

Fundamentals of language Acquisition

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Lecture 047

Lec 47: verbal communication: speech act

Welcome back. We will start with Lecture 2 today, Lecture 2 of Module 10. In Module 10, we are looking at communication. So after the children have figured out the basic grammatical structure of the language and the semantics of the language, that is, how the words mean and how sentence structures are to be created, then they need to communicate. And in this module, in lecture 1, we have looked at some of the principles of communication that have been put forward in the literature and the pre-verbal stage of children, which occurs before they have started to communicate in language proper. What are the primary methods that infants use for communication? So, now we will move on to verbal communication. So, this is the verbal stage where they can use words, use sentences, and indulge in the communicative process. So, in the verbal stage, there are a number of things that happen. So, once the stage starts, infants need to hone the following skills. So, what are those skills? Speech acts, reference words use/referential communication, scalar implicature, turn-taking, and figurative language use.

All of these are possible only after they have started the verbal stage. The pre-verbal stage, as we have discussed, refers only to eye movement, along with some gestures and pointing. So, there are pointing and non-pointing gestures and eye contact. But when they are using verbal language, they can do a lot more. So, one of the most important things that we do with language, as Searle talked about, is that we can do things with language; we do not just speak, but we can make some actions happen with language, which is called a speech act. We will not get into what a speech act is; just restrict ourselves to what the different kinds are that Searle talked about. So, the most basic one is the assertive statement when you simply state something that is happening. So, when you say it is raining, it is a simple statement of fact that it is actually raining. You can have another kind, which is called directives. Directives are when you ask somebody to do

something.

The speaker wants the hearer to do something, act on whatever kind of command or request there is. So "could you please open the skylight?" So this is called a directive. The speaker is requesting the hearer to open the skylight. Commissives can be conveyed without using specific words through intonation. So, speakers commit themselves to a future action like a promise, pledge, guarantee, and so on. Similarly, you have expressive "you won!" So, if you say you won like this, then this is a feeling expressed through tone most of the time. So, if you say you won in a particular tone, you might mean that I did not expect you to win. Or in another tone, the same structure can mean that I am happy that you won like this. So, these are called expressive because the intonation pattern expresses what you feel; that is another kind of speech act. Then you have declarations.

So, declarations mean "I declare you the winner of this tournament"; often, these are used in a formal setup, you know, kind of a specific utterance for a specific kind of context. So, I declare you the winner of this tournament, I sentence you 10 years of imprisonment by a judge in the court, this kind of sentences will be called declarations. So, these are the speech acts as far as Searle is concerned; these are the ones that he gave. Now, this has also been studied in child language acquisition to determine whether children can indulge in speech acts. Adults, of course, can and do, but do infants also indulge in speech acts? This is what we are more interested in.

So, from the age of 10 months, children can point to things they are interested in. We have already seen in the first lecture how pointing is an important feature of pre-verbal behavior. That is what we are talking about. So, they also reach towards anything that interests them. These gestures have been viewed as proto-forms of assertives and directives. So, if you are pointing to something, this is taken as a simple declaration of "I want this; I want that toy." So, if the child is pointing, this satisfies the speech act of the very first one, the simple assertive one, that conveys "I want this; this is it; this is my toy" or something like that. And when they are reaching out for something, pointing and reaching are slightly different, so when they are trying to reach for something, they are probably asking you to, this is where the directive comes in, what is a directive? Asking somebody, "Would you please open it?" You can request, you can order, or whatever, but here the child is basically asking the caregiver, whoever the caregiver is, to get him or her that particular thing, toy, or book, or whatever. That is why it is regarded as a directive. So, these points and reaches combine with single words to express different intentions.

They can occur only in isolation, only as pointing, or also when, because by the time they are 10 months or 1 year of age, they start to speak in words. Some children can use even two words. So, in this situation, they are using single words and then combining

them with gestures to express different kinds of speech acts. So, different kinds of intentions; this is the reason this is called the first speech acts performed by children. So, as for Greenfield and Smith (1976), this is how they have categorized the different kinds of speech acts with respect to different kinds of gestures as well as simple words, as they say.

So, assertion: utterance 'recor(d) plus point. So, what they mean is that the context was pointing at a record player with a record on. So, meaning that this is a recorder or something, recor, /d/ was absent. Assertion again, "car", and then looking at the car, turning to the window, as the car passes outside. So, this is an assertion that there is a car.

So, car and looking at it. So, this is taken as an assertion of the assertive speech act. Request: "recor (d)" and then start to whine. So, in here, the record player just turned off; the child wants it on. So, the record player was playing, and then he or she says "recor" and then starts to whine; that means this is a request. Similarly, "car" looks at the car and then starts whining, wanting the toy car that had just fallen on the floor. So, these are some of the speech acts as far as Greenfield and Smith are concerned; this particular publication is concerned with respect to Searle's speech act theory. The children are also able; infants are also capable of indulging in speech acts. So, this is about a speech act. Another important domain of the initial verbal communication strategies used by children is in the domain of reference.

Reference, as in what a particular thing refers to. So, what is the relationship between what you say and what is there, and what does it refer to in the real world? So, referential communication is again a joint activity between the speaker and the listener. So, this is not something that a person does alone. This is a collaboration again. We talked about collaboration at the beginning of this module. That communication is always a collaborative affair; any kind of conversation is a collaboration. So, within that collaborative context, reference is one of the most important aspects. So, this is dependent on the interlocutor's pragmatic competence. So, what the other person is trying to say is that you have to understand. So, the appropriate use of referential expressions warrants the speaker's ability to take the hearer's perspective, and this refers to the apt assessment of his knowledge state.

