9 Child language – learning to talk

9.1 The nature of child language acquisition

Just as children develop physically at more or less the same rate, so all normal children will develop language at about the same time. Because of this parallel between physical and mental growth, it could be suggested that LANGUAGE ACQUISITION is a biologically determined process. This cannot provide the complete explanation, however, because children deprived of normal social contact do not acquire language. This has been seen in cases where children have apparently been reared by wild animals away from a human environment. Equally, where children have been isolated and have received only minimal human contact, their language skills are non-existent. Even when reintroduced to society, children deprived of language during their early years fail to acquire much more than a very basic linguistic knowledge.

If language acquisition was innate (natural to the mind) and linked only to biological factors, then once the appropriate triggers were provided such children should have been able to acquire language in the usual way. Recorded cases of children who have experienced extreme social isolation have therefore led linguists to believe both that language acquisition is dependent on an appropriate linguistic input and that this language experience must be gained before a certain age.

In very general terms, it would seem that language acquisition is linked to:

- **physical growth**: the body has to be mature enough for the child to produce recognisable words by manipulating the speech organs effectively and consciously;
- **social factors**: the environment and culture in which a child grows up will influence the kind of language input experienced – this will, in turn, affect the child's linguistic abilities;
- a **critical age**: if input and language experience occur before a certain point in the child's physical and mental development, learning will be easy, quick, effortless and complete.

Because so many children acquire language effortlessly, it is easy to underestimate the complexity of the process taking place. Research in this field, however, is comparatively new, and linguists still have much to learn about language acquisition.

9.2 The theories of language acquisition

There are four key linguistic approaches that try to explain the ways in which children acquire language.

Behaviourist approach

The BEHAVIOURISTS believe that children learn to speak by **imitating** the language structures they hear. Parents automatically **reinforce** and correct children's utterances, and this forms the basis for a child's knowledge of language.

There are, however, significant problems with this theory of language development. Although imitation is obviously important in learning pronunciation and in acquiring new vocabulary, children do not seem to automatically pick up 'correct' forms from imitation. With irregular verbs, for instance, children do not necessarily use the standard form because they hear adults use it. Instead, they over-extend the language patterns they already know.

steal → stealed (stole) *grow → growed (grew)*

Equally, children seem unable to imitate adult 'corrections'.

CHILD: my train is /beə/
MOTHER: no (.) not 'by there' (.) just 'there'
CHILD: my train is /beə/
MOTHER: no just 'there'
CHILD: oh (.) my train is just /beə/

Such evidence suggests that child language acquisition cannot be based on imitation and reinforcement alone. Although children may add new words to their repertoire by using LABELS (words with a naming function) an adult has just introduced, they rarely imitate speech that is not directed at them. Equally, they do not appear to assimilate syntactical structures by imitation. Above all, this approach fails to explain how children are able to produce structures that they have not heard before.

Cognitive approach

The COGNITIVE approach links language acquisition directly to intellectual development. The research of Jean Piaget (1896–1980), a Swiss psychologist who did much work on the intellectual development of children, suggested that children can only use a certain linguistic structure when they understand the **concept** involved. For instance, children will only understand the past tense when they understand the concept of past time; they must have learnt to recognise and conceptualise visual and physical differences before they can talk about size and colour. This approach to language acquisition seems to be most effective in describing linguistic progress during the first one and a half years. Even at this stage, however, it is difficult to make precise connections between cognitive and linguistic developmental stages.

Nativist approach

The NATIVISTS believe that children are born with an **innate capacity** for language development. When the brain is exposed to speech, it will automatically begin to receive and make sense of utterances because it has been 'programmed' to do so. Noam Chomsky, an American linguist (1928–), suggests that the human brain has a **language acquisition device (LAD)** which enables children to use the language around them to work out what is and what is not linguistically acceptable. This device also provides young children with an innate understanding of the underlying grammatical rules that govern language usage. The programmed patterns are general, and the child then has to learn exact rules through trial and error. The nativists believe the presence of the LAD explains the facts that:

- all normal children acquire language skills in the same kind of order and at the same kind of speed;
- children are able to understand new sentences and constructions without having had any previous experience of them.

The nativists, however, do not appear to pay sufficient attention to the importance of input, the critical age aspect, and the role of imitation and reinforcement.

Interactive approach

Recent studies have shown the importance of INTERACTION. Adults alter the way they talk to children, giving them specific opportunities to take part in the discourse. For instance, utterances are simplified; intonation patterns are distinctive; extra information is given for clarification; and questions invite direct participation. Adults will also often expand on a child's speech and research suggests that this can be one of the most positive ways to increase a child's awareness of grammatical structures. This kind of interaction is called **'motherese'** or **'caretaker speech'**, and it differs quite markedly from speech between two adults. Key features can be summarised as follows:

- **Vocabulary** is simplified so that concrete objects are named in broad categories: *dog* rather than *spaniel* or *labrador*; *ball* rather than *football*, *cricket ball* or *tennis ball*. **'Baby words'** like *doggie* or *moo-cow* do not help a child to learn language more efficiently. The reduplication of sounds in words like *baba* and *dada*, on the other hand, does enable babies to communicate because the words are easy to say.
- **Conversations** tend to be based on concrete things that relate directly to the child's environment.
- **Sentence structures** tend to be short and often use pauses to stress the end of grammatical units. Certain sentence patterns recur regularly: *where is* _____*?*; *do you want a* _____*?*; *that's* (pointing) *a* _____.
- **Commands** occur frequently and young children assimilate and use them in their own speech.
- **Tag questions** – questions added to the end of a statement inviting a response from the listener: *isn't it?*, *aren't we?* – are used to invite direct participation and to encourage a child to ask for clarification if necessary. The high percentage of questions makes 'caretaker speech' distinctive.
- **Repetition** reinforces new words or structures and clarifies meaning.
- Parents often use a higher and wider **pitch range** when talking to small children, possibly because it keeps the child's attention. The singsong intonation and exaggerated stress on key words also make 'caretaker speech' distinctive.
- The **pace** is often slower than in conversations with other adults.

Because the baby or young child receives attention as a direct result of any attempts to communicate, the process is rewarding. 'Caretaker speech' is therefore an important means of creating a positive relationship with the parent which will form the basis for future meaningful communication.

Although the benefits of 'caretaker speech' are clear, it is not possible to identify precisely the links between the language structures parents use and their appearance in the child's language.

Each of the four theoretical approaches highlights a particular element of child language acquisition, but none can provide a complete explanation on its own. More research is needed before linguists can be completely sure about the processes that take place, but it is possible to summarise the basic principles:

- to acquire language, children must be part of a **social and linguistic community**;
- **physical development** plays a part in children's ability to articulate the particular phonemes making up a language;
- children have some kind of **instinctive awareness** of language patterns which enables them to experiment with structures that they have not previously heard;
- in order to use language structures (like the comparative, for example), children must be able to **intellectually conceptualise** the world around them – language acquisition is therefore linked in some way to intellectual development;
- through **imitation**, children can acquire new vocabulary and may be introduced to new grammatical structures;
- **parental reinforcement** highlights non-standard usage and draws attention to 'correct' versions – although children often do not accept adult correction:
- **especially adapted forms of speech** create a positive speech environment in which children are encouraged to participate in a meaningful way.

9.3 The function of communication

Interaction with other language users gives children a purpose – if they too acquire language, they will be able to participate in the communication processes that are taking place around them. They may begin by using different kinds of cries to attract attention to their needs, but as they become more adept at using language, so their range of communication can become more complex. Through their use of language, they can:

- establish relationships with the people around them;
- express their feelings and opinions;
- get others to do as they wish;
- find out new information by asking questions;
- get what they need by explaining exactly what they want;
- communicate their ideas to other people;
- tell stories and use language expressively.

As children acquire language, they become active participants in society. They can suddenly communicate purposefully in a way that others can interpret easily and so can express their own individuality.

