

# Learning to play the language game

How children acquire language **BY MADALENA CRUZ-FERREIRA**



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Kids will say the most extraordinary things. Cute things, hilarious things and, sometimes, baffling things that may start us wondering whether we should worry about their language development.

This article summarises some of the knowledge we have about child language acquisition. All children, monolingual and multilingual, acquire language in the same way. They must learn the rules of the language game, just like they must learn how to play tag or chess in ways that satisfy other players of the same games. In order to learn, children follow their own strategies, just like the rest of us. So let's see how they go about cracking the code of the language game.

## PHYSICAL STRATEGIES: 'WORK SMALL'

The first stumbling blocks are sounds. We can tell that there are difficult sounds and easy sounds by looking at

what children do. Children start using speech sounds when they start babbling. They'll produce things like bah bah bah, dee dee, goo goo goo, plus several combinations of the sounds spelt here b, d, g, a, ee, oo, but not things like fay fay or zoh zoh zoh. The former are easy sounds, the latter are difficult ones.

Take vowels, the sounds usually spelt 'a, e, i, o, u' in English. The three vowels most commonly found in babbling (ah, ee, oo) are easy because they are articulated as differently as possible from one another: small differences are more difficult to perceive and hence to produce. For ah, you just open your mouth wide. For ee and oo, you close your mouth, but you pout your lips for oo. Vowels are easier than consonants and are generally learned first, because vowels are the sounds that carry: if you want to shout for someone named Fred or Archibald you prolong the vowels in their names, not the consonants. So your child is likely to go through

some stage where all or most vowels are fine in his speech, but all or most consonants may still be funny.

Turning now to consonants, they are so called because they must be sounded out ('sonant') with ('con') vowels, to make up words. Being 'dependent' sounds in this way, consonants are really tricky for children. All children start with stop consonants like b, d, g, p, t, k, m, n (g and k as in geek), which are pronounced by banging articulators together, as it were. Children are experts at pronouncing stops because they are 'feeding' and 'gurgling' sounds. If you smack your lips together you get b, p, m-like sounds, if you suck your thumb or a nipple you're positioning your tongue to pronounce t, d, n, and if you lie on your back and gurgle you'll produce g, k-like sounds. This is also why in virtually all languages the baby-words for 'mummy' and 'daddy' have easy sounds like these. It's not that the children 'know' the words for mum and dad, it's simply that these are the kinds of words that children can say (they say them to us, to the cat, to their toys, to themselves), but we parents decided to believe that the children are calling us 'by name', and so reinforced their use of these words to us from time immemorial!

Other consonants involve finer control of articulators, for example the consonants beginning and ending words like juice, thief, cheese, shave, roll. Children either replace them with easier sounds, or simply drop them from their speech. This is why small children will call Sam 'Tam' but won't call a pan a 'fan', and may want to 'pee' potatoes with a potato-'peewah' or ask you why strawberries are 'wed' and not 'boo'. The same strategy operates in children's spontaneous play: they start by banging toys and things together, which doesn't require the fine motor skills that will develop only later. Whether with toys or articulators, your child is doing what she can do, while waiting for what she cannot yet do to fall naturally in place for her.

You may now guess that pronouncing several consonants in a row is young children's worst nightmare. English is particularly child-unfriendly, with many words like splash (beginning with three consonants) or like texts (ending in four, the letter x represents two sounds, 'k' and 's'). If your child is bilingual in a devilish language like English and a benevolent one like Hawai'ian, where only single consonants appear before vowels, you shouldn't be surprised if she becomes fluent in Hawai'ian much earlier than in English, or if a proud Hawai'ian parent tells you that his monolingual children started 'speaking

much earlier' than all the English monolingual children he knows. It's the languages' fault, not the children's. The insights that we gain from cross-linguistic observations like these, especially among multilingual children, teach us that using child productions in one single language as the benchmark for typical language development across the board is very short-sighted indeed.

*Work Small* strategies also account for why children leave out certain words and not others in their utterances, for example. They may say things like 'Mummy big glass table' but not 'On if her the'. These are two quite different types of words, the former much more salient to children because they carry stress in connected speech, and therefore much easier to perceive and produce.

