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How parents introduce new words to young children: The influence of development and developmental disorders



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ABSTRACT

This study documents how parents weave new words into on-going interactions with children who are just beginning to speak. Dyads with typically developing toddlers and with young children with autism spectrum disorder and Down syndrome ($n = 56, 23,$ and 29) were observed using a Communication Play Protocol during which parents could use novel words to refer to novel objects. Parents readily introduced both labels and sound words even when their child did not respond expressively or produce the words. Results highlight both how parents act in ways that may facilitate their child's appreciation of the relation between a new word and its referent and how they subtly adjust their actions to suit their child's level of word learning and specific learning challenges.

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1. Introduction

The broad claim that parents can orchestrate interactions in ways that facilitate children's early word learning is well supported and widely accepted (Adamson, Bakeman, & Deckner, 2004; Hoff & Naigles, 2002; Pruden, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2006). Of particular note are parents' actions that might help a child who is just on the brink of rapid vocabulary acquisition solve the fundamental problem of mapping words onto the world (Baldwin, 1995) by carefully placing a new word into the child's on-going stream of attention. For example, a parent might make the link between a novel word and referent more transparent by calling attention to an object (e.g., shaking a bell) and then, once attention is caught, emphatically stating its name ("That's a bell.") or producing a word for the sound it makes ("Ding-a-ling!"). Or the parent might follow the child's lead and produce labels or sound words for objects only after they have entered the child's field of attention.

There is ample evidence that such strategies can help children learn new words. Most of the evidence comes from experiments that control when and how an experimenter introduces a novel word for an unfamiliar object. These studies verify that introducing a novel word when a child is already attending to an object is more effective than doing so after attempting to redirect a child's attention to the object (Dunham, Dunham, & Curwin, 1993; Tomasello & Farrar, 1986). In addition, systematic observations of parent–child interactions with both typically developing children (TD; Simpi & Huttenlocker, 2007; Smith, Adamson, & Bakeman, 1988; Tomasello & Farrar, 1986) and young children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD: McDuffie & Yoder, 2010) support the claim that vocabulary acquisition proceeds more quickly when parents use strategies that take the child's attention into account. Moreover, we know from Clark's (2007, 2010) detailed analyses of five children's conversations that parents will work very hard to ensure that their child is attending to a referent before they introduce a word and that, when they do so, children as young as two years often repeat the new words.

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However, systematic observations of what parents do as they introduce new words to young children are surprisingly limited. This gap leaves unclear whether parents do indeed place new words into the child's stream of attention and how this placement might be influenced by developmental changes in language acquisition strategies and by language learning challenges associated with development disorders. To document what parents do during on-going social interactions, we observed how they spontaneously presented different types of novel words (labels and sounds) to children who were at different points of early word learning (pre- and post- 50 words) and who varied markedly in joint attention capacities and word learning skills (TD toddlers, young children with ASD, and young children with Down syndrome [DS]). Such observations can indicate whether parents attempt to align their supportive actions to suit developmental changes in word learning or atypical patterns of joint attention, and if so, how they adjust their actions.

To observe how parents introduce new words during on-going interactions, we needed to control for the child's prior experience with words and their referents. We did so by integrating the venerable experimental practice of using novel words for novel objects (Berko, 1958; see Ratner & Menn, 2000) into semi-naturalistic observations of parent-child communication. The use of novel words for novel objects has been used to probe children's use of various principles to map words to objects (Moore, Angelopoulos, & Bennett, 1999) and verbs (e.g., Golinkoff, Jacquet, Hirsh-Pasek, & Nandakumar, 1996), and the effects of an unfamiliar adult's actions (e.g., pragmatic cues, Tomasello & Akhtar, 1995; attention management strategies; Dunham et al., 1993; and overhearing, Floor & Akhtar, 2006). But this procedure has rarely been used to reveal how parents present new words (cf., Hani, Gonzalez-Barrero, & Nadig, 2013, who explicitly ask the parent to teach two novel words). In the study reported here, we adapted the procedure by providing novel words for novel objects as one of several suggestions parents might pursue as they played with their child using the Communication Play Protocol (CPP; Adamson et al., 2004), which produces semi-naturalistic playful parent-child interactions during activities which encourage social interacting, requesting, and shared commenting.

Of primary interest was what parents did to modulate their child's attention when they introduced a novel word. Thus each time a parent produced an utterance containing a novel word, we systematically coded what she did before, during, and immediately after this utterance. We expected that most parents would readily follow our suggestion to use the novel words, especially in communicative contexts, such as shared commenting, that afford the introduction of new words. Moreover, as has often been observed in studies of parent-child communication (e.g., Bornstein, Tamis-LeMonda, & Haynes, 1999), we expected that they would be quite consistent over time in how they interacted with their child. Moreover, we expected that parents would often act in ways that provided a communicative frame that scaffolded the child's attention to the word/object mapping. Overall, we expected that parents would often create a frame using strategies that sought to gain the child's attention *before* they produced the novel word (e.g., shaking the to be named object, pointing to it, saying "look here"), that might draw attention to the novel word *during* its presentation (e.g., emphasizing the word, showing the object), and that would prompt the child's use of the word *after* they produced it (e.g., asking what the object is called, eliciting a repetition).

We were also interested in how children's approach to word learning might influence how often and how parents introduce new words. One important variation is developmental. As children begin to amass a vocabulary, they become more rapid and skilled word learners (Hollich, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2000). Thus we expected that during the beginning period of vocabulary acquisition (<50 words), parents would provide more and possibly different input. More specifically, they might be more likely to repeat words when a child's expressive vocabulary was very small. They might also be more apt to present the novel sound word more often than the novel label when a child has a limited expressive vocabulary and to favor the label after the child's vocabulary has begun to expand. This developmental pattern would be consistent with Werner and Kaplan's (1963, p. 103) intriguing discussion of how early in language development children and parents delight in repeating naturalistic onomatopoeic "nonstandard" words that translate perceived noises into patterns that are "linguistically and morphemically stabilized". Moreover, they might adjust the communicative frame to suit the child's word learning capacities. More specifically, we hypothesized that parents interacting with a child who was just at the cusp of building an expressive vocabulary would make more attempts to capture attention to the link between the novel word and object than when the child was already demonstrating the capacity to learn new words. Thus they might attempt to gain attention to the novel object before presenting the word, draw attention to the word as they present it, and repeat the word more often. In contrast, we anticipated that once a child was amassing a vocabulary, parents would be more likely to prompt the child to use the word after they introduced it.

In addition to documenting how the child's vocabulary level might influence parents' strategies for introducing new words, we studied what transpired when children had persistent problems with one or more aspects of the mapping problem. The challenge of optimizing word learning is more complex, and arguably more crucial, when a child has a developmental disorder that compromises joint attention skills or hampers the infusion of symbols into interactions (Diesendruck, 2007). Our three-group design allowed us to examine differences between strategies parents used with typically-developing children and children with developmental disorders, but – perhaps more revealing – between strategies parents used when interacting with children with different developmental disorders.

Children with ASD present an especially complex constellation of early communication problems that contribute to difficulties in early language acquisition. Joint attention deficits that are evident before language emerges and predict language concurrently and longitudinally (Bopp & Miranda, 2011; Charman et al., 2003; Toth, Munson, Meltzoff, & Dawson, 2006) may hamper a child's appreciation of the relation between a partner's speech and shared objects. Limited interest in new objects (Adamson, Deckner, & Bakeman, 2010) may limit opportunities to engage a child long enough to present novel words. Yet,

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