9.4 Features of child language

Children acquire language skills rapidly during the first three years of their life. Even before birth, babies have become accustomed to the sound of the human voice; at one day old, they can distinguish their mother's voice from others; and by their second week, they can distinguish between human voices and non-human sounds. This prepares the ground for the communication that will take place before recognisable words are uttered.

Mothers tend to instinctively encourage interaction from very early on by establishing the pattern for conversation. They will:

- leave pauses where responses could be made;
- use question structures frequently;
- include the baby's own 'sounds' in a running dialogue.

This intuitive behaviour prepares babies for language acquisition. It immerses them directly in a simplified version of the linguistic patterns of the adult world by establishing basic turn-taking structures.

The process of language acquisition can be broken down into five main stages and linguists consider certain key areas within each one: **pronunciation**; **prosodic features**; **lexis**; **grammar**; and PRAGMATICS (an understanding of the social factors affecting spoken interaction).

0–12 months

In the first two months, the sounds babies make are linked to their **physical conditions**. They cry if they are hungry or wet; they gulp, burp and cough noisily; and they grizzle if they want to be held. They have to control the flow of air to make these noises and this same control will be used in a more refined way as their ability to communicate becomes more sophisticated.

Between 2 and 5 months, babies begin to experiment more and start to respond directly to parental smiles. At 6–8 weeks, babies will often begin to **coo**. This is a softer sound than crying, made up of velar sounds like [k] and [g] and high vowels like [i] and [u:]. As the baby realises that cooing will elicit a response from the mother, the first interactive dialogues begin. Although cooing sounds like [gæ] and [gu:] are sometimes strung together, there are not yet any recognisable patterns. Between 2 and 4 months, the baby will begin to **respond to the 'meaning'** of different tones of voice – anger, pleasure, humour. At around 16 weeks, the first **laugh** will encourage even more varied responses from the mother and this widens the scope of possible interaction.

Physical developments at this stage also prepare the baby for greater communication:

- as the child starts to look around and sit up, the mother will point to things and her intonation will become more exaggerated;
- simple games like peekaboo make interaction fun;
- the tongue starts to move horizontally and vertically, enabling the baby to produce a wider range of sounds;
- the vocal cords are used in conjunction with the movements of the tongue;
- the lips and the tongue play a greater part in sound production, helping the baby to make new sounds – it is possible that babies are beginning to imitate the mouth movements of adult speech at this stage.

The parents will respond instinctively to these physiological developments, and interaction becomes more like a two-way communication.

From 6 months, babies begin to **relate their utterances to specific contexts**. They seem to **recognise some words**, particularly names of family members. By the end of the first year, they will probably be able to **point to things in answer to a question**; to **respond** in some way to situations requiring **predictable feedback** (*say bye-bye*; *say night-night*); and to **understand several words** even though they cannot yet say any recognisable words. Because the parents will now respond more to utterances that appear to be meaningful rather than random sounds, the baby's communication will begin to be more deliberate. Utterances in the 6–12 month period will become **more varied**. Segments will be longer and will consist of frequently **repeated consonant and vowel-like patterns**. The **pitch level** will usually be high, but will also be marked by **glides** from high to low as the baby experiments.

From the baby's experimentation with a large range of sounds, a smaller, more frequently occurring set will emerge. This stage is known as BABBLING. The sounds are now less randomly selected and begin to adopt rhythms that are closer to that of adult speech. **Reduplication of patterns**, like [bæbæbæ], and sequences in which the consonants and vowels change in each segment, like [dæbæ], are common. As the baby reaches 9 months, **recognisable intonation patterns** will be used for these consonant-vowel combinations. By 10–11 months, when babies can pull themselves into a standing position, they will use **vocalisations to express emotions**. The utterances at this stage are important because they will form the basis for the sounds of early speech.

Imitations and **sound play** at this point in their linguistic development give babies a much wider experience of the social role of speech. Equally, by **observing adults**, they learn a great deal about conversation even though they cannot yet fully take part. Although many of the sounds of babbling, particularly in the earlier part of this period, do not appear to have meaning, babies do seem to consciously use them to communicate with the people around them. This kind of language use is called JARGON.

12–18 months

Towards the end of the first year, children are able to indicate their intentions more specifically. **Intonation** is used to mark different kinds of purpose: the meaning of particular utterances will probably still be unclear, but intonation patterns will enable parents to interpret them. At this stage, the first real steps towards language acquisition are made as the **first words** are formed, often with the same intonation patterns each time. Language used at this stage will not really resemble adult speech, but parents familiar with the context in which PROTO-WORDS appear will be able to understand many of the utterances. Up to this stage, almost all children develop in the same way and at more or less the same speed, but after this children's language becomes much more individual.

From 12–18 months, children begin to produce a **variety of recognisable single-word utterances** based on everyday objects. These utterances are HOLOPHRASTIC – they are grammatically unstructured and each consists of a single word. At this stage, pronunciation is often idiosyncratic. In general, children will tend to choose and avoid the same kinds of sounds, but each child will have marked preferences for some sounds rather than others. Equally, the same child might pronounce one word in different ways at different times: *cheese* might be articulated as /gi:/, /ki:s/ and /i:s/.

Children at this stage will be acquiring between ten and twenty new words a month. The vast majority of these words will have a **naming function**, focusing on people, food, body parts, toys, clothing and household things. During the holophrastic stage, children use a **limited vocabulary** to refer to a wide range of unrelated things. OVER-EXTENSION is therefore common – children use the same word to refer to different objects because they see a similarity in size, shape, sound or movement. *Baby*, for instance, may refer to all children; or *flower* to anything with leaves. It is common for the middle term of a set of HYPONYMS (groups of related words in which specific words are seen as sub-categories of a general word) to be used: for instance, *dog* instead of *animal* or *spaniel*. As the child gains linguistic experience, over-extension is replaced by a **narrowing of the field of reference** – more words are learnt so references can be more precise. Other examples of a lack of linguistic sophistication at this stage can be seen in:

- UNDER-EXTENSION, in which words are given a narrower range of reference than is usual – *car*, for instance, may be used to refer only to a family car;
- MISMATCH, in which words are used to label objects with no apparent logic – *doll*, for instance, is used to label a child's trousers.

Between 12 and 18 months, the first **modifiers** will be used to describe things; **action utterances** (one word accompanied by gestures) like *gosleep* or *allgone* will form

the basis for the first verbs; and **social expressions** like *bye-bye* will mark a growing awareness of cultural expectations. Although the utterances are holophrastic, intonation and gesture help the single word to convey the meaning and mood of a sentence. The **conversational skills** of a child at this stage are still limited. Adults continue to do most of the talking and much of the child's communication takes the form of a **monologue**.

18–24 months

By the age of 2, a child's **vocabulary** has probably reached two hundred or more words. **Pronunciation** continues to be erratic, but certain commonly occurring pronunciations can be identified:

- words are often shortened, with unstressed syllables dropped: /teɪtəʊ/ *potato* and /mɑːtəʊ/ *tomato*;
- consonant clusters are avoided: /gaɪ/ *sky* and /deɪ/ *stay*;
- consonants at the end of words are dropped: /be/ *bed* and /je/ *yes*;
- many words are simplified using reduplication of sounds: /dəʊdəʊ/ *Joseph* and /biːbiː/ *baby*;
- vowels often differ from adult pronunciation: /diːdiː/ *daddy* and /nuː/ *no*;
- initial position consonants, particularly velars and fricatives, are often replaced: /dɒp/ *shop* or *stop*, /duːlz/ *tools* and /det/ *get*.

The standardisation of pronunciation takes place over a long period. Some consonants will not be produced accurately until after the age of four. Between the ages of 1½ and 2, for instance, children will begin to pronounce the voiced alveolar nasal [n], but it may take another twelve months for accurate pronunciation of:

- the voiceless labiodental fricative [f];
- the voiced bilabial approximant [w];
- the voiced velar nasal [ŋ].

Between 12 and 18 months, although two words are sometimes used they are spoken as a single unit. From 18 months, words are used as distinct rhythmic units and they can often be analysed as **grammatical sequences**.

