

*The Units of Language Acquisition*

# **The units of language acquisition**

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**Series preface by Sheldon Rosenberg**

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## PREFACE

The investigation that led to the writing of this book began when I realized that the language development of a child I was studying was not progressing in any previously documented manner. By beginning to observe this child, Minh, at the age of 7 months, I had planned to trace the transition from babbling to speech, and ultimately to connect my observations on his one-word stage with the growing literature on early learning of syntax. What I discovered, however, was that while he was learning a number of traditional "words" (*doggie, kitty, cookie*, etc.), Minh's speech consisted more characteristically of relatively long sentence-like utterances, only some of which could be identified with adult words or phrases (*look at that! what is that? open the door!*). Thus notions such as "word" and "syntax" were called into serious question when applied to his language acquisition. This and other problems led me to question many of the traditional models and assumptions about early language acquisition and to propose, in Peters (1977), that there might be a "Gestalt," in addition to the more familiar "Analytic," approach to acquiring language.

In searching the literature on the one-word stage I discovered a number of hints suggesting that Minh was not the only child to use a Gestalt strategy - or more accurately to combine a Gestalt with an Analytic approach. Although the material that I had found up to that time was incorporated into the 1977 paper, I was not satisfied. There was still the question: Is the Gestalt approach some kind of anomaly, a false lead that eventually peters out in a dead end? Or is it an important and pervasive strategy, but one that has been missed owing to theoretical biases of child language investigators? As I continued to read I steadily accumulated reports of observations that support the latter view, although, it seems, no author has attempted to integrate it into a reasonably comprehensive theory of language acquisition.

I gradually discovered that the key to the integration was that, whether a Gestalt or an Analytic approach was used, children must in general start out with whatever units they can acquire, whether large or small. Therefore, to understand early language acquisition, one must understand the language units that children are actually working with. There is no reason to assume that these are necessarily the same as the units of adult language. I set myself two tasks, the pursuit of which has resulted in this book. One goal was to formulate this view as clearly as possible and to integrate it with a wide range of reported research on language acquisition. The task proved surprisingly difficult since the ideas were so new and the relevant published observations were reported in such a tortuous fashion, reflecting the lack of appropriate terminology and conceptual framework. The other goal was to understand the implications of this model clearly enough so that I could devise specific research methods for investigating particular aspects of the phenomena that I was proposing were common to all children. Thus, although in this account suggestions for further research are mostly confined to Chapter 5, they must be seen as a major contribution of the work.

This book is a much revised and expanded version of an earlier working paper (Peters 1980). As the ideas presented here are better understood and further developed, it should be possible to reformulate them in clearer and more succinct ways. Although I am convinced of the validity of the overall approach, particular aspects of the theory may need revision in the light of the results of the proposed new research.

I have drawn on the ideas and observations of a large number of child language and even adult language investigators. It has not been possible to acknowledge accurately all the possible sources of each idea that I have mentioned or developed, although the range of my debt to them is accurately reflected in the References section at the end of the book. In addition, I would like to single out certain of the principal influences on my work. My conviction that children's language units are central to a theory of the early stages of language acquisition was greatly influenced by the work of Ruth Clark and Katherine Nelson. A preliminary paper I had formulated by the spring of 1979 was strongly reinforced by interactions with Charles Fillmore and Lily Wong Fillmore that summer. More recent versions of the theory were influenced by my exposure to Dan Slobin's cross-linguistic work on language acquisition in the summer of 1980, as well as by the latest version of his

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Operating Principles, to which I was introduced in his seminar at Berkeley in the winter of 1981. To Shirley Brice Heath I am grateful for the chance to discuss ideas about cross-cultural influences on the size of linguistic units. Other colleagues whom I thank for discussions and comments are Carol Tane Akamatsu, Elizabeth Barber, Ruth Berman, John Bisazza, Stephen Boggs, Eileen Cain, Bonnie Davis, Susan Fischer, Joan Forman, George Grace, Robert Hsu, A. W. F. Huggins, Susan Iwamura, Elizabeth Kimmell, Stephen Krashen, Anita Nordbrock, Claudine Poggi, Jack Richards, Theodore Rodgers, Robin Scarcella, Jacquelyn Schachter, Ron Scollon, Stanley Starosta, Harry Whitaker, and the participants in Dan Slobin's seminar at the University of California at Berkeley during the winter quarter of 1981. I am also indebted to Sheldon Rosenberg, the editor of this series, and to his consultant, for their perceptive and helpful comments. I wish to thank the Social Science Research Institute of the University of Hawaii for support while I was working on this project. The text owes much of its present shape to the constant encouragement and merciless editing of my friend and colleague Robert W. Hsu. I alone am responsible for the content.

Ann M. Peters

**Caveat to the electronic version:**

This book was originally published in 1983. After it went out of print I requested that the copyright be returned to me, and Cambridge University Press agreed. The book was then scanned into a computer. I have done a spellcheck and some formatting but there may still be some errors.

Ann Peters, April 2002

## SERIES PREFACE

Ann Peters's *The units of language acquisition* inaugurates a new series for researchers, practitioners, instructors, and students: Cambridge Monographs and Texts in Applied Psycholinguistics. The aim of the series is to draw together work from all the subfields of applied psycholinguistics by authors who approach applied problems from the vantage point of basic research and theory in related areas of cognitive psychology as well as psycholinguistics. It will encompass a wide range of books: reports of original research; critical integrative reviews; major theoretical contributions; presentations of intervention programs for the language-disordered; language assessment programs; carefully selected and edited collections of research and other papers including, possibly, occasional conference reports and symposia; and, an important series component, texts.

The main topics of interest are: reading and reading disorders; writing and writing disorders; learning from texts and lectures; second-language learning and bilingualism; dialect and social-class differences; the assessment of linguistic maturity and communicative competence; the application of psycholinguistics to computer language design and the design of written and oral information; nonverbal communication; delayed language development; adult aphasia; autistic language; adult schizophrenic language; and language and communicative disorders associated with mental retardation, environmental deprivation, motor impairment, specific learning disabilities, deafness, blindness, or senile dementia.

Sheldon Rosenberg

## CONVENTIONS

The following conventions are used in my own examples and discussion, though not necessarily in examples quoted from others:

Material in double quotation marks: either a technical term or what someone else actually said - a direct quotation, for example, "I don't wanna."

Material in single quotation marks: a gloss of what someone said - either a translation from another language or an interpretation of child speech, for example, 'look at that'.

Material in italics: emphasis; phonological stress (in quoted speech); or the target of an utterance, that is, a word or phrase being aimed at, for example, *look at that*.

Underscored materials in italics: Underlines show presumed lack of segmentation, for example, *I don't know what that is*.

Material in square brackets: phonetic transcription, for example, [dʊkədæt].

Material between slashes: phonemic transcription, for example, /heyv/.

Children's ages are given as: years;months.days, for example, 2;3.12.