language development only requires that children are exposed to a language. The other theoretical directions assume that grammatical competence to a greater extent is a result of children’s active use of language, but have different explanations of how children acquire language and to some extent focus on different aspects of language development. There is also a main distinction between behaviorism and the other theories: behaviorism sees language as learned behavior while the other theories emphasize the cognitive processes involved in language comprehension and use. The considerable disagreements about the bases of even basic language skills reflect the complexity of human communication and language.

Speech sounds are part of children’s auditory environment even before birth, and children’s perception of speech changes significantly through the first couple of years. As part of the cultural adaptation, infants lose their early ability to distinguish between most speech sounds while becoming better able to distinguish between sounds that differentiate word meanings in their language or languages – a large part of the World’s children grow up with two or more languages. Speech production follows a path where children’s speech gradually becomes more similar to the language or languages that are spoken in the environment. The children learn to divide the voice stream into meaning-bearing elements and understand which people, objects, events and so on are relevant to what is being said. Children who learn sign language must be able to identify signs in the flow of hand movements they see and attach meaning to them.

Joint attention and speech or sign perception constitute a basis for inferring the meaning of words or signs. The acquisition of the first words is a quite slow process in most children but the speed soon increases and remains high throughout childhood and adolescence. Children learn the common words of their society but the content of their vocabularies varies both at an early age and later, reflecting differences in the children’s interests, activities, education and cultural background. Also gender and social economic background may influence children’s language development. Moreover, it is not only the number of words that increases, the comprehension and use of the words change dynamically over time, including metaphorical and other forms of figurative use. Adults also learn new words but the addition of new vocabulary items slows down with age.

The ability to combine words to relay new messages is the hallmark of human language. Combining words allows children to produce
both more specific and more complex messages. The transition from single-word utterances to multi-word utterances is therefore an essential milestone on children’s way to comprehension and production of language. Grammars differ between languages and children learn to use word order, inflections and grammatical words to express gradually more complex meanings, using a variety of strategies. The theories differ in how they interpret both errors and lack of errors as the child’s competence increases.

Children learn the language(s) around them. They learn from observing others and through the answers other people give to their utterances. However, learning from others’ language use does not mean that language development is a simple process of imitation. Internalization of the language conventions is only part of language competence; equally important is externalization, expressing personal knowledge and ideas which without language would not have been possible to transmit to others.

The acquisition of words and grammatical knowledge is based on an understanding of the functions of language, that is, how language may be used for various communicative purposes. The conversation may be regarded as the basic unit of language use. Words and sentences are rarely used in isolation but rather as part of shorter or longer conversations already from the early adult–child dialogues. Conversational skills include initiating and ending the conversation, taking turns, changing topics, correcting mistakes and negotiating meaning. These skills emerge as a blend of children’s earlier communication and language skills, concept formation, and social skills. Early conversations typically concern things children and adults are doing or have done together, such as farm animals in a picture book, the food the adult is cooking, the peers at nursery school, and so on. Over time, the children’s contributions become more autonomous and less dependent on the adults’ help and chaining together.

In all societies, humans communicate about people and events, including gossip. Children start early to share experiences, comment on ongoing events and talk about past and future events with guidance from the parents. Narratives are a natural extension of these conversations, often co-constructed with parents or other adults. Construction of narratives constitutes an important part of children’s language development and is a basis for learning about the world and the development of autobiographical memory. Adults adapt their language in child-directed language to facilitate the child’s understanding and
learning of words, grammar and conversational skills. With age, children’s narratives become more independent and coherent, and the content changes as children move into adolescence.

Speech is the most common language mode but language may take different forms. The national sign languages have developed mainly through the linguistic praxis of individuals with severe hearing impairment and their families. Individuals with normal hearing who are severely delayed in speech development or who fail to develop intelligible speech can learn to express themselves with manual signs or graphic symbols.

Language is complex, and various factors may slow down or hinder language development. Some children struggle with acquiring spoken or signed language (see Book 1, *Theoretical Perspectives and Methodology, Part IV*). The importance of communication and language for everyday functioning and participation in social and societal life implies that disorders of communication and language may have a severe impact on all aspects of life, education, work, relations, and the well-being of children and adolescents. Many children need help and support in the early phases of language development and some may need language intervention also into adolescence. Children with language disorders may also struggle with reading and writing (see Book 4, *Cognition, Intelligence and Learning, Part VI*).

Some of the terminology used in developmental psychology may be unfamiliar to some readers. Many of these terms can be found in the Glossary.