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Language in Children

Eve V. Clark

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Language in Children

Language in Children provides a concise and basic introduction for students studying child language acquisition for the first time. Starting from the first sounds a child produces, this book covers all the stages a child goes through in acquiring a first language. In ten accessible chapters, this book:

- illustrates developmental stages from the recognition of sounds and words to the ability to hold a conversation, and also covers bilingual upbringing;
- features real-life examples of all the phenomena discussed, from languages such as French, Spanish and Finnish as well as English;
- incorporates guidance on sources for further reading and exploration by chapter;
- is supported by a companion website, which includes links to further material and real-world data on the CHILDES archive.

Written by an experienced researcher and teacher, *Language in Children* is essential reading for students studying this topic for the first time.

Eve V. Clark is Professor of Linguistics and Symbolic Systems at Stanford University, USA.

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Language in Children

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Contents

Preface ix

1 Where do children learn a first language? 1

Signposts 1
Some proposals about acquisition 3
Early adult–child interaction 5
Adults modify their forms of talk 7
Adults modify the content of their talk 8
Adults scaffold early child contributions 10
Adults expand their children's utterances 11
Adults offer new words 12
Adults provide feedback 14
Adults ask children questions 16
Joint attention, physical co-presence, and conversational co-presence 17
Summary 18

2 Recognizing and producing words 20

Perceiving sounds 21
Discrimination and attention 22
Recognizing words 24

Adult forms versus child forms 26
Unanalysed chunks 28
Producing words early on 28
Practice 30
Taking turns 32
Summary 33

3 Mapping meanings to words 35

Fast mapping 38
Eliciting and retaining new words 40
Early vocabularies 41
Building up lexical domains 43
Space, motion, goal, and source 44
Speech act meanings 45
Construction meanings 46
Reference and referential expressions 47
Summary 49

4 Using language 50

Pragmatic principles 52
Common ground 53
Scaffolding and collaboration 55
Turns and their content 57
Grounding successive utterances 58
Inferences about intended meaning 60
Summary 61

5 Early constructions 63

Formulaic utterances 65
Adding grammatical elements 66
Verbs and verb forms 70
Noun classes 71
Summary 73

6 More elaborate constructions 75

Questions 76
Negation 78
Modification of noun phrases 79
Number and quantification 81
Place and time 83
Causation and cause 86
Conditionals and contingency 88
Summary 90

7 Carrying on a conversation 91

Interaction and communication 91
Common ground 94
Given and new 97
Turn timing 97
Play and reality 100
Summary 104

8 Perspectives, viewpoints, and voices 106

Lexical and constructional perspective 107
Tracking viewpoints in others 109
Voices, roles, and identities 111
Telling stories 114
Instructions and directions 117
Summary 119

9 More than one language at once 120

Two systems from the start 120
Two vocabularies: early doublets 121
Vocabulary size 123
Early word-combinations and language mixing 124
Language choice and addressee 127

Adding complexity 128
Bilingualism, multilingualism 131
Summary 131

10 Process in acquisition **133**

Processes in acquisition 135
Errors of omission and commission 136
What do children need to acquire a first language? 138
Learning a first language or a second: what's the difference? 139
More than one language at once 141
Disorders and language development 142
Language universals 143
Conclusion 147

General resources and further reading 148

Reference books 148
Data sources 149
Further reading by chapter 149

Subject index 161

Preface

In learning to talk, children master a complex system and apply a variety of skills in doing so. This book is intended to offer a first look at what is involved as children acquire a language, how adults talk with them, from a few months old onwards, and how interaction between adult and child plays a critical role in the process of acquisition. Young children attend to expert speakers, talk with them, get feedback from them, and, in interacting, practise what they have acquired so far.

This book gives examples of what children can say at different stages, how they elaborate their utterances as they learn to communicate effectively with language and gesture, establish and accumulate common ground, and add new information when they can to what the other speaker has just said. We know a lot about some of the processes involved, but there are many questions waiting to be asked, and answered, in this field.

