

How children learn language—what every parent should know

William O'Grady

Most of the time we adults take language for granted—unless of course we have to learn a new one. Then, things change pretty quickly. We can't get the pronunciation right, and we can't hear the difference between sounds. There are too many new words, and we forget ones that we learned just the day before. We can't say what we want to say, and we can't understand anything either, because everyone speaks too fast.

Things work differently for three year olds. They can't tie a knot, jump rope, draw a decent-looking circle, or eat without making a mess. But they have figured out what several thousand words mean, how they are pronounced, and how they can be put together to make sentences. Herein lies the mystery of language acquisition. How can children be so good at language?

There are at least five things that every parent should know about how children learn language.

1. It starts early

Children seem to be especially designed to listen to language. In fact, they don't even wait until they are born to start. Speech can be heard in the womb—not precisely enough to make out individual sounds, but clearly enough to identify the basic rhythm and certain features of the speaker's voice. And yet-to-be-born children are evidently listening: at birth, they prefer their mother's voice to other female voices, they prefer the language of their parents over other languages, and they are able to recognize that an English sentence does not sound the same as a French sentence.

In one study, mothers-to-be read aloud a story every day during the last six weeks of pregnancy. Some read *The Cat in the Hat* and others read *The King, the Mice and the Cheese*. Two days after birth, the infants were tested to see whether they found the story that they'd heard in the womb more soothing than the other story. They did. The infants who had heard *The Cat in the Hat* preferred it to *The King*, and vice versa—even when the story was read by someone other than their mother. Evidently the infants had been able to pick up enough of the story's rhythm while in the womb to recognize it after they were born.

2. It happens fast

Children learn language very quickly. Between age two and six, they average ten new words a day—almost one for every waking hour and often

after hearing it just once or twice! By age six, they have a vocabulary of about 14,000 words, but they're far from finished. Over the next several years, they move even faster, learning as many as twenty new words per day. (Try to do that day in and day out if you're learning a foreign language.)

How can children be so quick at guessing a new word's meaning? At the beginning, they seem to rely on a couple of simple strategies. One is to assume that new words refer to objects, rather than to color, or texture, or activities. If a father points to a sheep grazing by the side of the road and says 'sheep,' his eighteen-month old daughter assumes that 'sheep' refers to the animal itself—not to the fact that it's white, or the fact that it's wooly, or the fact that it's munching on grass.

Another helpful strategy is to assume that the new word refers to *all* objects of that type and *only* objects of that type. So 'sheep' refers to sheep in general, not just to that one sheep in the field and not to animals other than sheep.

Perhaps the most important strategy of all involves noticing subtle clues in the behavior of adults. For example, realizing that adults tend to look at the thing they are talking about makes it a lot easier to understand the meaning of what is said. In one experiment with two-year-old children, an adult looked at a toy and said "Look! A modi!", just as the child's attention was drawn to another toy by lighting it up. When the children were then asked to retrieve the modi, they consistently chose the object that the adult had been looking at.

3. No two children do it the same way

Children who are learning a language share a common destination, but many paths lead there. Take word finding, for instance. Although many people don't realize it, we usually don't leave pauses between words when we speak—most sentences are just a single continuous stream of sounds. (If you have any doubts about this, try listening to a language that you don't speak. You'll quickly notice that the words all run together.)

Some children are initially better than others at finding words and at pronouncing them clearly. By age 18 months, they are producing short, clearly articulated, one-word utterances. They like to name people (*Daddy*, *Mommy*) and objects (*kitty*, *car*), and they use simple words like *up*, *hot*, and *hungry* to describe how they feel and what they want.

However, other children take quite a different approach. They memorize and produce relatively large chunks of speech. These chunks correspond to entire sequences of words in the adult language, but they are often poorly articulated—*whatsat*, *dunno*, *donwanna*, *gimmedat*, *awgone*—and it's unlikely that children know what the component parts are.

Some children fall in the middle of the spectrum, with a combination of single words and chunks. But none of this matters; these are just different paths to the same destination. Except in the rarest of cases, differences of this sort should not be cause for concern.

The same goes for the rate at which children learn language. Some will produce their first word at the age of ten months or even earlier, and some will not do so until eighteen months or later.

4. Mistakes are good

Children make many mistakes when they learn language. What parent hasn't heard 'goed' for 'went' or 'eated' for 'ate'? It's hard not to listen to a three year old without hearing errors of other types as well—'scissor it' for 'cut it,' 'let's broom the floor' for 'let's sweep the floor,' 'Can you needle it?' for 'Can you sew it?,' and so on.

Mistakes like these mean just one thing — children are doing what they are supposed to be doing; they are discovering the rules of English. We adults may not say 'goed' or 'eated,' but adding '-ed' to a verb IS the basic way to form the past tense in English. Most verbs work that way, and any new verb that enters the language has to form its past tense with '-ed'—that's why the past tense of 'blog' has to be 'blogged.' Figuring out the rule is a prelude to figuring out the exceptions.

The same goes for other mistakes children make. Maybe we don't scissor things, but we do sometimes hammer them. And maybe we don't broom floors, but we do mop them. English allows many words that refer to objects (like *hammer* and *mop*) to be converted into words that refer to actions involving those objects. A child who says 'Scissor it' or 'Let's broom the floor' has started to figure this out, and that's a good thing.

Mistakes don't disappear overnight. It may take several hundred exposures to the right past tense form of a verb before all the errors are eliminated. Immature forms may pop up for months or even years before they are finally laid to rest, but there's no reason for concern. Mistakes arise as a normal part of the language acquisition process, and they'll disappear as a normal part of that same process.

5. It's not how you say it, it's what you say

It's natural to want to help children with something as important as language. But the best way to help may not be what you think. One thing that's quite unlikely to work is trying to correct mistakes. A child whose parents insist on correcting *They no go* ('No, don't say that; say "They ... ARE ... NOT ... goING".') doesn't learn English any faster than a child whose

parents respond by saying, ‘That’s right. They aren’t going. They have something else to do at home.’

Using baby talk with a child probably doesn’t help either. A lot of mothers speak to very young children in short simple sentences, with higher-than-normal pitch and child-like pronunciation. That certainly doesn’t do any harm and it may help get the child’s attention, but it’s unlikely to be crucial for language learning. Children in cultures where mothers don’t do this still acquire language without difficulty.

Does this mean that children can learn to talk no matter what their circumstances? Not quite. No one—adult or child—has ever learned a language by listening to the radio. That’s because (unless you already speak the language) there’s no way to figure out what the voice on the radio is saying. Chances are it isn’t talking about what you’re looking at or what you’re feeling, and that’s not good enough.

Children need to hear language being used to talk about things they can see and feel, what they have just experienced or are about to experience, what they are curious about and what they care about. This is the type of speech that provides children with the raw material they need to learn a language—to figure out what words mean, where a subject or a direct object fits into a sentence, how to ask a question, and all the other things that make up language.

In fact, that’s the single most important thing that any parent needs to know about language. Talk to children about what matters to them. They will take care of the rest.

If you’d like to learn more about how children learn language or keep track of your own child’s linguistic journey, you might enjoy *How Children Learn Language*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2005.