The Communicative Competence of Young Children

A Modular Approach

Susan H Foster

The communicative competence
of young children

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Preface

During the last decade or so, scholars and researchers from a number of disciplines have shown increasing interest in how very young children become able to communicate their needs, desires, attitudes and ideas. Linguists, developmental psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists have all contributed to an understanding of both the language and the prelanguage communication skills of young children.

One of the main goals of linguistics is to discover what it is about language and the human organism that allows almost all children to learn a native language. Researchers in other social sciences – psychology, sociology, anthropology, education – have each from their own perspectives contributed to the enterprise and broadened the issues to include other aspects of communication as a whole. The last 15 or so years have seen increasing attention being paid to the developing social uses to which children put language; to the role of non-verbal gestures, eye-gaze, and other non-linguistic aspects of communication; and to the relationships between language development and cognitive development. This pooling of interests and expertise has resulted in our being able to explore the development of communicative skills as a whole, not just linguistic skills.

Developing communicative skills is a lifelong enterprise, one that, in many respects, continues well into adulthood. Thus, it is essentially arbitrary how we designate the major stages in communicative development. We can, if we wish, distinguish the one-word stage from the two-word stage from the multi-word stage, but those are stages characterized in terms only of word combinations (syntax). Other developments are continuous across those boundaries. The development of pronunciation, for example, has its own pace of development; as does the development of word meanings. So, in writing a book of this kind, one cannot simply talk in terms of general

across-the-board stages, and thus one cannot make any straightforward decision about where to end discussion. Rather, the cut-off point has to be essentially arbitrary. In this book that point is roughly the middle of the fourth year of a child's life, since the period up to that point sees the development of many of the most important milestones in the acquisition of communication. The period from birth to three-and-a-half is also the most extensively studied, and there is thus a much greater wealth of information in the academic literature on this period than on later periods.

This book will put considerable emphasis on infancy and the transition from infancy to early childhood. It will also follow the birth of language and its development up to the beginnings of complex sentences, but will generally not extend the discussion beyond the preschool period.

This text has been prepared with a number of different audiences in mind. It is intended that both beginning and continuing students of linguistics will find it a useful source of information on early language and communication – an area that is usually given short shrift in language-development textbooks. It will also attempt to integrate studies from a variety of different viewpoints, including developmental psychology and formal linguistics. In so doing it is hoped that it will contribute to an understanding of the multi-faceted nature of communication and communicative development.

The first chapter provides a summary of basic linguistic concepts necessary to understand child language development. The second chapter examines the development of various perceptual, cognitive and social skills that interact with the development of communication, showing how many of the innate predispositions of human infants make them peculiarly suited to using language for social interaction.

Chapter 3 explores prelinguistic communication and the beginnings of word use; tracing the development of early vocabulary, including the development of pronunciation and the sound system. Chapter 4 continues discussion of vocabulary development, as well as describing the development of morphology and syntax, and later stages in semantic development.

Explanations for the developments described in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 are attempted in Chapter 5. This chapter also considers general issues involved in trying to explain child language: issues such as the overall role of experience, the effects of cognitive development, the nature of 'stages' in development, the degree of continuity from stage to stage, the role of innate linguistic knowledge and the nature of the appropriate model to adopt. The closing chapter summarizes the basic issues in child language acquisition study and considers ways of

studying early communicative development. Each chapter includes some suggestions for further reading, so that students who are interested may continue their study of the development of communicative competence.

Acknowledgements

Writing the acknowledgements for this (my first) book allows me to pause and pay tribute not only to those who have helped and guided me in the construction of this manuscript, but also to those who have helped in making it possible for me to write it at all.

My first and lifelong thanks go to my parents, Michael and Pamela Vonberg, who raised me to believe that hard work and application could extend the resources with which I am naturally endowed, and whose scepticism about this new-fangled field of linguistics made me utterly determined to make it a career.

My first encounter with linguistics was at Lancaster University in 1973, where Jim Hurford, along with Chris Candlin, Geoff Leech, Mick Short, and the rest of the department at the time, so thoroughly whetted my appetite for it that I stayed eight years and completed a doctorate. Mike Breen, Andy Lock and Robert Hoogenraad made that possible, and my dissertation on developmental pragmatics can be seen lurking on many of the pages of the present volume.