My goal in writing this book is to encourage readers to pursue the questions and issues touched on here, find out more about the process of acquisition, and pursue questions about how the amount of social and communicative interaction children have access to affects their acquisition and early use of a language.

EVC
Stanford
January 2016

A few phonetic symbols and their values in English words

Some consonants:

/s/	**s**it, cat**s**
/z/	**z**oo, dog**s**
/ʒ/	a**z**ure
/ʃ/	**sh**ip, pu**sh**
/ŋ/	li**n**k, mo**n**key

Some vowels:

/æ/	s**a**t, b**a**t
/ə/	schwa/neutral vowel, as in ***a*** *book* or *th***e** *book*
/ʌ /	b**u**t, m**o**nkey
/ɪ/	s**i**t, f**i**ll
/i/	f**ee**l, s**ea**l
/ɒ/	h**o**ck, d**o**g, c**o**t
/ɔ/	h**aw**k, c**au**ght
/ɑ/	f**a**ther

Nasal vowels are marked with a tilde above the vowel

Notes on age:

Children's ages are reported in years: 2 years old; in years followed by months, as in 2;6 for 2 years 6 months; and in years, months and days, as in 2;6.13, for 2 years, 6 months, and 13 days.

Chapter 1

Where do children learn a first language?

In this chapter, we examine the setting in which children first come to understand and produce language. We'll begin with some general signposts along the way as children begin to master and then become more skilled in using language. We'll also consider, briefly, some of the earlier views of this process, before we turn to some of the general issues we need to address in relation to the process of language acquisition.

Signposts

Very young children show initial comprehension of a few words somewhere around 8 to 10 months, and they typically produce their first words between 11 or 12 and 20 months. Next, they begin to produce longer utterances by combining gestures and words, and then producing two or more words together. This may happen anywhere between 14 and 15 months and 18 and 22 months. (There can be as much as a year's difference in when particular children master a specific feature of language.) Once children begin to combine words, they also start to add word endings like the plural *–s* in English, and add in small words like *the*, *of*, or *in* as well. Again, learning where and when to use word endings as well as these small grammatical words (often called **function** words) takes time. In some languages, children master these elements in the language by around age 6. In others, some of these details may take them much longer, up to as late as age 10 or 12.

Once children can combine two or more words, they also start to do more complicated things with language. And when they can produce utterances with three or four words, they start using more complex constructions too. For example, they add information to distinguish among the people or objects they are referring to, as in *the* ***blue*** *car*, *the man* ***with the red hat***, *the girl* ***who's running***. They start to talk about sequences of events: *He ran outside* ***and then*** *he climbed the hill*. They talk about causal events: *They* ***made*** *the boat* ***capsize***. They talk about contingent events: ***If*** *it rains, we'll play inside*. They start to express beliefs and attitudes: ***I think*** *they like spinach*, ***He wants*** *to have a picnic.* And they gradually learn how to do all sorts of things

Age/stage	*Comprehension*	*Production*
6–8 months	2–4 frequent words	(early babbling)
9–12 months	10–30 words, frequent routine phrases	babbling, 1–2 words
13–22 months	simple instructions, answer simple questions	10–50 words, word-combinations
2;0–2;6	answer more question types, understand 1000–1500 words	100–600 words, many question types; start to produce more complex constructions
2;6–3;6	increasing skill in turn-taking; further increases in vocabulary size	initiate many interactions, propose new topics, and ratify new information
3;6–5;0	near adult timing in turn-taking; up to 14,000 words by age 6;0	variety of complex constructions, vocabulary of ~6000+ words by age 5; regular addition of new information in own turns; some rudimentary storytelling
5;0+	good comprehension, follow instructions	persuade, give instructions, tell more structured stories, and keep track of characters

Note: Typically a year or more's variance in when a particular child reaches these milestones.

with language, from telling jokes – a favourite at age 5 – to persuading, instructing, managing, and cooperating in all sorts of activities, and also telling more and more elaborate stories.