### COGNITIVE STRATEGIES: 'THINK BIG'

Suppose you show a banana to a group of children who are at the one-word stage (when all their utterances contain only single words) and suppose you ask them "What's this?" Some children will say 'nana', others will say 'mama', others still may say 'bana'. Child words like these exemplify children's use of generalisation: children modify words, replace, add and remove word bits, to make them conform to a general pattern that they find easier to tackle. The straightforward two-syllable structure of words like these, featuring a sample of preferred consonants, is typical of children's first words all over the world.

But suppose one child in the group says 'moo'. This doesn't sound like 'banana' at all, now does it? Before you start worrying about this child's linguistic (or cognitive) abilities, try to think about your question and his answer on the child's own terms, not yours. You are expecting a word that sounds like 'banana', but how does the child know what you are expecting? And how do you know what is going on inside his mind in his attempt to reply to you? In particular, why should the sound of the word be more relevant to him than, say, the shape of the object you're holding? It may well be that this child has recently become fascinated by the night sky and all shiny things in it, whose names he's just learned. And a banana does look like a crescent 'moon'. This child is also generalising, though in a different way from his friends. He is besides showing that he knows how to relate what he learned before to whatever activity is required of him now, which is a very good thing to have mastered indeed. We all do

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the same: if we see an insect that we never saw before and that looks like a cockroach, we're likely to think it may be a cockroach and thus call it a cockroach. It is this kind of generalisation that makes young children, sometimes very embarrassingly, call all adult males 'daddy'.

Other examples of Think Big strategies may mistakenly cause concern. Say your English-speaking child uses so-called irregular past tenses like came or went fluently, as well as regular ones like baked or cried. Then one day she starts saying things like 'Mummy drove me to school today', or 'I slept so well'. What is happening here is that your child has realised that there is a pattern in some part of her language: some words (linguists call them 'verbs') can have extra sounds at the end to indicate events that happened before the time we are talking about them. Most verbs are regular in this way, so productions like goed or swimmied show that your child has actually learned a general rule and immediately started applying it to any verb. Again, she's generalising from her observations, just like you did with the cockroach. The same happens with noun plurals: your child may start talking about foos or even feets where she talked about feet before, and will make similar generalisations in all her languages.

These apparent 'errors' in fact mean that learning is progressing as it should: the earlier, 'correct' production of irregular and regular forms was simply due to imitation. The generalised forms will disappear once your child is ready to learn the next rule, which is that some words follow the general rule and some don't. Other apparent regressions may start appearing in your child's speech, typically when she learns to put words together in one single utterance. She may hesitate, slur words that she had no problem pronouncing before, or even start stuttering: this is all part of the normal

process of learning the very difficult skill of coordinating breathing with speaking in long utterances.

## MULTILINGUAL LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Multilingual children will use these learning strategies in all their languages. Their progress across languages will vary, depending on which language happens to be in the foreground for them at any point in time and for any reason. I found a very, very strong link between experiences and languages among my children. For example, they could only discuss skiing in Swedish (my husband's language), because that's the language in which skiing 'takes place', so to say. So if your child just spent three weeks with his Hungarian-speaking cousins and his skills in this language shot forward accordingly, then don't expect him to be able to tell you all about it in Japanese, the language you and him normally use, with the same degree of linguistic sophistication.

Finally, if you want to find out more about typical language development, I have two suggestions. David Crystal's book *Listen to your child: a parent's guide to children's language* (Penguin, 1986) offers a very accessible and very entertaining account of what children do with their own language learning. And the Learning Disabilities website lists typical milestones in cognitive, linguistic and social development, at [www.ldonline.org/article/6313](http://www.ldonline.org/article/6313) (In case you're wondering, the reason why information about 'typical' development is found in a learning 'disabilities' site is that we cannot know what may be wrong if we don't know what is right.)

Just keep in mind one very important thing: these two resources deal with monolingual language development. Believe it or not, we still have no developmental guidelines dedicated to multilingual acquisition. ❖