

## **Word Learning Styles**

**Diana Hincapie, B.A., Lisa K. Lashley Psy.D., Charles J. Golden, Ph.D.**

**Nova Southeastern University**

Language acquisition is the way that humans learn and attain their spoken language. Infants are biologically equipped to attain four aspects of language. These include phonology, semantics, grammar, and pragmatics. The earliest acquired language begins with phonology, attained as early as three months and make rapid progressions to conversational language by four years of age.

Phonology refers to the individuals sounds that make up spoken language. In development phonemes is the first speech-production system. It not only requires precise timing of rhythms but the corresponding motor ability to carry out specific sounds. Infants are able to differentiate specific phonemes at a very early age and this ability changes through the course of their first year.

Although each infant's development is individualistic, their acquisition of language follows a similar path. Babies begin coo between two and four months of age, after maturation of the larynx, tongue, and emergence of teeth. They begin to make more complex sounds around four to six months leading into babbling, speech depicted by recurrent arrangements of consonants and vowels. Babbling takes place during six to ten months of age and much like cooing, it is an indication of and directed by anatomical development. Because babbling is thought to be a replication of spoken language, infants babble in their perspective languages.

The development of vocabulary, or semantics, transpires at approximately one year. There is a very fast development within the next year and toddlers will begin to experience language explosions, where children begin to add exponential amounts of words to their

repertoire each month. Children tend to have common nouns, words relevant for social interaction, and items they are frequently exposed to, be their first set of spoken words. During elementary schooling, the pace in which children obtain new words becomes even faster, giving way to a significant increase in semantic ability. With an increase in vocabulary children also begin to produce active language, words a child can produce, and receptive language, the words the child can comprehend.

Grammar relates to the actual structure of a specific language. The rules of grammar refer to morphology and other grammatical rules refer to syntax. Morphology specifically relates to the structure of words and the knowledge of word combination. Morphemes can be thought of as the root word and knowing we can add “-ing” to make it present progressive is morphology at work. Syntax refers to the specific order of words in order to form coherent sentences. In the development of language, syntax does not come into play until at least 18 months of age, when children begin to put words together in order to create sentences. Children will not have the ability to create the speech required to properly use plurals and verb tenses until around three years of age.

Children begin to form simple sentences around two years of age, putting together two to four words. They quickly learn the importance of syntax and easily recognize improper sentence structure. By age four, children are able to make complex sentences that include complementation, interrogative clauses, and the use of conjunctions. Children will handle elementary grammatical foundations with ease by age five and will continue to obtain a mastery of this skill for the remainder of their school years.

Pragmatics refers to the ability to communicate effectively. Unlike the previous mentioned skills, pragmatics requires the understanding of social interactions to formulate

sentences. Furthermore, pragmatics differs from grammar, semantics, and phonology because this linguistic skill is not mastered until adolescence or early adulthood. While its foundation is built during early life, having the ability to competently engage in a conversation requires cognitive development. Children will begin to learn the importance of body language such as maintaining appropriate eye-contact or appropriateness in verbal exchanges, by knowing when it is their turn to speak. It also requires children to empathize with others.

Language acquisition, along with most developmental processes, is directed by anatomical and cognitive developments in the individual. It is postulated that language development begins not when we are infants but prenatally. Infants will begin with the most basic form of language in which phonemes are imitations of the words they frequently hear. They will quickly develop abilities to organize the world around them, through the use of semantics. Through their elementary school years' children will not only gain the ability to structuralize their language in the appropriate order through grammar, but will gain the ability to communicate effectively based on their understanding of social processes with the use of pragmatics.

**Further reading:**

Bjorklund, D. F., & Blasi, C. H. (2015). *Child and adolescent development: An integrated approach*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Friederici, A. D. (2011). The Brain Basis of Language Processing: From Structure to Function. *Physiological Reviews*, 91(4), 1357-1392. doi:10.1152/physrev.00006.2011

Myers, D. G. (2004). *Psychology*. New York, NY: Worth.