Some proposals about acquisition

People have long puzzled over how children come to acquire their first language, and a variety of proposals have been made at various times. Here we'll briefly consider a few of these proposals, and why they fail as an adequate account of what goes on as children acquire language. In effect, many proposals that have been made present an unrealistic picture of how acquisition occurs, how long it takes, and the role adults play in it.

One view that arises from behaviourist approaches to psychology is that adults *teach* children their first language. They do this, it is proposed, first by approving of any babbled sounds that belong in the language, but ignoring any sounds that don't belong. Sounds that are accepted, approved of, become shaped into sequences that constitute words. Adults don't reinforce erroneous forms, so even if these were produced, they would be short-lived. The same approach is assumed to work for acquiring words and constructions.

However, parents actually appear to approve of every vocalization – and hence many non-native sounds – produced by babies as they babble. And they typically approve of any attempts to communicate, however defective. Young children start out with many elements 'missing' from their early utterances, and they make certain consistent, and often long-lasting, errors, retaining non-adult-like forms over weeks and even months. In doing this, they seem to be regularizing their language: they make irregular forms regular, as in *sit* with *sitted* as its (regular) past tense, or *mouse* with *mouses* as its (regular) plural form. So it is unclear what role adult approval (reinforcement) or lack of approval actually plays in the process of acquisition.

A related view here is that children simply imitate what they hear around them. But if they learn language by imitating other speakers, why do they begin with just one word at a time, and that only at 12–15 months of age? Why do they take such a long time to put two words

together in an utterance? And why do they leave out word endings and small grammatical words like *to*, *of*, and *the* for so long? That is, their early utterances do not seem to be direct imitations of any adult model in their vicinity.

A rather drastic alternative to these views, proposed in the 1960s, was that adults play virtually no role in children's acquisition. They provide no feedback and so never correct errors. Indeed, there is no need in this view for any feedback because the language itself – at least the grammar – is assumed to be innate. At the same time, proponents of this view agree that children do have to learn the sounds of a language, somehow. They also have to learn the vocabulary, which can amount to between 50,000 and 100,000 words by age 20 or so – hence, a massive learning task. But the grammar is there from the beginning, it is claimed, and, in this view, that is what is most important.

Yet children take time to settle on or identify properties central to the grammar of the language they are acquiring, and the process involved in going from innate grammatical categories to possible syntactic constructions in a language has yet to be fleshed out. Moreover, as we will see, adults do offer feedback as part of the conversational to-and-fro as they check up on what their children mean, and they do this for all aspects of the language being acquired. (And we will see how this plays an essential role in the overall process of acquisition.)

Finally, another position often proposed informally is that children learn language when they go to nursery school and kindergarten, hence from their teachers. But children arrive there already talking, often talking rather a lot. So they must already have been working on the early stages of what they need to do to learn a language in their first two or three years. The question is how much they already know by age 3 or 4, and how they got there.

In this book, we will focus instead on the kinds of interactions that adults and babies take part in from birth on, and the critical role these interactions play in the acquisition of language by young children. Children learn their first language from the speakers around them. Initially, these speakers will generally be the adults looking after them. But as infants get older, progress to walking, and start producing single words themselves, they also interact with older siblings and peers as well as caregivers. So it is the ambient language that young children

acquire. How does their acquisition take place? Do adults tailor their language for young addressees?

Early adult–child interaction

Adults talk to babies from the start, even though they know that babies can't yet understand any language. Despite this, parents and other caregivers interact with infants, and such interactions, the evidence suggests, are helpful and even crucial for the later acquisition of language. For example, parents rely on mutual gaze, looking at babies, catching their eye; they touch them, hold them, and use affective intonation to communicate comfort, soothing, play, and laughter. Two-way interaction typically begins as soon as small babies respond with smiles and mutual gaze. In these early 'exchanges', with little or no communicative content on the babies' side, adults will treat a smile, a look, a burp, or a leg-kick as a 'turn' in an exchange. But both content and timing here differ from later conversational turns and actual turn-taking with language, with both larger gaps between turns and more overlapping of turns.

