Children’s World of Words: a Developmental Perspective

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Abstract
Children's semantic development has been studied for decades. Eve Clark is among one of the influential research pioneers on how children develop words and their meanings. Most research tends to focus on the cognitive or referential meaning. However the mystery of children's world of words has still attracted researchers, particularly from an intercultural perspective. Bilingual children tend to develop code mixing and code switching in their use of two languages. At the University of Tasmania, research on children's semantic development started with verbal explanation and definition strategies. Our recent focus is on aspects of cultural meanings with their cultural metaphors in children's words. For example, what do words with social meanings such as 'wife', 'teacher', 'neighbour' etc. mean to children of different cultural backgrounds? This paper attempts to discuss this question with examples from Australian and Vietnamese children.

Keywords: children, words, language development

Introduction
Child language development has received intensive research from different academic disciplines such as linguistics, sociology, psychology, and education. In linguistics, the focus is on the development of aspects of linguistics, including phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. In sociology, the emphasis is on the social function of language, interaction and language acquisition, bilingualism and language development in social contexts. The studies of concept development and word development have enhanced the contribution of psycholinguistics to developmental psychology. Psychologists tend to focus on cognitive aspects of concept development in children whereas linguists show great interest on three aspects of words: form, meaning and function.

The interdisciplinary research on child language and cognitive development has opened up new perspective as indicated by Bowerman and Levinson (2001):

At first sight recent advances in the two areas seem to have moved in opposing directions: the study of language acquisition has been especially concerned with diversity, explaining how children learn languages of widely different types, while the study of cognitive development has focused on uniformity, clarifying how children build on fundamental, presumably universal concepts. These two vital strands of investigation into close dialogue, suggest a new synthesis in which the process of language acquisition may interact with early cognitive development. It provides original empirical contributions, based on a variety of languages, populations and ages, and theoretical discussions that cut across
the disciplines of psychology, linguistics and anthropology. (Bowerman & Levinson 2001, p. 617)

Words and concepts in children’s minds

What is a word? ‘Word’ is one of the most widely used terms in communication. However it is still a mystery to laypeople as well as linguists. In the school context, words are everywhere: in writing, reading, listening and writing. Thus it is important to have a close look at ‘the world of words’ before we discuss how children handle them and how they operate in children’s minds.

The task of all teachers is to help learners grow in words. However, we need to know more about words. Word awareness will enable us to understand children's language development and some problems associated with it.

How is ‘word’ perceived in a classroom discourse? Here are different discourses of word:

- When teachers say: “The word ‘horse’ has three sounds”; they talk about the sound pattern of a word (phonological aspect).
- When teachers say: “The word ‘horse’ has five letters”; they talk about its spelling (spelling aspect of a word).
- When teachers say: “The word ‘horse’ refers to an animal”; they talk about its semantics (semantic aspect of a word).
- When teachers say: “The word ‘horse’ is a noun”; they talk about its grammar (or syntax). The term ‘grammar’ can be too broad. Thus linguists tend to use the word ‘syntax’ to talk about sentence structure (syntactic aspect).
- When teachers say: “The word ‘shit’ should not be used in formal writing.” They talk about its social function (sociolinguistic aspect of a word).

The illustrations above indicate that word is a complex concept that teachers deal with in various situations in their teaching discourse.

Form, meaning and function

The trichotomy ‘form, meaning, function’ may not powerfully capture the complexity of language. However, it is useful to use as a basis for studying language and child language development in which word plays an important role.

In linguistics, the term ‘lexicon’ is often used instead of ‘word’ to indicate the component in the grammar which is in its bare form a list of words or lexical entries. It contains information about (a) the pronunciation, (b) the meaning, (c) morphological properties, and (d) syntactic properties of its entries. (Kerstens et al 1996-2001)

**Form:** Linguistic form is shown in various ways. Spoken words consist of phonological and morphological units such as phonemes and morphemes. In English, a word has different phonological and morphological manifestations:

- A phoneme as in ‘a’ in ‘a book’, ‘a car’, or ‘ai’ in ‘I go’
- A combination of phonemes as in ‘cat’ , ‘dog’
- A morpheme : car, happy
- A combination of morphemes: cars, happiness
In many languages, a word is basically a morpheme.