S	P	S	A	P	O	S	C
(baby)	(go)	(dummy)	(there)	(eat)	(apple)	(sock)	(red)

These minimal structures mean that the child can describe: a person carrying out an action; the position of something; the effect of a process (verb) on a person or thing (object); and a person's or thing's condition. Adults respond to such utterances even when they are not grammatical or complete, and thus the child becomes a part of real communication. The adult can often determine the meaning from the context and from the child's intonation. For example, an utterance like *Jo-Jo cup* may mean:

- *this is Jo-Jo's cup* (possession);
- *give me my cup* (command);
- *Jo-Jo has got his cup* (statement);
- *where is Jo-Jo's cup?* (question).

During this period, children also begin to use some **inflections**. At 18 months, children will begin to experiment with the present participle although it will not be used correctly for several months. **Questions** will appear at this stage, usually marked by a rising intonation: *eat cheese now?* Sometimes, however, *wh-* question words like *where?* and *what?* will be attached to the beginning of an utterance: *where teddy?*; *what that?*

At the end of this stage, the first **negative words** emerge. *No* and *not* are used as one-word sentences or are tagged onto the beginning of any expression: *no* (in response to a request); *no sit*; *not car*.

The **feedback** children receive during this period of language acquisition is one of the most important elements in the learning process since it establishes them as participants in 'real' communication. Because parents respond to all utterances, even if they do not appear to be meaningful, children are encouraged to experiment and therefore to work out what is and what is not acceptable.

2–3 years

This stage is marked by what is called TELEGRAPHIC TALK. Only the most important lexical words are used to express ideas, and grammatical function words like prepositions, determiners, auxiliary verbs and inflections are often omitted. To understand children's telegraphic speech, it is important to know the **context** – particularly because children tend to talk about the present rather than the past or the future.

Vocabulary expands very quickly; by 2 years 6 months (2;6) children initiate talk rather than just responding to adults. They become inventive, creating new words from patterns they have heard but do not remember accurately.

buffalosaurus (buffalo + dinosaur) tipping bronco (bucking bronco)

Pronunciation becomes closer to the standard adult form too.

tractor: /tæk-tæk/ (2;6) → /tæktə/ (2;8) → /træktə/ (2;9)
badger: /bæbɪdʒ/ (2;5) → /bædʒə/ (2;6)
shirt: /sɜːt/ (1;11) → /ʃɜːt/ (2;6)

Immature pronunciations typical of the previous developmental stage often continue during the 24–36 month period. Some sounds, however, are standardised:

- the bilabial plosives [p] and [b], the alveolar plosives [t] and [d], and the velar plosives [k] and [g];
- the voiced bilabial nasal [m];
- the voiceless glottal fricative [h];
- the voiced palatal approximant [j].

Three further sounds will begin to be pronounced correctly between the ages of 2;8 and 4;0:

- the voiceless alveolar fricative [s];
- the voiced alveolar lateral [l];
- the voiced post-alveolar approximant [r].

The age at which children accurately produce these sounds will vary, but most will be using them correctly by the age of 4.

The pronunciation of many words is still idiosyncratic, but adult correction is not effective in encouraging children to change their pronunciations. Because they do not seem to hear their own mispronunciations, children do not recognise the mispronounced word the parent tries to change. If a child says /æliːæm/ for *animal* she will not recognise the difference between her own and the standard version. Therefore if an adult tries to persuade her to say the word differently, she will be unable to do so.

CHILD: full /diːm ədɜːn/
MOTHER: is your boat going full /diːm ədɜːn/?
CHILD: no

MOTHER: how is your boat going?
CHILD: full /diːm ədɜːn/
MOTHER: oh (.) full steam astern
CHILD: yes

Utterances become longer. Combinations of three and four words are used in a variety of ways, and **clause elements** are less likely to be deleted.

P O
(Need) (potty) (2;4)

S P O
(Mummy) (give) (chair) (2;4)

S P A
(I) (going) (to your house). (2;7)

S P O A
(Little pigs) (want) (a ride) (in the boat). (2;7)

S P O
(We) ('ve got) (bricks that you can use like heavy boxes to pile up for your
SCl–RelCl SCl–NFCl
presents and things). (2;10)

Utterances are often quite sophisticated because of the embedding of subordinate clauses, and children are often using structures that are far more complicated than the simple sentences of early reading books. **Inflections** are used more frequently and more accurately during this period. Initially suffixes will be overused before standardisation occurs.

-s suffix to mark plural nouns: *sheep* → *sheeps*; *information* → *informations*
-ed suffix to mark regular past tense: *steal* → *stealed*; *go* → *goed*; *build* → *builded*

Auxiliary verbs are still often omitted, but usage becomes more accurate towards the age of 3.

Little pigs always *having* fun. (2;7) It *be chugging* in the tunnel. (2;10)

Modal auxiliaries are used more frequently to convey variations in attitude.

Frog *might* have a swim. (2;7) We'*ll* need a ladder. (2;10)

Present participles are more likely to be used with the primary verb *be*, although this will still often have an unmarked form. At the age of 2 ***wh-* question words** will be tagged on to the beginning of utterances. *What?* and *where?* will be used first, followed by *why?* and later *how?* and *who?*

Where baby? (2;4)
Where's the carriage? (2;10) *What* the name? (2;10)

Throughout the period, question structures become more complex, although the use of rising intonation to mark a question is still common.

Daddy put it ón. You need a big bóx.
Why did Daddy put it on? (2;10) *Do* you need a big box? (2;10)

Negatives are used with more subtlety too. Additional forms like *can't* and *won't* appear alongside *no* and *not*, which are now placed in front of the appropriate verb rather than at the beginning of the utterance.

No books there. (2;4) I *not* tell story. (2;6) I *can't* know. (2;8)
I *don't* know. I *didn't* say anything. It's *not* Lixie's. (2;10)

Pronouns are used with more variety during this developmental stage, but children are often inaccurate. Because they hear themselves referred to as *you*, they tend to use the second person pronoun to talk about themselves. Equally, the first person singular *I* is used to refer to other people. This shows that imitation does play a part in language acquisition. Although children may copy the pronoun referencing they hear, they seem instinctively to sense that their meaning is unclear – their words are therefore often accompanied by gestures to clarify the reference. A similar confusion occurs with **possessive determiners**.

CHILD: I mending /maɪs/ chair
MOTHER: are you mending your chair?
CHILD: no (.) I mending /maɪs/ chair (*pointing to mother*)
MOTHER: oh (.) you're mending mummy's chair
CHILD: yes (.) Mummy's chair (2;5)

As they become more familiar with the different pronouns and determiners, however, children will correct their own mistakes. By the age of 3;0 they will often repair a breakdown in understanding by repeating the utterance with the key word changed.

this toast is for you (1) toast is for me

Children continue to experiment with language patterns and although they do not always get them right, they clearly begin to initiate and practise new structures.

willn't satting pavementless (no pavements) sickless (not ill)

Between the ages of 2 and 3, children develop language skills at a remarkable speed. Grammar and pronunciation become steadily more consistent and standard; conversational skills become more sophisticated; and children actively develop their vocabulary by asking for new names and labels.

From 3 years

After the age of 3, telegraphic speech is replaced by more **fluent** and **sophisticated** language use. **Vocabulary** continues to expand and diversify and **pronunciation** continues to become more standard. The last consonantal sounds to be produced accurately are:

- the voiceless palato-alveolar fricative [ʃ];
- the palato-alveolar affricates [tʃ] (voiceless) and [dʒ] (voiced);
- the voiced labiodental fricative [v];
- the voiced alveolar fricative [z];
- the dental fricatives [ð] (voiced) and [θ] (voiceless).

The first sounds listed above may be standard before the age of 3½, but others may not be pronounced in a mature way until after the age of 4.