Parents engage 2-month-olds with smiles and eye-gaze. From the age of 3 months on, infants can participate with adults in what could be called passive joint engagement where the adult follows the infant's gaze. When infants reach 4 months of age, adults can also get them to attend to objects they show to them. This is also about the time when infants also start watching hand motions intently, and motion in general, and actively track adult eye-gaze during interactions. Around 6–8 months, most infants start to babble, and adults will now expect, even demand, babble-sequences as turns contributed by the infant. By 9–10 months, infants readily participate in a variety of exchange games, passing a toy to and fro with an adult, for example, or alternating roles in bouts of peek-a-boo. It is shortly after this that infants typically attempt to produce their first words.

When infants vocalize, they may simply babble in response to adult comments and questions, but from around 11–12 months, they often combine a vocalization with a gesture, where the vocalization may be based on some adult word, as in uses of a syllable like **da** along with a point gesture at some object of interest. When this happens, adults

typically respond with a label for the apparent referent. And once young children begin to label things spontaneously, adults typically confirm any label a child has produced, and then expand on it, as in:

Nicola (1;11.9)*:*	*nose*.
Mother:	He's got a pointed nose, hasn't he?

But when children combine a single-word utterance, a label, with a gesture, pointing towards some object, say, or reaching towards something, adults construe this as a request for information or a request with respect to that object, as in:

Nicky (1;7.29)*:*	*back*, *back* <handing plate to Mother>
Mother:	Do you want me to put it back? There.

That is, adults tend to respond differently to children's word-only utterances compared with how they respond to child utterances that contain a word and gesture combined.

Early on, infants' vocalizations often overlap with adult speech: when they smile, when they produce contented cries, and later when they start to babble. But even with a 3-month-old, adults may impose something like turns-at-talk: first making a comment say, then pausing until the infant does something – kicks, yawns, closes its fists, smiles, blinks, or any other action – and only after that do adults resume their talk, taking another turn. Effectively, adult speakers offer a framework for communicative interaction, and even impose it, long before young children actually start to produce any language or participate communicatively, as in the following exchange:

Ann (0;3)*:*	<smiles>
Mother:	Oh what a nice little smile!
	Yes, isn't that nice? There.
	There's a nice little smile.

Ann:	<burps>
Mother:	What a nice wind as well!
	Yes, that's better, isn't it?
	Yes. Yes.
Ann:	<vocalizes>
Mother:	Yes! There's a nice noise.

When adults talk in this way to very young babies, they generally adjust their intonation (the melody of their speech), maybe speak a bit more softly, but don't make any particular adjustments to the content of what they are saying. This content may range from general reflections on the day to talk about activities specific to what the adult is currently doing, e.g. changing or bathing the baby, dressing it, preparing to nurse it. But once very young children display some understanding of a few words, begin trying to communicate with gestures, vocalizations, and even produce a few words (from around 10 months or so onwards), adults start to modify both the form and the content of their speech as they adjust to their addressee's level, taking into account what very young children appear able to understand and what they can produce.

Adults modify their forms of talk

One reason adults adjust their speech as they talk with very young children is to take into account how much infants understand. But adults, sensibly, don't bother to make any adjustments until they see some evidence of comprehension in their children. This typically doesn't happen until around age 10–12 months.

Since children understand so few words at first, adults modify how they talk with young children. They slow down, a lot; they produce very short utterances, they pause between utterances, they use exaggerated intonation contours with a wide pitch range (around two octaves in English speakers, compared to under one octave in talk to other adults), and they wait longer for children to respond, waiting much longer than they would in conversation with an adult. They make these modifications because they are designing their utterances for inexpert, beginning speakers.