Chapter 6: Learning to communicate

Successful communication requires that the child learns both to interpret a sentence's literal meaning and to interpret a speaker’s intended meaning by drawing on their knowledge of the situation, the real world and the mental state of the speaker.

Successful communication between children and adults begins before children learn their first word, through the use of communicative actions such as pointing gestures. However, the extent to which infants are interpreting the communicative intention behind the gestures of others is disputed. Thus, the first key question in this chapter was:

*Are infants and young children capable of interpreting the communicative intentions of others?*

We discussed research showing that from about nine months of age, infants behave as if they understand what others are trying to communicate. They also seem capable of interpreting intended and accidental actions differently soon after their first birthday. However, there are two possible interpretations of these behaviours; the rich and the lean interpretation views, with disagreements centring on the age at which knowledge of communicative intent can be attributed to infants.

We also debated whether the early communicative abilities of infants provide them with a crucial first step in the language learning process, as suggested by social pragmatic theorists. Here we addressed the key question:

*What role do infants’ early communicative abilities play in word learning?*

There is some evidence to support social pragmatic theory, but nearly all of it comes from Western cultures. More evidence from different cultures is required to determine whether the link between early abilities and later language learning is universal.

Given the early sophisticated communicative abilities of infants, we might expect them to be very good at holding conversations once they learn to talk. However, research suggests that children find it difficult to adjust what they are saying in response to their listener and to interpret the message behind a speaker’s words. Thus, we asked the key question:

*Why is successful conversation so difficult for children?*

We addressed this question by exploring three areas; the development of scalar implicature, the use of referring expressions and learning how to take turns. In some cases, it turned out that children were more proficient than we originally thought. The apparent problems stemmed from the fact that our experimental designs were not sensitive enough to reveal children’s knowledge. In other cases, the children’s lack of ability could be explained by the fact that holding a conversation requires children to master a range of different skills, some of which require extensive experience with the language. In fact, in some cases, children may learn most from their unsuccessful attempts at conversation, as they can help them identify what aspects of their conversations are problematic.
Finally, we looked at communicative impairments, focusing on autism and pragmatic language impairments. We addressed the key question:

**Why do some children have communication impairments?**

We first looked at autism. Communicative impairments are central to a diagnosis of autism, yet the reasons why are unclear. Three explanations were discussed – theory of mind theory, central coherence theory and language deficit theory – but none fully explains the pattern of impairments. We then discussed pragmatic language impairment, which, like autism, is characterised by difficulties in communication. We debated whether pragmatic language impairment should be seen as separate from autism. However, one factor that makes the accurate diagnosis of communication impairment difficult is the fact that children change so substantially through development. This means that children who meet the criteria for one diagnosis when young may no longer do so in adolescence or adulthood. It is crucial that researchers and clinicians take account of both the age of the child and how the child's profile of impairment changes with development.