The first version of this book was attempted shortly after completing my dissertation, and around the time that I made the acquaintance of MIT-trained linguists at the University of Southern California (where I was a visiting faculty member). The contradictions and conflicts between my doctoral training and Chomskyan linguistics were so great that they threatened to undermine both the book and my professional identity. Luckily 'modularity' came to the rescue, and the multi-faceted approach I have tried to delineate in this book began to guide my thinking. Sharon Klein and Nina Hyams have particularly helped me mature in my thinking about language and language acquisition, and I depend on them for both scholarly companionship and friendship.

The influence of these formally-minded acquisitionists has continued to be balanced by that of my more functionally-oriented

THE SOUND SYMBOLS USED IN THIS BOOK

This chart represents the symbols that appear in speech data samples in this book. It is intended to help readers without a linguistics background make sense of the textual examples. (A few of the more exotic symbols in the text have been omitted from this chart as their explication does not contribute crucially to understanding the text.)

Consonants

b	at the beginning of	'bat'	r	at the beginning of	'wrong'
p		'pat'	l		'long'
m		'mat'	y		'young'
f		'fat'	w		'want'
θ		'thin'	h		'hand'
d		'dot'			
t		'tot'	ŋ	at the end of	'sing'
s		'sue'	ʔ	in the middle of	'butter'
š		'ship'		when said with a Cockney	
z		'zoo'		accent. In American English	
g		'got'		a similar sound often	
k		'cot'		replaces the 't' in kitten	

Vowels

a	the first vowel in	'father'
ə		'afraid'
æ	the vowel in	'pat'
ey		'day'
iy, ɪy, *or* i:		'seep'
ɪ		'bid'
ʊ		'put'
o, *or* ow		'soap'
ɔ		'cot' (some dialects)
ε		'bed'
uw, *or* u:		'shoe'

(These symbols come from a number of different representational systems. Hence there are multiple representations for some of the sounds in the text.)

   ˜ over a vowel means it is nasalized
   ˋ over a vowel means it has falling pitch
   : after a vowel means it is lengthened

N.B. The sounds represented above appear in the text between either / / or [ ]. Which one is used depends conventionally on whether a phoneme (/ /) or an allophone ([ ]) is indicated. In child language research this distinction is not always possible to maintain, and so this book simply represents the sounds as they appear in the research paper from which they are taken.

For my brother, Paul.

CHAPTER ONE

Background concepts

Introduction

While still unable to tie their shoelaces, most three-year-olds are quite happily using language to ask and answer questions, express fears, doubts and opinions, make friends with others and generally make their mark on the world around them. In three short years their communication with the world around them has expanded from an initial ability to react to discomfort or pleasure, to include, first, a non-linguistic communication system for the expression of desires, opinions and attitudes, and finally a linguistic system for an extraordinarily wide range of purposes in a large number of different social situations.

What exactly is the path of communicative development through the first years of life? How does the development take place? Is it the result of innately specified neural changes? Is it the result of learning from the environment? What role does prelinguistic communication play in the development of linguistic communication? Are there fundamental discontinuities between the prelinguistic and linguistic phases? What are the continuities? It is answers to questions such as these that the following chapters discuss.

Communicative development

While children vary greatly, most children start producing their first gestures towards the end of the first year, their first words around the

time of their first birthday, simple sentences around their second birthday, and more complex ones during their third and fourth years. Figure 1 presents a sample of communicative expressions from children three and under. The samples are arranged according to the age of the child producing them. However, it is important to note that children vary considerably in the speed at which they progress in their language development. Age designations can, therefore, be used only as a rough guide to developmental level.

These examples make it apparent that children initially communicate in highly idiosyncratic ways. They use sound combinations that mean something only to their parents and friends, as in (3), or they use sounds, gestures and eye movements that can only be interpreted in context, as in (1) and (2). The goodwill of the adults who are addressed is often crucial to the success of the communication; and, as (4) shows, sometimes even the most willing of adults has difficulty figuring out what children intend.

As they develop the use of words during the first year, children operate with a combination of idiosyncratic words and child versions of adult ones, as (5) and (6) show. Then they begin putting words together, as in (7). Even as they enter the second year, however, gestures and child versions of words are still used quite extensively, as (8) shows. However, as (9), (10), and (11) show, they are also developing rapidly towards the adult constructions, both in terms of length and complexity. The 'mistakes' children still make at this stage are very revealing of how their version of the language works. Even at three years old, children are still pronouncing words differently (13), coining new words that do not exist in the adult vocabulary (14), using words in ways adults do not (15), and producing sentences that still fail to conform fully to adult syntax (16).

Determining exactly what has changed in the course of the first three years requires a detailed analysis of the system children are operating with at each successive stage, as well as an account of how the system changes. We must, therefore, first look at the nature of language so that we are aware of what it is children are working towards.

