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INTRODUCTION.

The goal of this work is to attempt to shed light on the fundamental aspect of the complex human act of understanding. Since understanding requires acquaintance with research in a variety of disciplines, each chapter is devoted to such general topics as: first language acquisition, second language acquisition, interference, comprehension, word recognition, syntactic clues, inferences.

The aim is to make these topics comprehensible with the assumption that many readers will have neither the time nor the experience to undertake a deep or specialized study in these areas. At the risk of offending specialists, diverse subject fields have been covered only to the extent that they are relevant to reading.

I have tried to provide an integrated discussion, a coherent theoretical position rather than a compendium of research. I have not attempted to cover all contemporary research and theorizing into literacy, but I have tried to indicate at least, one specific source of evidence for every assertion I make, and occasionally an alternative point of view.

The manner in which I have interpreted the evidence and tried to construct a coherent picture reflects my way of thinking. I have pointed out that this act of understanding is not passive and mechanical, but purposeful and rational, dependent on other aspects such as prior knowledge (schemata), expectations, natural abilities, cultural influence, and so on.

Since understanding can not be achieved without consideration of the nature of language and various operating characteristics of the human brain, the first half of this work is devoted to such topics as language acquisition, interference, and comprehension. These opening chapters are, by no means, intended to be comprehensive or even balanced disquisitions on the subjects covered. This is not a

theory about linguistics or comprehension. Instead, these chapters offer the minimum of background fact and theory that is necessary and relevant for an analysis of understanding.

On the other hand, the second half of this work deals with aspects closely related to language such as word identification, syntactic devices, and the role of inferences.

Finally, it includes a brief research on the strategies used by adult readers to draw inferences while reading.

Each chapter is separate and self-contained. They can be drawn upon and be combined in different ways as required by the needs or interests of different readers.

There are many people who have been influential in the writing of this work. Their thinking together with numerous conversations and discussions have helped shaped many of my own ideas.



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CHAPTER ONE: FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Conceptual holdings are thought to be important to linguistic acquisition for several reasons. First, language is a representational act. It represents reality or stands for objects and relationships in the world. Second, language is an abstract symbol system. If we are to appreciate abstract symbols, we must be able to represent them mentally. Third, language is a tool that we use in social interactions. Tool use implies the apprehension of relationships like means-end. Fourth, language use involves talking about objects, events and relationships in the world. It is necessary that one knows the properties of these objects and relationships in order to talk about them coherently.

Jean Piaget has been, probably, the most well known researcher in the area of children's cognitive development. A most significant period in language development occurs between birth and two years. By the age of two, a child is typically beginning to use multiword utterances and has clearly demonstrated the symbolic capacity for dealing with language. Piaget calls the period between birth and age two the "sensorimotor stage" of cognitive development because most learning takes place through active sensorimotor exploration of a child's environment. Table 1 shows Piaget's sensorimotor stages and the characteristics of each.

TABLE 1

STAGE AND AGE (MONTH)	GENERAL	IMITATION	OBJECT CONCEPT	CASUALITY	MEANS-END
Stage 1 Birth-1	Reflexive	Notion not present	No differentiation of self from objects	Egocentric	Notion not Present
Stage 2 1-4	Primary Circular reactions (self-repetitions) Coordination Of sensory schema	Self-imitation of Actions with unexpected Results "Preimitation"	Object Followed with eyes Until out of view Change in Perspective interpreted as change in object	No differentiation Of self and Moving objects	Notion not Present Intentionality lacking
Stage 3 4-8	Secondary Circular reactions Repetition of actions of others	Imitation of other's actions Already in repertoire	Anticipation of position of moving objects: No manual search	Self as cause of all events	Repetition of events with Unexpected Outcomes, Heightened interest in Event outcome Intentionality Follows initiation of behavior
Stage 4 8-12	Coordination of secondary Schemata known means applied to new problems	Imitation of Behaviors different from those in repertoire facial imitation	Manual search for object where last seen object constancy	Some externalization of causality realization that objects can cause action	Coordination and integration of schemata establishment of goal prior to initiation of activity anticipation of outcomes
Stage 5 12-18	Tertiary Secondary Schemata Experimentation	Imitation of Behaviors markedly different from repertoire	Sequential displacement considered awareness of object spatial relations	Realization that he/she is one of many objects in environment	New means through experimental trials used
Stage 6 18-24	New means through mental combination Representational thought	Deferred imitation	Representation of displacements. Awareness of unseen movements.	Representation of causality. Able to predict cause-effect relationship.	Language used to influence others Representation of the outcome or end

Each stage has certain acquisitions associated with it that may indicate that the child is ready to make the transition into the next stage.