The **structure of utterances** become more varied. Co-ordination is common by the age of 3, but now subordination is increasingly used. Conjunctions like *because* (/kɒs/), *so*, *if*, *after* and *when* help children to create longer sentences – sentences are often made up of four or five clause elements. The utterances are not always grammatical and are often marked by **normal non-fluency features**. For a time, regular and irregular **past tense verbs** will be confused and a child may use both a standard and a non-standard variant: *broked/breaked* and *broke*; *sitted* and *sat*; *bringed* and *brought*; and *blewed/blowed* and *blew*. By the age of 4, however, most children have worked out the appropriate patterns. It is usually during the early part of this stage that children begin to use the **third person singular inflection *-s*** more consistently. It appears first with lexical verbs and slightly later with primary auxiliaries: *here it comes*; *the song says she blew*; *he's got a little son.*

Questions are now framed by inverting the subject and verb of a declarative sentence, although in the early part of the period, children do not always use an inversion following a *wh-* word. They have to learn that questions beginning with a *wh-* word must still alter the word order and that where there is no auxiliary verb, the dummy auxiliary *do* must be added: *where is the picture?*; *did I have my milk?* **Other auxiliary forms** like *didn't* and *won't* become part of the repertoire at this stage, and the use of *not* becomes more accurate: *I didn't catch it*; *she won't give it to me*. **Multiple negatives** are used for emphasis: *I didn't get nothing today*. The last negative form to be acquired is usually *isn't*. This means that some inaccurate negative constructions from the previous developmental stage continue to appear alongside standard constructions: *he not going* instead of *he isn't going*; *this not Lixie's* instead of *this isn't Lixie's*. In the early school years, children will begin to understand the difference between more complicated negative structures like *any*.

During this last period of dramatic linguistic change, children learn more about the art of **conversation**. They initiate dialogue and become skilful in controlling turn-taking. They can respond appropriately to other speakers and they start to learn how to alter their register for different contexts and audiences. They are able to anticipate problems and to repair simple breakdowns in communication by repeating things that have not been understood or by asking for clarification.

The 4-year-old will begin to sort out any remaining grammatical inaccuracies and language use will become consistently more adult. By the age of 5, children usually have an operating vocabulary of more than two thousand words and they will be using more complicated grammatical structures. Over the next years (6–11), children will acquire what will probably be their last intuitive grammatical knowledge: **comparative** structures; **comment** and **attitude adverbials**; the ability to recognise the **differences between similar sentences**; and an awareness of the **different ways in which meaning can be conveyed** (active/passive sentences). They will also begin to recognise **implicit meaning** and **metaphorical uses** of language. Although most grammatical structures will have been understood by the ages of 8 or 9, semantics will continue to cause problems.

9.5 Types of child language

Monologues

Children involved in imaginative play will often speak at length about what they are doing. Their actions will be accompanied by a discourse which has no obvious intended audience – they may adopt the role of a character, describe their actions, retell or create stories, issue commands or ask questions. As they become older and more able to play alone, the speech utterances become more like narrative. As their language skills develop, children are able to construct a complete discourse without needing to rely on adult interventions to sustain the speech.

ACTIVITY 9.1a

The following extracts were recorded over a period of three months. In each instance, Joseph is playing and the speech accompanies his activities. His parents are present, but they do not take part in the spoken discourse.

Children acquire new language skills incredibly quickly between the ages of 2 and 3 and the transcriptions here demonstrate linguistic and syntactical features that are typical of the stages of child language acquisition. Within three months, the vocabulary, grammar and the ability to sustain an extended turn change noticeably. By focusing on Joseph's pronunciation, his lexical choices, his grammar and his ability to create a narrative, it is possible to chart key features of his language development.

Read through the extracts and comment on:

1 the lexical and grammatical features;
2 Joseph's ability to sustain an extended turn;
3 the developmental differences revealed by each transcript.

Each transcription is preceded by a standard written version using traditional orthography and punctuation to help you follow Joseph's immature speech patterns. The transcriptions mark prosodic features selectively. A key to the symbols used can be found on page 86.

Joseph, aged 2;4, playing with his ride-along tractor, pretending to be a local beach life guard

Written version

Fall off. Yes. Dirt on my shirt. Mm. Fall off tractor. Dirt on shirt. Yes. Mm. Think. Mm. Dirt from sand. Fall off tractor. Oh yes dirt on me mm oh oh. Move round chair. Move tractor. Vroom, vroom, vroom, vroom, vroom, vroom, vroom. Cold. Blooming cold. Blooming, blooming cold. Life guard brush off dust. Fell off. Sand. Life guard. Dirt. Little little (*indistinct*). Look out. Tractor in sea.

Spoken version

1 fall off (.) /jeθ/ (.) dirt on my (.) /sɜːt/ (4) mm (5) fall off (.) /træk-træk/ oh dirt on (.) /sɜːt/ /jeθ/ mm /fɪŋk/ (.) mm (.) dirt (1) from sand (.) /fɔːlə/ off (.) /træk-træk/ (1) oh /jeθ/ dirt (.) /æn/ (.) me mm oh oh (.) move /raʊn teə/ (.) move /træk-træk/ (.) /vrʊːm vrʊːm vrʌ́m vrʌ́m vrʌ́m vrʌ́m vrʌ́m/ (.) /kɒld/ (.) /blʌmɪn kɒld/ (.)
5 /blʌmɪn blʌmɪn kɒld/ (2) life guard (2) /brʌs/ (.) off (.) /dʌs/ (.) fell off (.) sand (.) life guard (.) dirt (.) /lɪlɪ/ (.) /lɪlɪ/ (*indistinct*) (2) look /aʊ/ (.) /træk-træk/ in sea

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COMMENTARY

The extract here is clearly an example of telegraphic talk. At the age of 2;4, Joseph's utterances are staccato and his intonation is often monotone. Although he is joining words together to form grammatical units, his utterances are incomplete.

The following specific points can be made about Joseph's language at the age of 2;4.

LEXIS

Joseph's vocabulary is growing quickly and the examples here show how children learn from the range of experiences to which they are exposed.

Linguistic features	*Examples*
Words taken from familiar stories (Raymond Briggs, *Father Christmas*)	/blʌmɪn kɒld/ blooming cold (l. 5)
Words taken from personal experience (limited lexical set of the 'seaside')	life guard (l. 5); sand (l. 2); sea (l. 7)

Words taken from the play context	/træk-træk/ tractor (l. 1); /sɜːt/ shirt (l. 2); /teə/ chair (l. 3)
Onomatopoeic words	/vruːm/ /vrʌm/ (l. 4)
Growing range of verbs	fall (l. 1); move (l. 3); look (l. 6); /brʌs/ brush (l. 5); /fɪŋk/ think (l. 2)
First modifiers used	/blʌmɪn/ (l. 4) – euphemism, slang for 'bloody'; life (l. 5) – noun modifier for *guard*

PRONUNCIATION

Many of the immature pronunciations from the previous developmental stage are still evident in Joseph's speech. Some simplified words continue to be used, although most are now in a recognisable adult form.

Linguistic features	*Examples*
Immature vocabulary (reduplication)	/træk-træk/ (l. 1); /lɪlɪ/ little (l. 6)
Difficult phonemes are avoided: • the voiceless palato-alveolar affricate [tʃ] is replaced	/teə/ (l. 3)
Initial position fricatives are replaced: • the voiceless palato-alveolar fricative [ʃ] • the voiceless dental fricative [θ]	/sɜːt/ (l. 2) /fɪŋk/ (l. 2)
Consonants in the final position are dropped or replaced by another phoneme: • the voiceless alveolar fricative [s] • the voiceless alveolar plosive [t] • the voiced alveolar plosive [d] • the voiced velar nasal [ŋ] • the voiceless palato-alveolar fricative [ʃ]	/jeθ/ yes (l. 1) /dʌs/ dust (l. 5) /raʊn/ round (l. 3) /blʌmɪn/ bloom*ing* (l. 5) /brʌs/ (l. 5)
Vowels differ from adult pronunciation: • [əʊ] → [ɒ] • [uː] → [ʌ] • [ɒ] → [æ]	/kɒld/ (l. 5) /blʌmɪn/ bl*oo*ming (l. 4) /æn/ (l. 3)
Idiosyncratic pronunciation is used alongside the adult form	fall (l. 1) /fɔːlə/ (l. 2)

GRAMMAR

Utterances are getting longer and combinations of different clause elements make them more varied, but Joseph's clauses are still incomplete. As is typical of telegraphic speech, some clause sites are not filled and determiners are elided. Inflections are not used in this extract and the verb *to be* is omitted. Joseph's meaning is usually clear, but there are points at which an outsider would struggle to understand.