**Meaning:** Dictionary meaning is also known as referential meaning. A chair is a piece of furniture with four legs used for sitting. Apart from dictionary meaning, there are different semantic types such as cultural meaning, social meaning, metaphorical meaning etc. Children learn different aspects of word meaning, not just dictionary meaning or word meaning in isolation.

**Function:** Language is acquired because it is useful cognitively, emotionally and socially to children. Words are used ‘to get things done’ for the child. When very young children learn their first words, the function and meaning are an intricate entity for them. When a child points to a bottle and says: ‘boo’, it can convey multiple meanings and functions: ‘Here is a bottle of milk and I want to drink milk now’. The function becomes more complex when children’s social interaction has widened as seen in the following examples:

The following examples illustrate the nature of this trichotomy:

- ‘Are you OK?’
  - Form: question, short (3 words), intonation rising
  - Meaning: about your health
  - Function: greeting or showing sarcasm

- ‘He becomes a good teacher, who loves teaching dearly.’
  - Form: long sentence, two clauses
  - Meaning: about a male teacher with love for teaching
  - Function: praising

- ‘Why did you hit her?’
  - Form: a question, past tense (did)
  - Meaning: someone hit someone
  - Function: inquiry or threatening, or exclaiming

Children are limited in linguistic form. They have meaning but do not know how to express them due to form restriction.

Children gradually develop an aware that a form can perform many functions as in “Did you drive to work today?” This could ‘mean’:

- Questioning: about driving to work or taking a bus.
- Requesting: could I have a lift?
- Commenting: It was foggy, how stupid of you if you did.

**Explaining and defining**

How do we know what a word means to a child? There is a distinction between knowing a word and knowing how to define or explain its semantic features. For instance, when the word ‘chair’ was presented to several children, the following definitions or explanations were given by different children:

- A chair is a thing you sit on.
- We have a lot of chairs at home.
- A chair has four legs.
- Chairs are black and square.
- A chair is used with a table.
- A chair is a piece of furniture for sitting.

All the features given above are associated with the concept ‘chair’. However there are primary features or intrinsic features which should be present in conceptualising what a chair is. There are also features which are strongly associated with the concept but not necessarily the primary features constituting the concept. A table may be round and grey, but shape and colour are not primary features of the concept ‘table’.

Children use different defining and explaining strategies to express their understanding of word meaning. These strategies can be divided into two broad categories: linguistic and cognitive.

**Linguistic category**

Words and concepts are perceived and ‘stored’ systematically in human minds. They are not treated as isolated items. When the word ‘orange’ is given in a recall test, the common responses are: apple, fruit, round, sour, delicious etc. It is very strange if the following words are given in response to the stimulus word ‘orange’: Gum tree, river, grass, computer, sky etc. This indicates that concepts and words are semantically or experientially related. For children, semantic relationship is useful in defining and explaining a word or concept. The following linguistic strategies are identified:

**Synonym**: defining a word by using a semantically similar word.
- Sorrowful: sad
- Speedy: fast

**Antonym**: Defining a word by using a semantically opposite word.
- Poor: not rich
- Far: not near

Young children tend to use ‘not correct’ instead of ‘incorrect’, ‘not perfect’ instead of ‘imperfect’.

**Hyponym**: In Greek, hyponym means ‘few names’. It is a word whose extension is contained within it. For example, the word ‘furniture’ has the following hyponyms: chair, bed, table, and cupboard.
- Children define hyponym word in term of its parent words.
- *Rose* is a flower which has a lot of thorns and…
- *Hammer* is a tool which is used to hit a nail.

**Non-specific parent hyponym**:
- *Bed* is a thing you use for sleeping
- *Nurse* is someone who…

When children are more linguistically competent, they may replace generic terms by specific ones as in:
- *Bed* is a piece of furniture which…
- *Nurse* is a health worker who…
Lexical Derivative: Children use this linguistic strategy in a similar way as they use synonym and antonym.

- **Responsibility** is being responsible.
- **Wisdom** is when people are very wise.
- **Sociolinguistics** deals with language in society.

**Nuclear - non-nuclear**: This dichotomy is similar to the linguistic concept ‘hyponym’. The main difference is that nuclear items are the primitive source on which non-nuclear concepts are developed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NUCLEAR</th>
<th>NON-NUCLEAR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kill</strong></td>
<td>murder, assassinate, execute...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Give</strong></td>
<td>donate, present, offer, award...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **To murder** is to kill someone illegally.
- **To assassinate** is to kill someone who has some political status.

