

Several Postings from various child language experts on Info-Childes listserv following the initial question of "what is a word?"

Initial point of discussion:

I'm interested in the definition of 'word' in a child's first word, as I'm researching my autistic son's delayed language acquisition. He had many unconventional early 'words'; for example, intentional vocalisations, such as squeaks and growls, and lexical signs (taught and invented), that were consistent in form and meaning but which did not contain speech sounds. His first word (at 3;1.25) with speech sounds was "Daddy" [dædædædæ], which was whispered as were all his early words that contained speech sounds. I am unsure of the criteria for determining word status in both his signs and his early productions, and in differentiating 'real' words from what are variously termed as phonetically under-specified sound patterns, phonetically consistent forms, protowords, non-words, marginal words, performatives, pre-lexical terms, situational words, indices of meaning etc! I have a few questions that will help me to establish which of his early words qualify as real words, in order to compare his lexical development in terms of rate, vocabulary count, compilations of early semantic categories, and the timing of his word spurt to those of studies of typical children.

My questions are: Is the definition of a 'word' in child language acquisition determined by form or consistent meaning, or both? If by form, how close to adult pronunciation does it have to be to be a word? Can a 'word' include an unconventional non-speech vocalization, like an imitation of an animal sound, or a gesture, or must it fall within the speech sounds of the native language and be a recognizable approximation of adult pronunciation, subject to the motor articulation skills and emerging phonological rules of the child? To be a 'word', can it be comprehensible to the only the child's intimates, or understandable to more than the child's immediate circle?

If being a 'word' depends on having a regular extension of the word's meaning, will an intentional non-speech sound or gesture with consistent context-bound meaning that is understood by the child's intimates qualify? Or, at the other end of the spectrum, must the 'word' have conventional adult extensions of meaning to be considered a 'real word'? Will possessing some extensions of the adult meaning, even if irregular and underextended, suffice? My question boils down to this: What are the various criteria for determining where on the continuum, between the two milestones of the onset of intentional vocalizations and the word spurt, do researchers distinguish vocalization from word?

Responses:

1.

On the deeper origins of 'daddy' and 'mommy' as first words: Dean Falk's 2004 BBS commentary "Prelinguistic evolution in early hominids: Whence motherese?" considers the importance of increasing necessity for early hominid mothers to be separated from their babies while foraging as creating selection pressures for an elaboration of the dyadic vocal communication

pattern. She suggests an early linkage between nasal demand sounds and the word for female parent. For contrast, the label for male parent would be oral. This potential hypothesis for early contrastive use of 'daddy' and 'mommy' in first vocabularies is emphasized in a study of kinship terms in 474 contemporary languages, where Murdock found that 78% of words for mother began with a nasal consonant while 66% of words for father began with an oral consonant. Early sounds available to the infant production system include both [b] and [d], so the concept of ease is not easy to establish.

2.

> I've been reading these for days and can no longer resist adding my data.
> My
> son's first word was "hiya" said in greeting, and my daughter's first word
> was "uh-oh" said as commentary on something about to fall off a table.
> Both
> babbled da-da-da before this, but I never felt compelled to impute
> meaning.

3.

> One of my daughters used, as her first word (at
> about 6 months) /da/, meaning "that", with rising intonation,
> accompanied by pointing to objects she wanted us to name.
>
> She also produced a very credible "hi" when just
> two weeks old and we were ignoring her in favor
> of a football game on television. Even my father,
> a speech pathologist, heard it and his mouth dropped open.
> It was the first thing we used to say to her every time we
> initiated interactions. But of course
> it is impossible for a newborn to have done such a thing.

4.

If I may pitch in, my Portuguese speaking 2 year old's first words were: "dá" (give me) , "nanã" (no) and "adê" (where is it?). As a language conscious mom, I awaited anxiously for the first "mamãe", as his first word, but that took a while to come up. As did "papai" (daddy). Anecdotal data aside, there is no reason to believe that mommy or daddy should be children's first words, but more likely the saliency of words in the parents' talk, their functionality and the phonetic complexity. In the example above, "give me" might be much more complicated for an English speaking child than "dá", for a Portuguese native.

5.

In response to Annette's query, I have heard the same story, but with "momma" (or some /m/-initial variant: "mom", "mummy") suggested as the child's first word. Ease of articulation was given as the reason in this case also.
Having said that, my son's first word was "cheers," presumably because the champagne being handed round was more salient than either of his parents. The point here is that ease of articulation is probably only one factor dictating production of the child's first recognisable word form.