Linguistic features	*Examples*
Clause elements are now quite varied and are usually in the appropriate position: • (S P) (S) A	(S) A (dirt) (on my /sɜːt/) (l. 1)
• (S) P O	P O (fall off) (/træk-træk/) (l. 1)
• (S) P A	P A (move) (/raʊn/) (l. 3)
• (S P) C	C (/blʌmɪn kɒld/) (l. 5)
There is no evidence of co-ordination yet – the utterances are basically simple. There is one grammatically complete simple utterance, although the third person singular inflection is not used	S P O (life guard) (/brʌs/ off) (/dʌs/) (l. 5)
Most of the extract is in the declarative mood, but Joseph uses two imperatives	/fɪŋk/ (l. 2) look (l. 6)
Most verbs are unmarked for tense, but Joseph uses one irregular past tense form accurately	fell off (l. 5)
No subject pronouns are used but a first person object pronoun and a possessive determiner are used accurately	/æn/ (.) me (l. 3) my (.) /sɜːt/ (l. 1)

SUSTAINING AN EXTENDED TURN

Joseph's speech is all directed towards himself – he shows little awareness of his parents although they are present. His monologue, however, becomes almost a running dialogue with himself. His discourse is marked by **normal non-fluency features** like the repeated *mm* which helps him to sustain the extended turn. The **pauses** are all brief and Joseph seems immersed in the story he is creating. The **rhythm** is still very disjointed and the **lexis** and **syntax** are quite repetitive.

ACTIVITY 9.1b

Joseph, aged 2;7, playing with a miniature park, the three bears' house and various characters

Written version

Case little pigs want ride in a boat. In a boat. Going in a boat. Always going in a boat. Always going in a boat. Have fun. Always having fun in girl's house. Oh be. Have tea. Beings, beings, beings, beings under there. Not anybody in the park. No anybody in the park. Nobody in the park. Frog playing in it. Frog might have a swim. Swimming. 'We mi. might visit the park' say Mummy Bear, Daddy Bear and Baby Bear and Baby Bear might see little wee wee frog in the pond. Baby Bear might have a look over there. Look over there. Having a swim. Oh Goldilocks peeping and peeping and peeping.

Goldilocks. Goldilocks ha. hang on. Somebody in the pool. Peace and quiet. Goldilocks go and cook. I coming going to your house little while seeing you in the pond and peered and peered and peered and peered over the fence and Baby Bear and the frog went to went to find the pool. Little little fre. Little animals in in the in the pool. Goldilocks, Goldilocks, Goldilocks saying 'hello all'. Somebody else in the pond. Somebody else in the pond. All the trees. All yellow trees. All yellow trees.

Spoken version

case /lɪlɪ/ pigs want ride in a boat (2) in a boat (.) going in a boat (.) all (.) ways going in a boat (.) all (.) ways going in a boat (3) have fun (.) all (.) ways having fun in girl's house (.) oh be (.) have tea (.) /biːʌŋs biːʌŋs biːʌŋs/ (.) /biːɪŋs/ under /eə/ (.) not anybody in /ə/ park (.) no (.) anybody in /ə/ park (.) no (1) body in /ə/ park (.) frog playing /ɪnɪt/ (.) frog might (.) have a /wɪm/ (.) /wɪmɪŋ/ (2) we mi. (.) might visit /ə/ park say Mummy Bear and Daddy Bear and /biːbiː/ Bear and /biːbiː/ Bear might see /lɪlɪ/ wee wee frog in /ə/ pond (.) /biːbiː/ Bear might (.) have (.) look over /eə/ (.) look over /eə/ (.) having a /wɪm/ (.) oh (.) /gɒlioks piːpɪn/ and /piːpɪn/ and /piːpɪn/ (.) /gɒlioks/ (.) /gɒlɒs/ ha. (.) hang on (1) /sʌmbiː/ in /ə/ pool (.) peace and quiet (1) /gɒlɒks/ go and cook (.) I /kʌmɪn/ (.) going to /ɔːz/ house /lɪlɪ/ while seeing /uː/ in /ə/ pond (.) and peered and peered and peered and peered over fence and /biːbiː/ Bear (.) and and /ə/ frog went to (.) went to find pool (.) /lɪlɪ lɪlɪ fre/ (.) /lɪlɪ æliːæms/ (10) in (2) in /ə/ in /ə/ pool (.) /gɒlɒs/ (.) /gɒlɒs gɒlɒks/ saying hello all (.) somebody else in /ə/ pond (.) somebody else in /ə/ pond (.) all /ə/ trees (.) all /leləʊ/ trees all /leləʊ/ trees

COMMENTARY

The second transcript is longer and Joseph is more able to sustain his discourse. He is becoming more standard in both his pronunciation and grammar, and uses a more varied range of prosodic features. His monologue is now much closer to a recognisable form of narrative which most listeners could understand.

Focusing more closely, it is possible to list the following points about Joseph's developmental stage.

LEXIS

The vocabulary used in this example is far more diverse. Although it is still dominated by concrete nouns like *trees* (l. 16) and *house* (l. 3), abstract nouns like *peace* and *quiet* (l. 10) are beginning to appear. Dynamic verbs like *playing* (l. 5) and *going* (l. 1) occur more frequently, but stative verbs like *want* (l. 1) and *have* (l. 2) are more common than in the earlier extract. Equally, having understood the concept of position, a range of prepositions like *under* (l. 4), *over* (l. 8) and *in* (l. 1) are used to describe 'place' precisely.

Linguistic features	*Examples*
Words are still often linked to familiar stories	/lɪlɪ/ pigs (l. 1); Mummy Bear and Daddy Bear and /biːbi/ Bear (ll. 6–7); /gɒlɒks/ (l. 10)
As Joseph's vocabulary widens, he begins to use synonyms	pool (l. 10); pond (l. 12) /piːpɪn/ (l. 9); peered (l. 12)
By listening to adults, Joseph is able to identify and later use collocations	peace and quiet (l. 10)
Modifiers are used more often and are more varied	*wee wee* frog – Adj (l. 7) *girl's* house – possessive NP (l. 3) /leləʊ/ trees – Adj (l. 16)
Inevitably much of the vocabulary is still linked to Joseph's own experiences	park (l. 0); trees (l. 16); houses (l. 3)
The verbs are far more varied	want (l. 1); have (l. 2); playing (l. 5); /wɪmɪŋ/ (l. 6)

PRONUNCIATION

In just three months, there is a noticeable difference in Joseph's pronunciation: most words are now pronounced standardly; words that are still pronounced in an immature way are usually close enough to the adult form to be quite easily recognisable.

