Understanding Children with Language Problems

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1 What's in a word?

Seven-year-old Steven struggles to name a microphone:

S: Oh this is tricky . . . when you on . . . it's when you're on . . . like on a concert . . . and you get this . . . micro . . . scope . . . no . . . like thing when you speak into it and it's even louder. (From Hayman 1996)

Six-year-old Eamonn requests a favoured toy:

E: I want that . . . deepersiper.

SC: The what?

E: [jəʊ] (= you know) the deeper . . . Where deedeepsiper? I dunno deedeepsiper is. Where's the deepbersiper? The deepdeepsiper?

Eamonn's search is for the deep-sea diver.

Children who have problems with language have problems with words. Typical descriptions of such children state that they are unable to understand words, find words, or say words, or that they omit words or use words in odd ways.

Such descriptions are no more than a starting-point for looking at their difficulties. To probe these further, we need to consider *what* it is the child can't understand, find, say or put in the right place. This means knowing what words are. We can then consider what is involved in coming to *understand*, *find*, *say* and *combine* them, and what might stop a child from doing one or more of these things.

While it seems obvious that intact language users know words, it is by no means obvious what it is that they know. Once we go beyond the obvious to question what it is that we know, we find

that words are not simple things. Each word is a collection of rather special sorts of information.

Take the word 'hair'. To know the word 'hair' is to have represented in your mind a connection between the following:

- **Phonological information**: the sound pattern of the word. In this case, a single syllable containing the sequence of sounds /hɛə/ (in accents where the final *r* is not pronounced).
- **Semantic information**: the meaning to which the sound pattern can refer. In the case of /hɛə/, this is the clump of stuff that grows on the human head or in varying quantities on other parts of human beings and on animals.
- **Syntactic information**: the position which the word may occupy in relation to other words. This information would include the fact that 'hair' may be preceded by the determiner 'the' and by adjectives such as 'long', and that it will occur in certain positions within the sentence such as before a verb ('Hair grows'), following certain verbs ('He cuts hair') and so on.

Each of these pieces of information is **abstract** in the sense that it is picked out or **abstracted** from another level of information. The phonology of the word is the sound *pattern*, and not the sound signal which occurs when the word is uttered. Nor does it include every detail of that sound signal. For example, knowing the word 'hair' does not involve knowing the loudness with which it might be uttered. It *does* involve knowing the consonant–vowel sequence /hɛə/. This means picking out those features of the sound signal that differentiate it from other sequences of consonant and vowel such as /dɛə/ and /ʃɛə/ (*dare* and *share*). Similarly, the semantics of the word 'hair' does not include every detail of the thing it might refer to. Knowledge of the word does not include the number or shades or length or density of hairs on a particular head.

In summary, words are not concrete objects out there in the world. Their existence consists in a connection between phonological, semantic and syntactic information, and that information is picked out from the stream of information we receive.

Different languages, of course, have different words. Most obviously, languages differ in the phonological form which they attach to a meaning. Part of learning a new language is learning the phonological forms of words. But languages also differ in the exact semantics which they attach to phonological forms. For example, the phonological form *hair* in English refers to the clump of stuff on the head and elsewhere on the body. In contrast, French uses a distinct phonological form for hair on the head (*cheveux*) and hair on other parts of the body (*poil*).

Languages also differ in the syntactic properties they attach to particular phonological–semantic pairings. In English, 'hair' when referring to stuff on the head is not used with plural endings or with a plural verb: 'Mona Lisa's hair is long' is fine, but 'Mona Lisa's hairs are long' is not – at least not if the intended reference is to hair on the head! In French, the converse is true, so that the French version of 'Mona Lisa's hair is long' would make 'hair' plural, and in fact mark the verb ('are') and the adjective ('long') as plural.

Each word, then, is a phonological–semantic–syntactic complex. To know words is to have stored such complexes in our minds, in what is termed our **mental vocabulary** or **lexicon**. But knowing words involves more than knowing each such complex. Our **mental vocabulary** is not an undifferentiated collection of such complexes. Words share properties with other words. They may be phonologically similar to each other. *Hair*, for example, is phonologically similar to *fare* and *chair* and *bear* in sharing the rhyme /ɛə/ (the variable spelling of that rhyme being irrelevant). It is phonologically similar to *house* in sharing the initial consonant /h/. It is phonologically identical to *hare*, though spelled differently. Words such as *hair* and *hare*, which are phonologically identical but semantically distinct, are known as **homophones**.

Phonological relationships between hair *and other words*

Homophone	hare
Shared rhyme	fare, chair, bear . . .
Shared initial consonant	house, hat, hen . . .

Semantically, 'hair' is most similar to words which refer to parts

of the body such as 'skin' and 'nail'. It has more in common with words referring to concrete *substances* such as 'wire' or 'soil' or 'bread' than to concrete *entities* such as 'table' or 'book'. It has even less in common with words referring to abstract things such as 'idea' or 'message', or to places such as 'library' or 'park', or to states such as 'joy' or 'poverty', or to events such as 'revolution' or 'accident'.

Syntactically, though, 'hair' shares properties with all these words, which belong to the category **noun**. This means they may be preceded by a **determiner** and **adjective**:

Det	Adjective	Noun
the	famous	skin/nail/wire/soil/bread
	weird	table/book
	new	idea/message
		library/park
		joy/poverty
		revolution/accident

But of all the above nouns, 'hair' has most in common with 'skin', 'soil' and 'bread', which are distinct from other nouns in certain respects. These nouns may, for example, occur without a determiner where other nouns may not:

Hair should be kept clean
Skin should be kept clean
*Table should be kept clean
*Library should be kept clean

Nouns like 'hair' (as on the head) form a subcategory known as **mass nouns**. They are distinguished from other nouns, known as **count nouns**, in a number of ways, one being the possibility of occurring without a determiner.

Looking at just the word 'hair' illustrates amply the idea that a word consists of connections between phonological, semantic and syntactic information, and is connected to other words by virtue of sharing some of that information.