SINGLE-WORD UTTERANCES

After a period of using no real words and becoming more consistent with the use of vocalizations accompanied by gestures, the child begins to use single words to code objects and events. The words are not adult productions and were formerly called "holophrases". As a matter of fact, a single word refers to an entire thought (e.g. "cookie" may really mean, "I want a cookie").

Recent research has reported that subgroups of language-developing and language-disordered children are referential (word and object oriented) or expressive (social and conversation oriented). That is, the referential children use mostly nouns and refer to objects and events. They also like to play with objects and spend more time playing alone. The expressive children, on the other hand, enjoy talking to and being with people and use more personal-social words. There are, perhaps, other ways to characterize early single-word production, but the point is that children go through a period of talking using "one word at a time". Toward the end of the single-word period, it is said that the child accrues an expressive lexicon of about 50 words and then begins to attempt word combinations.

Children in the single-word period can be examined for both the types of words they use and the apparent reasons they use them. The form of single-word utterances has been viewed in different ways by different authors. Ideally, single words should be paired with functions. Parent checklists are especially useful in obtaining data on lexicon size and content.

Prior to the first word combination, some researchers noted another transitional phenomenon known as the "presyntactic device". Thus, a syntactic

utterance is one in which two words that have a meaning relationship are combined under the same intonation pattern (e.g. "mommy go"). A presyntactic device is the combination of two elements under an intonation contour that does not have a meaning relation because one element is not a real word, or because the word combination is reduplicated. A child who says "WIKITI" is combining a real word (KITI) with a non-word (WI) under an intonation contour. Other presyntactic transitional elements that have been reported are empty forms, which are consistently used productions that appear to be nonsense words ("woda", "gacking", etc). Another report shows the use of two single words that have a meaning relationship with a pause inserted between the two elements (e.g. "car...go"). All of these presyntactic devices prepare a child to combine two meaningful language elements under an intonation pattern that is the essence of early multiword combinations.

EARLY MULTIWORD UTTERANCES.

Perhaps, the most researched and reported period of language acquisition is the time when children begin to combine lexical items to form meaning relationships (semantic relations). There has been a long history of interpreting these early utterances as traditional parts of speech (noun, verb), telegraphic speech, open classes, and underlying structures of transformational grammar. Currently, many authorities support a semantic view of early multiword utterances using a case grammar (Fillmore, 1968) and have rendered interpretations of early utterances using semantic relations. Some of

the basic early multiword constructions are composed of the semantic cases
 (Table 2).

TABLE 2

NOMINATION	"This ball"
RECURRENCE	"More milk"
NONEXISTENCE	"Allgone egg"
AGENT+ACTION	"Dogui run"
ACTION+OBJECT	"Mommy shoe"
ACTION+LOCATIVE	"Come here"
ENTITY+LOCATIVE	"Coke kitchen"
POSSESSOR+POSSESSION	"Daddy shoe"
ENTITY+ATTRIBUTE	"Ball red"
AGENT+ACTION+OBJECT	"Daddy hit ball"
AGENT+ACTION+LOCATIVE	"Dogui run outside"

These are the basic semantic relations code aspects of the world that the child has learnt about during the sensorimotor period of the cognitive development, and this is one reason that surely indicates the strong cross-cultural similarities in early utterances. Semantic relations must always be interpreted in light of the non-verbal context surrounding the utterance. The main point here is that children begin to use word combinations that code various common relationships in their environments. If we merely assign adult, syntactic categories (e.g. noun, verb) to the utterances we miss some of the skill that children have in coding rather subtle relations cognitively understood in the sensorimotor period. This "rich interpretation" gives the child credit