Linguistic features	*Examples*
Immature vocabulary (reduplication)	/lɪlɪ/ (l. 1)
Consonant clusters still avoided: • [sw] is simplified	/wɪm/ (l. 9), /wɪmɪŋ/ (l. 6)
Initial position fricatives are absent: • the voiced dental fricative [ð] • the voiceless glottal fricative [h]	/eə/ there (l. 4); /ə/ the (l. 4) /uː/ who (l. 11)
Vowels differ from the 'caretaker speech' (Modified RP), but self-correction eventually results in a standard pronunciation of the vowel: • [iːʌ] instead of [iːɪ] • [iː] instead of [eɪ], adult = /beɪbiː/	/biːʌŋs/, /biːɪŋs/ beings (ll. 3–4) /biːbiː/ baby (l. 7)
The diphthong in the first syllable is simplified and Joseph reduplicates a pure vowel instead • [ɒ] instead of [əʊ], adult = /gəʊldiːlɒks/	/gɒlɒs/ (l. 10)
The voiced palatal approximant [j] is absent	/ɔːz/ yours (l. 11)
Some pronunciations are still idiosyncratic. Certain words are pronounced inconsistently – sometimes they will have an adult form and sometimes not	/æliːæms/ animals (l. 14) /gɒlɒs/, /gɒlɒks/, /gɒlɒks/ Goldilocks (ll. 9–10, 14) /sʌmbiː/ somebody (l. 10)

GRAMMAR

Joseph's language is now more grammatically complete. Determiners are usually included; inflections appear more consistently; and sentences include both co-ordination and subordination. Co-ordination:

S P P
(/gɒlɒks/) (go) (and) (cook) (ll. 10–11)
conj

Subordination:

S P A A A
(I) (/kʌmɪn/ going) (to /ɔːz/ house) (/lɪlɪ/ while) (seeing /uː/ in /ə/ pond) (and)
SCI–NFCl

P A S P A
(peered. . .) (over fence) (and) (/biːbiː/. . .) (went) (to find pool) (ll. 11–13)
SCI–NFCl

Linguistic features	*Examples*
Clause elements are used in a variety of ways to make the narrative interesting. Clause sites are rarely left empty now:	
• S P O	S P O (frog) (might have) (a swim) (l. 5)
• S P A	S P A (/gɒlɒs/) (hang) (on) (l. 10)
• S P O A	S P O A (/biːbiː/ Bear) (might have) (look) (over /eə/) (l. 8)
The narrative uses the declarative mood	frog might have a swim (l. 5)
The verb *to be* is still elided	somebody else in the pond (l. 15) frog playing /ɪnɪt/ (l. 5)
Quoting and quoted clauses are used, adding to the effective creation of a narrative atmosphere	QUOTED QUOTING ('We might visit. . .', (say MB and DB and /biːbiː/) (ll. 6–7)
There are still many unmarked verbs, but some verb forms are marked for tense	hang (l. 10); cook (l. 11) – unmarked verb forms went (l. 13) – irregular simple past tense
Inflections are used more standardly: • present participle inflection *-ing* • regular past tense inflection *-ed* • possessive noun suffix inflection *'s* • plural noun suffix *-s*	 having (l. 3), playing (l. 5), going (l. 2) peered (l. 12) girl's house (l. 3) /biːʌŋs/ (l. 3)
There is still no evidence of third person singular *-s* inflection	/gɒlɒks/ go[*es*] and cook[*s*] (ll. 10–11)
Modal auxiliaries are used correctly	might visit (l. 6)
Pronouns are now more accurate: • first person subject pronouns • compound indefinite pronouns	 *I* /kʌmɪn/ (l. 11); *we* might visit (l. 6) anybody (l. 4); nobody (l. 5); somebody (l. 10)
• second person possessive pronoun used as a possessive determiner	/ɔːz/ house (l. 11)
Negatives are used here – Joseph consciously works through a pattern until he finds the structure he believes is right	not anybody . . . (.) no (.) anybody . . . (.) no (1) body (ll. 4–5)

SUSTAINING AN EXTENDED TURN

In this example, telegraphic speech is being replaced by discourse that is closer to the patterns of adult speech. Although Joseph's monologue is still marked by many micro pauses, the overall **rhythm** is far less disjointed than in the transcript made at the age of 2;4. Longer **pauses** reflect Joseph's ability to concentrate for longer on his play activity and this increased concentration results in the creation of a more sophisticated narrative. Utterances are still sometimes **grammatically incomplete** but the meaning of each is now usually clear. For instance, Joseph uses the compound noun phrase *peace and quiet* as a grammatical utterance – although this is grammatically incomplete, a listener can more or less understand the meaning from the context.

Prosodic features are used with more sophistication now. **Stress** is used to highlight important words and the **pitch range** is quite varied. Joseph often adopts the singsong intonation patterns that are common in the speech of young children. **Normal non-fluency features** like repetition of words (*and and*) and false starts (*mi..might; ha. hang*) are typical of all spoken language. Another interesting development can be seen in the way Joseph is starting to **correct himself**. Often he uses repetition to work through a range of alternatives until he finds what he thinks is the correct pronunciation or grammatical form.

The extract here is far more developed than the previous example – Joseph can now **sustain an extended turn** quite successfully. The narrative is linked directly to his play and although it is often repetitive, there is a sense that he is telling a chronological story.

SUMMARY

The extracts clearly show the ways in which Joseph's language has developed within a three-month period. His **lexis** has become more varied; his **grammar** is more accurate; and he uses **prosodic features** more explicitly to highlight key words and to draw attention to important parts of his monologue. At the age of 2;7, he still does not **pronounce** all his words in an adult form and his utterances are still sometimes **grammatically incomplete**. However, it would no longer be difficult for an adult who does not know him to understand what he is saying.

Dialogues

Parents engage children in conversations from very early on. Even before speech acquisition begins, babies are learning about communication from the smiles and sounds which they begin to recognise as responses to their cries and gurgles. After 6 months, mothers tend not to respond to every vocalisation, but pay special attention to utterances that appear to be meaningful. By 8 months, babies will try to attract attention by pointing. It is at this stage that they also become fascinated by adult conversations, watching each speaker and thus learning implicitly about turn-taking.

In the early stages of language acquisition, children rarely initiate dialogue and they cannot easily sustain a conversation. Parents help them by:

- asking direct questions;
- repeating words and phrases spoken by the child;
- basing dialogue on the immediate activities and context.

ACTIVITY 9.2a

The following extracts were recorded over a period of six months: the first was made when Joseph was 2;4 and the second when he was 2;10. Each transcript reveals the same kinds of lexical and grammatical features discussed in Activity 9.1, but the examples are now dialogues rather than monologues. In each case, Joseph is at home talking to his parents. Read through the transcripts and comment on Joseph's ability to sustain a conversation.

Joseph (J), aged 2;4, talking to his father (F)

J: need potty
F: okay (8) how many clocks have we got?
J: Mummy point (.) Daddy point (.) one (.) one (.) one
F: so how many clocks have we got, Joseph?
J: two (5) pointing
F: point at what (.) what do you want Daddy to point at?
J: clock
F: clock (.) where's the other clock (2) over there (.) right
J: on /self/
F: on shelf (.) yes on the shelf
J: by books
F: by the books and where's the other clock?
J: /eə/ (.) no books
F: no books
J: mm
F: what's it near?
J: /pɪkpɪks/
F: the picture and what's underneath the clock?
J: /niːf/
F: underneath (.) what's underneath the clock?
J: /niːf/ (4) /dɔːdiː/ (.) /dɔːdiː/ (.) Daddy get
F: you want Georgie
J: woof woof woof woof (.) furry /dɔːdiː/ (.) woof woof /iːiːiːiː/
F: what are you doing to Georgie?
J: grab
F: you've grabbed || him
J: || grab him (.) /drəʊk/ him
F: where are you putting him?
J: /bækɪt/
F: he's in the basket
J: give /bækɪt/ (2) pl. (5) Daddy Daddy (2) /dɔːdiː/
F: where's Georgie now?
J: on (.) /eə/
F: where?
J: /teə/
F: chair (.) on the chair
J: one /eə/ (.) one /teə/
F: one chair
J: /lɪlɪ teə/ (.) give
F: little chair (.) so that's a little chair (.) what's this chair?
J: Mummy's
F: Mummy's chair
J: give
F: you want Georgie do you?
J: give (.) give (.) give (.)
F: where is Mummy?
J: give Mummy give /deə/
F: Mummy gave you || the chair
J: || /teə/

COMMENTARY

There are signs that Joseph is becoming a more active participant in dialogue. The **turn-taking** is quite smooth, although there is one instance in which he starts his utterance before his father's is grammatically complete: *you've grabbed || him* (ll. 26–7). Everything that he says follows on logically from what has gone before, and in each utterance his meaning and intentions are quite clear. The conversation, however, is typical of a child between the ages of 2;0 and 2;6 – Joseph's father **initiates the topics** (ll. 2, 24, 40) and **sustains the dialogue** with a series of questions (ll. 2, 8, 16). Joseph answers the questions appropriately, providing the necessary information: *on* /self/ (l. 9). Sometimes, his answer clearly does not give the information his father expects. In the exchange about the size of the chair, the father takes up the idea of a little chair (l. 40), expecting Joseph to describe the 'big' chair. He instead describes it as *Mummy's* (l. 41) – his response is appropriate although unexpected and shows that he has the **vocabulary** and **necessary grammatical knowledge** to construct a range of meaningful answers. In another instance, Joseph actually completes the utterance simultaneously with his father, showing his **intuitive knowledge of grammar** and his ability to use a word from the appropriate word class: *grab him* (l. 27). There are points at which Joseph changes the direction of the conversation by indicating that he wants something: *Daddy get* (l. 21). He uses imperatives to get things done: *Daddy point* (l. 3).