Non-nuclear indicates subtle variation, particularly in different discourse. Vietnamese and English may share the same nuclear (eg. kill) but differ culturally in non-nuclear items.

**Cognitive category**

As discussed above, linguistically-based strategies are operational in children’s defining and explaining competence. There are also other devices for them to use. Cognitive-based strategies are used separately or in conjunction with linguistically-based strategies. They include the following strategies: known to unknown, part-whole relationship, contextualising or instancing, and metaphor.

**Known to unknown**: One of the common cognitive strategies is the use of an established conceptual framework for developing new concepts. For example:

- **Syntax** deals with sentence and its structure.
- An **eel** is like a snake which lives in the water.

Children rely heavily on the use of this strategy to explain how they understand the meaning of a new concept or word.

**Part-whole relationship**: The world does not appear chaotically in the minds of children. Things are perceived in a meaningful connection. When children are asked to describe a car, they tend to refer to different components of the car and perceive their interconnectedness: horn, brake, exhaust pipe, doors, lights etc. It is similar to the way health scientists examine the part-whole relationship in human anatomy.

- **Cochlea** is a part of the inner ear and its function is…
- **Keel** is a part of the ship on which the framework of a ship is built.

**Contextualisation or instancing**: Contextualisation or instancing is very widely used by children to define and explain a concept or word. Instead of using dictionary-orientated strategies, children want to place idea and concept in specific contexts or experiences with which they are very familiar.

- **Accident** is when you drive the car and it hits a tree.
- **Marriage** is when a man and woman meet, they know each other, fall in love and then decide to get married and live together.
- **Virus attack** is when you open an email which has virus and it destroys your computer and it stops working.

**Metaphor:** Metaphor is a powerful device which is used to express the way in which the world appears not just to speakers’ eyes but fundamentally their minds which are full of thoughts, feelings, assumptions and presuppositions. Through the use of metaphors, children reveal to us their perception, values and attitudes. Children understand what the word ‘school’ is. However they make sense of school in different ways depending on their own presuppositions. School can be a prison for some and a paradise for others. For those who assign a positive metaphor to school, they treat school as a significant and meaningful part of their life experiences. On the other hand, if they hold a negative metaphor, school represents unhappiness, hostility, and desperation.

**Cultural meaning**

There is a close relationship between language and culture. Can a language be taught without its culture? The answer is not simple as it depends on how seriously we take language learning and teaching. It can be argued that what air traffic control workers need in learning English is to acquire some basic words and expressions predominantly used in directing and controlling planes at an airport. There is no point for them to study its cultural aspects. One also argues that mathematics is a universal language which rises above cultural boundaries.

However, language is not just an abstract system. It is embedded in its culture. To know a language, one needs to develop social and cultural awareness. The word ‘teacher’ means different things to different people depending on their cultural backgrounds. Children in their enculturation develop an awareness of cultural meanings in the way words are acquired in their cultural context. The following examples illustrate the presence of cultural meaning of words in children of English and Vietnamese backgrounds. Children were asked what the words ‘teacher’ and ‘neighbour’ mean to them.

- **Teacher** is someone who teaches at school and makes sure that you learn well. In high schools, we have different teachers for different subjects. (English)

- **Teacher** is the one who knows what is best for you. They teach you the right things. You should show them your respect. (Vietnamese).

In the examples given above, the first response indicates an orientation towards academic role and achievement. The second response expands the social role of a teacher. It refers to wisdom and appropriate cultural values.

- **Neighbour** is someone who lives next-door. (English)

- **Neighbour** is the one who lives together with you in the same area. (Vietnamese)

The first response indicates the importance of special orientation in Western cultures. Whereas in the second response, the emphasis is on collectivism. It is interesting to note in these responses the choice of words: ‘live together’ and ‘same’.

**Conclusion**

A word is not just simply a word. Words are enlightening windows which show how the world is represented in people’s minds. In children, words help them to make sense of three mysterious aspects of their development: social, intellectual and
emotional. Children are not passive language users. They are constantly engaged in creative construction with language.

References