Components of language

Linguists divide language into a number of subcomponents. These are: (1) phonology, (2) the lexicon, (3) semantics, (4) morphology, (5) syn-

Children younger than a year

(1) A mother is standing holding her child in her arms. The child gazes down and leans towards the floor, making a long 'uh' sound. The mother stands her child on the floor (Foster 1979).

(2) A child is playing with a truck. He looks at his mother and says 'mmm'. She says, 'That's a lorry' (Foster 1979).

(3) A child says 'na' to mean 'Give me that' and 'do' pronounced like 'dog', but without the 'g' to mean 'Look, a dog' (Halliday 1975).

One-year-old speech

(4) At lunchtime a child reaches towards a table laden with various different foods and says 'gu'. Her mother responds, 'What d'you want love?' The child continues to reach towards the table and repeats 'gu'. Her mother repeats, 'What is it you want love?'

(5) Some words and their meanings: 'dad' means both 'downstairs' and 'upstairs'; 'dye' means 'light'; 'dth' means 'drink' (Cruttenden 1979).

(6) A mother is preparing her child for a meal. The mother says 'Teatime!'. Her child says 'keek', and her mother responds 'No, it's not breakfast time. It's teatime, Kate' (Foster 1979).

(7) Early in her second year, a child says on three separate occasions: 'More cookie', 'Up', 'There man'. Later in the same year she says 'Children rain . . . walk rain'. And later still 'Baby Allison comb hair' and 'Pour Mummy juice' (Bloom 1973).

(8) A child looks at his mother and says 'Chee'. His mother responds, 'No, Ross. It's much too soon for cheese' (Foster 1979).

Two-year-old speech

(9) A child points to an apple and says 'appu'. Next he reaches towards his mother. Then he points at the apple and says 'please' (Foster 1979).

(10) Assorted utterances: 'I making cake too.' 'He's gonna talk.' 'Mommy try it.' 'No write this name.' 'Where Uncle Nat?' (Menyuk 1969).

(11) Another utterance: 'I goed grandma's' (Foster 1979).

(12) A child wanting to have some cheese weighed says, 'You have to scale it first' (Clark 1982).

Three-year-old speech

(13) Some assorted words: 'kengel' (= kennel); 'somepin' (= something); 'predin' (= spreading) (Smith 1973).

(14) A mother has taken her child's clothes off. Another child who is present says, 'Why did you unclothes her?' (Bowerman 1982).

(15) A child who is taking spaghetti out of a pan with tongs says, 'I'm going to pliers this out' (Clark 1982).

(16) Two final examples: 'Why you do with this?' 'What you are writing?' (Menyuk 1969).

Figure 1: Speech samples

tax. Together these subcomponents form the *grammar*. It should be noted that sometimes the term 'grammar' is used synonymously with the term 'syntax'. In this book, however, the term 'grammar' will be used to refer to the combination of phonology, lexicon, semantics, morphology and syntax. A sixth component, pragmatics, lies outside grammar, but is a key component of communicative competence.

(1) Phonology

Phonology is the study of how particular languages make use of the range of sounds that humans produce in speaking: what the inventory of speech sounds is for any given language, and how those sounds can be combined. Also included are such things as stress and intonation which affect the way particular sequences of sounds are said.

We know that children have a certain amount of trouble physically pronouncing the words of the language they are learning, but that does not account for all the differences between children's pronunciations and adults'. Children also have different systems from adults. A particularly dramatic example of this was documented by Smith (1973) who tells of a child who said 'puggle' for 'puddle' and 'puddle' for 'puzzle'. This child was perfectly able to produce a 'd' in the middle of a word; he simply did not produce it where adults expected him to.

Similarly, in example (13) in Figure 1 the child seems unable to produce an 'ng' sound at the end of a word, where the adult word usually calls for it (depending upon dialect), but can produce it in the middle of a word, when the adult word does not (Smith, 1973).

(2) The lexicon

The lexicon is the dictionary of the language. Examples (3) and (6) in Figure 1 show an initial solution to the problem of figuring out the words of the language – a kind of prelinguistic neologizing. The child in (3) uses 'na' to mean 'give me that'; the child in (6) uses 'keek' for breakfast. Other examples show that children quickly learn the words of the language, although examples (12), (14) and (15) suggest that only gradually do they come to understand exactly how these words can be used and modified.