The father tries to correct Joseph's **pronunciation** by reiterating key words: /self/ – *on shelf (.) yes on the shelf* (ll. 9–10); /niːf/ – *underneath* (ll. 19–20). The father's reiterations also make Joseph's utterances grammatically complete by including the function words that Joseph omits: /pɪkpɪks/ *the picture* (ll. 17–18). Despite the father's attempts to 'educate' him explicitly, Joseph continues to pronounce words idiosyncratically and omit words like determiners. He can, however, recognise when understanding has become a problem and he can **repair the dialogue** in a very basic way. For instance, the father fails to understand that Joseph is saying his mother gave him the chair. To clarify the meaning of his utterance, Joseph stresses the lexical verb *give* (l. 45) and repeats it until his father has understood. He then provides the grammatically standard version to which Joseph adds the noun /teə/ (l. 49) in the object site. In some places, Joseph tries to **correct his own pronunciation** by repeating a word in slightly different forms until it sounds more like the adult version: *one* /eə/ *(.) one* /teə/ (l. 37). The pause marks Joseph's awareness that his first version is not a recognisable word and that there might be problems in communicating his meaning.

ACTIVITY 9.2b

Joseph (J), aged 2;10, talking to his mother (M)

J: /ə/ train is taking /ɪm/ to his || wêdding
M: || watch your knees

J: his wedding (.) /ə/ train taking /ɪm/ to his wêdding (3) where's /ə/ cárriages
M: ‖ oh ha.
M: ‖ watch your knees Joseph (.) that's a good boy
J: /eɪ/ meant to have carriages if /eɪ/ taking Lixie to church
M: mm
J: /eɪ/ meant to have carriages
M: yes they are (.)
J: meant ‖ to
M: ‖ careful
J: /məʊk/ (.) /æt/ be near /ə/ track
M: mm (.) smoke
J: /æt/ is /ə/ stătion (.) runaway train went over /ə/ hill (.) /ə/ church is /æt/ way
M: the church is that way
J: (*indistinct*) /ə/ Lixie's sitting in /ə kəʊwʌl/ carriage
M: not /kəʊwʌl/ (.) can you say cóal
J: in a bit of /kəʊwʌl/
M: coal
J: bit of /kəʊwəl/
M: can you say cóal
J: coal (*shouted*)
M: that's it
J: in a bit of coal (*quiet*)
M: lovely (.) lovely
J: Lixie don't go (.) and he was slowly (1) and he slept in a bèd (2) for ages and ages and he fèll out (.) he fe. (.) wait he says /kɒs/ I not want to have it he says and /ə/ train púffs away (.) and it púffs slowly away to take /ɪm/ home
M: where is he góing
J: some people call /ə/ house homes
M: some people call them homes (.) a house ‖ or
J: ‖ a home
M: what's Lixie going to call ít
J: a cottage (4) /ə/ train is coming out of /ə/ tunnel
M: here it comes out of the tunnel
J: mm it (.) it coming out soft of a tunnel
M: it's coming out sóft (.) what does that méan
J: /ə/ track is soft
M: the track is soft?
J: mm
M: what does that méan (2) what happens if the track is sòft
J: one bit is bending in the tunnel
M: mm
J: ooo ooo (*train noises*) the runaway train went over the hill (2) and he came onto the track track track (1) he's going into the tunnel now now now (2) where's /ə/ (.) where's /ə/ train (.) it just went into /ə/ tunnel (2) /i:/ it chuffs (*train noises*) out of /ə/ túnnel Lixie (.) out of /ə/ túnnel (.) well (.) Lixie heard it go slow (7) and then /ə/ signal went dòwn (.) and /ə/ signal banged dòwn (.) and /ə/ signal banged down (2) clack (4) look out (*indistinct*) for /ə təʊ/ town (.) /təʊ/ ‖ town
M: ‖ look out for whát
J: [təʊ] town
M: what's that?
J: ‖ no
M: ‖ what did you sáy
J: I didn't say anything

COMMENTARY

Joseph is clearly more in charge in the second transcript and is far more able to sustain a conversation in his own right. He still drifts between monologue and dialogue, but he is now much more aware of his audience. He is able to **question** (l. 3) as well as **respond** (ll. 34–5) and the **rhythms** of his speech are far less disjointed. Both participants are actively involved and Joseph is clearly listening to the utterances in detail. He **initiates the topics** (ll. 1, 6, 31) and his mother merely helps to develop them with her spoken contributions to the game that he is playing (ll. 35–41). He is more aware of **grammatically complete utterances** and there are few examples of overlapping speech – except where his mother is telling Joseph to be more careful with his toys (ll. 4–5). Everything that Joseph says is recognisable except where he talks about /təʊ/ *town* (l. 50). His mother asks him to reiterate the word in order to clarify what he has said. Joseph, however, refuses to explain, instead opting for an escape – *I didn't say anything* (l. 57). Joseph can now also respond to adult correction. When his mother draws his attention to a mature pronunciation of *coal* (l. 17), he is able to replace /kəʊwʌl/ with *coal* (ll. 18–24).

The second transcript shows the speed at which children acquire linguistic skills. Within six months, Joseph has acquired a much more **diverse vocabulary**; he is able to **recognise** and **use complete grammatical structures** and he is able to **control the conversation** and deal with **turn-taking** effectively.

As well as learning about language structures, children have to understand the patterns that underpin spoken communication. They must learn about turn-taking and repairs; they must recognise when a situation demands an apology or when it is necessary to ask for clarification. Children are never taught these skills, but assimilate them both from participating in and observing spoken interaction in different contexts. The study of the things that influence our choice of language in social contexts is called **PRAGMATICS.**

Young children often make mistakes as they learn about the 'rules'. A child answering a telephone might be asked 'Is your mother in?' – if she replies 'Yes' and puts the receiver down, she has failed to understand the pragmatics of the interaction. Pragmatic 'mistakes' do not prevent understanding and cannot be classed as 'wrong', but they are seen as 'socially inappropriate'. Children inevitably make such mistakes, but by school age they have acquired a subconscious knowledge of many of society's expectations.

At the age of 2;10, Joseph is well aware of the pragmatics or social rules of conversation. He has already learnt when to speak and how to use language to get the desired result, and he knows the kind of utterance which is expected in a range of contexts. He has assimilated the 'rules' that prevent spoken language exchanges being anarchic and he recognises in an unsophisticated way how to choose the appropriate tone. He can repair simple breakdowns, repeat things when required to do so and respond directly to his mother's utterances.

9.6 What to look for in examples of child language

The following checklist can be used to identify key features in examples of different stages of child language acquisition. There will not be examples of all the features listed in every transcript, but the list can be used as a guide. The points made are general so discussion of specific examples will need to be adapted to take account of the particular context.

The following are helpful questions to ask.

Register

1 What is the **mode**? – spoken.
2 What is the **manner**? – the relationship between the participants: monologue? dialogue? the extent of the interaction? the function of the communication?
3 What is the **field**? – the subject matter will indicate the kind of discourse taking place: usually, it will be directly related to the context and activity going on at the time.