There are argued to be a number of different kinds of words in the lexicon. One distinction is between content words and function words. Content words carry the main meaning of the message; these are nouns, adjectives, main verbs and many adverbs. Each of these constitute open-ended sets which can always be expanded when new

intentions or discoveries require it. (For example, kleenex, xerox, and space-shuttle have fairly recently been added to the set of nouns.) Function words, on the other hand, form a closed set, usually do not describe things in the way content words do, and include prepositions, articles, auxiliary verbs, conjunctions and bound morphemes. The characterization is not entirely straightforward since prepositions, for example, carry important meaning. Also pronouns are a closed set, but yet they refer to things as nouns do.

Another distinction is among content words: between those that refer to things that can be pointed to, and those that describe abstract things that cannot. In the former group are words such as 'duck', 'bottle', and 'Mummy'. In the latter group are words such as 'love', 'hate', and 'justice'. This difference is important because it is presumed that the 'pointable' words are more readily learnable in the context of a mother–child interaction in which the relevant objects are present.

(3) Semantics

Words, both alone and in combination, carry the meanings that the language can convey. Semantics is the study of meaning. There are two kinds of semantics: lexical semantics and sentential semantics. Lexical semantics is the study of individual word meanings: that 'clothe' means to put garments on someone or something; that 'cake' means either an object that has been baked from (usually) flour, eggs, sugar and butter, or the act of covering something with a glutinous, mud-like material. Sentential semantics is concerned with how words convey meaning in combination. For example, the sentence 'Every man loves a woman' is ambiguous. It either means that every man loves the same woman, or that each man loves a different woman. The individual words in the sentence mean the same thing under either interpretation, but in combination they mean two different things. The development of sentential semantics is mostly beyond the scope of this book, but the development of lexical semantics will be considered fairly extensively. (See Chapters 3 and 4.)

(4) Morphology

As well as having meanings, words have forms. Morphology is the study of those forms: the way words are constructed. The child in example (14) in Figure 1 is being creative with the form of English words. Exactly what the child is doing is a little hard to determine. However, the possibilities include either adding 'un-' to the noun

'clothes' to produce a new noun 'unclothes', and then using that noun as a verb, 'to unclothes', or deciding that the verb 'to clothe(s)' can have a negative counterpart: 'to unclothe(s)'. Morphology is the study of how words are constructed out of morphemes, of which there are two kinds. Words such as 'go' and 'make' can stand alone, and are called free morphemes. However, '-ed', '-ing', and 'un-' cannot stand alone as independent words, and are called bound morphemes

A final distinction that must be raised at this point is between derivational and inflectional morphology. The essential difference here can be captured by comparing the -er ending that changes verbs like *farm* into agentive nouns like *farmer* with the plural ending -s that simply adds to a noun such as *farm* the additional information that we are talking about more than one. The first case, the agentive -er, is an example of derivational morphology because its addition 'derives' a new kind of word. The second case, the -s plural ending, is an example of inflectional morphology.

(5) Syntax

A different area of language is illustrated in examples (7), (10) and (16). These demonstrate children's early attempts to grapple with the way words are combined into sentences, the subsystem of language called syntax. It is the syntax of English that allows the combination of words 'Stewart respects Vikki' to mean something different from 'Vikki respects Stewart', and explains why 'Why did you say that?' is a sentence of adult native-speaker English, but 'Why you say that?' is not. It is the combination of words, which ones are there and the order they appear in, that makes the difference. While children's syntax develops quickly, as example (7) shows, the earliest word combinations are just two or three words, and generally do not include function words. Because of this absence of function words, early utterances sound rather like telegrams sent by someone who cannot pay for more than just the main content words: cryptic, but usually understandable. (Some researchers have actually called early utterances 'telegraphic'.)

(6) Pragmatics

The term 'pragmatics' covers a rather large assortment of things. It is considerably less well-defined as an area of study than those we have looked at so far (Levinson, 1983). Broadly, it covers all aspects of the way language is used to convey messages. Among other things, it

includes how speakers use utterances to make requests, promises, and threats; how utterances differ in the degree to which they are polite; how the structure of utterances allows speakers to background some information while foregrounding other information. In fact, it covers all the ways in which the grammar serves the needs of speakers as social human beings.

While we can only guess at children's intentions in the absence of more adequate contextual information, it is likely that the child in example (14), Figure 1 is using language to ask for information; (15) seems to be making an announcement; (9) seems to be a polite request for an object. Being able to construct utterances to serve these purposes is a crucial part of being able to communicate.

Descriptive rules

In examining each of the subcomponents of grammar, and in looking at pragmatics, linguists have tried to describe how the adult system works. They have tried to define the *rules* that speakers of the language seem to be using when they construct utterances. These are not rules in the *prescriptive* sense of what speakers *ought* to do (that is left to English teachers), but rules in the descriptive sense of regularities or generalizations apparent from what speakers say and intuitively think is right or wrong. For example, 'Who did you see yesterday?' breaks none of the descriptive grammar rules of English, despite a prescriptive preference for 'whom' over 'who' in such cases. On the other hand, 'Who you yesterday did see?' would not be accepted by a native speaker of English as a sentence of the language; and the descriptive rules of the grammar should correctly predict this.

The non-linguistic repertoire

In addition to the linguistic subcomponents, there are also non-linguistic devices for communication. Most obviously there are gestures, facial expressions and eye movements. The child in example (2) communicates his interest in sharing his toy with his mother mostly by looking at her. At least that is how she interprets it. Examples (4) and (9) in Figure 1 include gestures (reaching and pointing respectively).

At the prelinguistic stage children obviously only have non-linguistic communicative devices available, but they develop quite a sophisticated gestural system that continues to serve them well even when language has emerged.

Communicative competence

This book will be using the term 'communicative competence' to refer to the total communication system, verbal and non-verbal. The term 'competence' was first used as a technical term in linguistics by Noam Chomsky in 1965. He used it to mean the unconscious *knowledge* that speakers (at any stage of language development or language mastery) have of the *grammatical* features of the language(s) they speak. He saw this grammatical knowledge as independent both of knowledge of how to use grammar for communication (what we have discussed under the heading of pragmatics) and of what happens when speakers actually engage their production and comprehension mechanisms on a moment-by-moment basis in real situations to communicate. This last Chomsky called 'performance', and suggested that often performance factors, such as sentences that overload memory or other aspects of processing capability, hesitations, slips of the tongue, mishearings, and slurring of words, mask the competence (the linguistic system) that speakers possess.

Dell Hymes (1967; 1972) and Campbell and Wales (1970) challenged the restriction of the term to only grammar. Hymes pointed out that speakers have systematic knowledge about how to use their grammar to produce communications appropriate for a particular situation (i.e., knowledge of pragmatic rules). They are sensitive to the social status of speaker and hearer, and produce utterances that are finely tailored to the degree of politeness, or informativeness required by the situation. He argued that we should extend the definition of 'competence' to include these kinds of facts about the speaker's knowledge, and he coined the term 'communicative competence' for this broader notion.

Hymes also argued that many of the performance factors that Chomsky identified be included in this wider notion. He considered that the effects of memory limitations, and the difficulties stemming from trying to understand certain complex constructions 'on-line' as it were, are all part of communicative competence.

Hymes' notion of communicative competence is therefore threefold. Firstly, it concerns what is 'systematically possible' in the language.

This is what we have discussed in the section on grammar – constructions allowed by the descriptive grammar of the language – and can be equated with Chomsky's original notion of competence. Secondly, it includes what is 'psycholinguistically feasible'. This involves comprehension and production performance factors such as those discussed above. Thirdly it involves what is 'appropriate', that is, it includes the speaker's knowledge of how language is *used* appropriately, in the ways discussed in the section on pragmatics above. In Hymes' own words: 'the goal of a broad theory of competence can be said to be to show the ways in which the systematically possible, the feasible, and the appropriate are linked to produce and interpret actually occurring cultural behaviour' (Hymes 1971).

Others, such as Canale and Swain (1980) and myself prefer to remove from Hymes' definition the performance factors that reflect processing accidents, such as forgetting what one wanted to say, or slurring one's speech. This leaves a definition of communicative competence along the lines of 'the totality of . . . knowledge and skill that enables a speaker to communicate effectively and appropriately in social contexts' (Schiefelbusch and Pickar 1984: ix).

Finally, it is important to point out that the term 'competence', whether it refers to grammatical competence or communicative competence, should not be equated with 'competent'. 'Competence' is not an evaluative term describing skill level. Rather, it is applied to the knowledge that speakers have of how to construct and use language, rather than their actual skill in doing so. (While this is the way the term will be used in this book, readers should be aware that not all researchers use the term in this way.)

A modular approach

The components of language reviewed above are traditional divisions in theoretical linguistics. As we will see in the course of this book, these divisions are also reflected in the acquisition of communicative competence. To a large extent, the development of each component proceeds along a different path, and requires a different kind of explanation. This is what is meant by the term 'modular' in the title of this book. In the following chapters, we will be exploring the acquisition of the different modules and trying to understand their development. Figure 2 presents a schematic representation of the components or modules and the relationships between them.