Lexis

0;6–1;0

1 Is the child using **reduplicated sound patterns** to represent meaningful words?
2 Are there any examples of **proto-words**?

1;0–1;6

1 Are there any recognisable **single-word utterances** used to name things directly related to the child (people, food, body parts, toys, etc.)?
2 Are there any examples of **over-extension**? **under-extension**? a **narrowing of the field of reference**? or **mismatch**?
3 Are there any examples of the first **modifiers**?
4 Are there any **action utterances** accompanied by gestures which will form the basis for the first verbs?
5 Are there any examples of **social expressions** that are typical of the child's cultural background?

1;6–2;0

1 Are there any examples of a **wider range of vocabulary** reflecting the child's growing understanding of the world?

2;0–3;0

1 Does any of the lexis relate to **familiar stories** or the child's **personal experience**?

3;0+

1 Is there any evidence of the child's growing **word stock**?

Pronunciation

0;2–1;0

1 Are there any examples of **cooing** using the first recognisable English sounds based on the high vowels [iː] and [uː] or the velar sounds like [k] and [g]?
2 What kinds of **reduplicated sounds** are used in any examples of babbling?

1;0–1;6

1 Is the pronunciation of holophrastic utterances **idiosyncratic**?
2 Are the same words pronounced in a **variety of ways**?

1;6–2;0

1 Are there any examples of words that are shortened by **dropping unstressed syllables**?
2 Are **consonant clusters** avoided?
3 Are **final consonants** dropped?
4 Are there any examples of words that have been simplified? what kinds of **reduplicated sounds** are used?
5 Do any of the **vowels** differ from the 'caretaker' accent?
6 Are any **initial position velars** or **fricatives** replaced?

2;0–3;0

1 Are there still examples of **immature pronunciation** from the previous developmental stage?
2 Has the child standardised:
- the plosives [p] and [b], [t] and [d], [k] and [g]?
- the voiced bilabial nasal [m]?
- the voiceless glottal fricative [h]?
- the voiced palatal approximant [j]?

3 Are some of the **consonantal sounds** still immature:
- the voiceless alveolar fricative [s] and the voiced alveolar lateral [l]?
- the voiced post-alveolar approximant [r]?

3;0+

1 Are pronunciations now **closer to adult forms**?
2 Have the last consonantal sounds to be produced accurately yet become standard:
- the voiceless palato-alveolar fricative [ʃ]?
- the palato-alveolar affricates [tʃ] (voiceless) and [dʒ] (voiced)?
- the voiced labio-dental fricative [v]?
- the voiced alveolar fricative [z]?
- the dental fricatives [ð] (voiced) and [θ] (voiceless)?

Grammar

1;0–1;6

1 Are **single words** used to represent a grammatically complete utterance?

1;6–2;0

1 Are there any **grammatical sequences** in the rhythmic units?
2 What different kinds of **meaning** do these minimal structures convey?
3 Are any present participle **-ing inflections** used?
4 Are **questions** framed using *wh-* words at the beginning of a sentence (usually *where* or *what*)?
5 Are the **negatives** *no* and *not* used in one-word sentences or at the beginning of a variety of expressions?

2;0–3;0

1 Are there any combinations of three or four words in which different clause elements (usually in standard positions) are used to construct a range of **clause types**?
2 Is the discourse an example of telegraphic talk in which many of the **grammatical function words** are omitted?
3 Are a wider range of **inflections** used? *-s* to mark plural nouns? *-ed* to mark the past tense of regular verbs?
4 Are any of the inflections **overused** as the child experiments?
5 Are any **auxiliary verbs** (primary or modal) used or are they still omitted?
6 Is the **primary verb** *to be* used with present participles: is it marked for person/number or is it still used in the **base form**?
7 Are **question structures** becoming more complex? does the child use *why?* and *how?* as well as *where?* and *when?*
8 Are **negatives** used in a more sophisticated way with *no* and *not* placed before the relevant verb?
9 Are **pronouns** used in a range of contexts, but without a complete understanding of the different forms? are second person pronouns used for first person references?

3;0+

1 Has telegraphic speech been replaced with **more sophisticated sentence structures**?
2 Are there examples of **co-ordination** and **subordination**?
3 Are **inflections** now used standardly? – regular past tense verbs with *-ed*? third person singular present tense with *-s*?
4 Are the subject and verb inverted in **questions** using *wh-* words?
5 Is the **dummy auxiliary** *do* used to frame questions and negatives?
6 Are **contractions** like *don't*, *won't* and *isn't* used?

Prosodic features

0–1;0

1 Is there any evidence that the baby is responding to the meaning of **different tones of voice**?
2 Does the parent use **exaggerated intonation patterns** to attract and hold the child's attention?
3 Does the baby use a **high pitch level** for the repeated consonant and vowel-like segments?
4 Are any **intonation patterns** repeated for consonant-vowel combinations?

1;0–1;6

1 Is there any evidence that the child is using **intonation** to mark different kinds of purpose?
2 Does the **variation of intonation** contribute to the meaning of utterances?

1;6–2;0

1 Are questions marked by a **rising intonation**?
2 Are the **rhythms** of two-word grammatical units distinctive?
3 Are **pauses** used frequently in unusual positions?

2;0–3;0

1 Does the child still use **rising intonation** to mark questions?
2 Are any syllables or key words **stressed**?
3 Are **rising-falling** or **falling-rising intonations** used to make utterances more distinctive?
4 Do **pauses** mark the end of a grammatically complete utterance instead of creating the disjointed rhythms of telegraphic speech?

3;0+

1 Is the child now using **pitch**, **pace**, **pause**, **rhythm** and **stress** in more sophisticated ways to enhance the meaning of utterances?

Conversation skills

0;6–1;0

1 Do the utterances seem to be related directly to **specific contexts**?
2 Are there examples in any of the exchanges in which the child and parent(s) take **recognisable turns**?

1;0–1;6

1 Does the adult take the role of **initiating** and **sustaining** conversation?
2 Does the child produce a **monologue-like string of utterances** with no real sense of audience?

1;6–2;0

1 Is there any evidence that the child is **taking part in real conversations** despite the fact that utterances are still grammatically incomplete?
2 Is the **context** crucial to an understanding of any utterances?
3 Does the child seem to be experimenting with **turn-taking** with an adult who makes all utterances meaningful?

2;0–3;0

1 Is it still important to know the **context** of the talk at this telegraphic stage?
2 Is the child **more actively involved in conversations**? – asking for names of objects,

people and places? relating responses directly to earlier utterances? initiating topics?

3 Are there any examples of **normal non-fluency features**?

3;0+

1 Is the child skilful in controlling **turn-taking**?
2 Are **responses** to other speakers **appropriate**?
3 Is the **register altered** for different contexts, audiences and topics?
4 Is there any evidence that simple breakdowns in communication are **repaired**? – is there repetition of key words or phrases? are there requests for clarification?

Summary

Once children have acquired language, they can become **active participants** in all kinds of communication: they can establish relationships; express their feelings; get others to do things for them; ask for information or explanations; or use language creatively. The more experience they have, the more skilful they will become in adapting their language use to suit their context, audience and purpose.

Apparently effortless **language acquisition** will take place if the child can consciously manipulate the speech organs; if the child lives in a developed social and cultural environment, experiencing an appropriate range of language input; and if the language experience is gained before a critical age. If all these conditions are met language acquisition will usually take place without any formal language teaching.

There are four main **theories** which try to explain the nature of language acquisition: the behaviourists believe that children learn by imitating the language structures that they hear; the cognitive approach suggests that children must have an intellectual understanding of a concept before they can use linguistic structures; the nativists believe that all children have an innate capacity for language acquisition; and more recent studies suggest that interaction is the key. More research needs to be carried out before language acquisition is really understood, but current thinking would suggest that each theory throws some light on the complex processes involved.

PART III

Varieties – English in use