So, if you are referring to something, you need to understand what the hearer will understand. If you are referring to something the hearer simply does not know, then there is no point in expecting successful communication. Similarly, the hearer should be able to track the speaker's intention. So, referential communication works both ways. Both the speaker and the hearer need to be aware of the other person's mental state, what he or she might be referring to, and what he or she might not be referring to at the same time.

Thus, the developmental trajectory of reference is very important. So, how do the children, how do infants understand what the developmental stages are through which the child perfects this particular understanding? This will give us a window into the minds of infants regarding how they really develop their pragmatic abilities. Pragmatic abilities also have to do with their cognitive abilities. How do you understand the other person's standpoint? How do you infer the other person's point of view? So this is what we are talking about here when we say "referring." So, using language to refer, in a communicative context, we use language or linguistic terms to refer to something.

We say "book" to refer to a book, to an actual book in the real world. So, the linguistic reference is the relationship between words, phrases, and entities in the world. So, this is what we mean by linguistic reference. So, for which we have words, phrases, or whatever. So, using a linguistic tool to refer to something, this is called linguistic reference.

Like the relationship between the noun phrase "the dog" and the specific dog in the world. Because it is the dog, it is specific; it is a specific dog. If we had used a dog, it would be any dog in the world. So, this is what we mean by a reference. So, referential assignment links the abstract system of language to objects, properties, events, and other different kinds of entities in the world; hence, it is at the fundamental level of communication.

Now, methods for doing this, methods for understanding, comprehending. So, we will talk about both the comprehension and production of referential communication, starting with comprehension. So, for very young learners with limited vocabulary who are just starting to speak in words, assigning linguistic reference involves a process that often serves to establish meaning for unfamiliar words. What does this mean? This basically means that when the child is at the very initial stage of word learning, the understanding of the reference of a novel word depends on whatever the caregiver might be using. So the caregiver uses a novel word and then shows a novel object; the child eventually uses it as a tool to learn the word's meaning. So they are basically building their vocabulary through referential understanding. So, if the child has to have that ability at that stage to infer the meaning and to understand that this novel word refers to something in the real world, which is this particular object. So, this is what we mean by an important tool for word learning: learning unfamiliar words, unfamiliar sentences, unfamiliar concepts, and so on and so forth. Infants use different types of sociopragmatic information to delimit the set of potential meanings and references for an unfamiliar expression used by the speaker. This is something we have discussed at length when we discussed the word, learning words.

So we will not go there. The speaker's direction of gaze is also one of the most important. Now, what is the speaker looking at? Not only often what happens when the caregivers are talking to an infant is that they will not simply say a novel word; they will also look at the object, and children figure out very early in life that by following the eye movement of the speaker, they can actually find out the referent of the novel word; hence, the speaker's direction of gaze is an important factor in this. So, studies have shown that eye gaze monitoring helps in learning new words, and this is also useful in terms of long-term understanding. So, children also figure it out at the beginning. We talked about responding to joint attention; this is exactly what we meant there.

So, the caregiver is looking at something; the child follows the gaze and thereby gets the meaning of the novel word. Now, the successful communication of reference depends on a number of means. So, when they are speaking, when they are producing words as opposed to comprehension, as we just saw, they use a number of tools; they use a number of socio-cultural methods to get to it. So, as they initially are in the pre-linguistic stage, we have seen the pointing and gestures, and as they grow, they start to use and comprehend different types of reference words; for example, we are giving an example here in English. So, the personal pronouns like "it," deictics like "this," "there," definite versus indefinite, noun phrases like "the cup" versus "a cup" in the English language, modified noun phrases like "the short red cup," and so on.

So, learning these linguistic items and markers will help them pick out the objects and other entities in the world. So, when they are in the initial stages of learning, they will be, once they understand that the cup is different from a cup, this will help them locate the object in the real world in a much better way. Similarly, when they start speaking, they will do the same. So, the choice and interpretation of these devices during inferential, referential communication largely depend on expectation of informativeness. So, this is where we connect the processes that the child goes through and indulges in to Grice's Maxim of Quantity. So, depending on what linguistic item you are choosing and what the other methods you are using are, dependent on the expectation of informativeness. Typically, we do not; most of the common conversations are informative, exactly adequately informative. So, that is taken as given. So, within that children perform. So, this means the speaker needs to keep in mind what information is shared and not shared by a conversation partner.

This has been studied at length by the authors, Clark and Group. An effective speaker chooses informationally appropriate words and phrases to refer to things in the world, taking into account what the listener is likely to know. So, if you cannot talk about something that the speaker has no clue about, So, in an effective communication setup,

this has to be taken into account. So, using reference words, we will now look at some studies and findings in this regard. So, the basic idea is that reference means understanding the linguistic unit and whatever it is pointing to in the real world.

That takes into account the child's comprehension as well as the use of those linguistic items. So, what are those linguistic items? They might be simple like deictic terms, pronouns, or nouns. So, now let us go to the examples. Studies have shown that they are good at taking the perspective of the listener into account. So, 14-month-old German children responded differently depending on which toy the speaker had previously played with.

The question was, the adult was asking where the other toy was and if they could give it to them. Now, when the person is asking where the other toy is, the child already understands that the toy the experimenter is talking about is the one he has not seen and has not played with because the word "other" has been used. So, by decoding this message, the child is trying to understand the speaker's mindset at that given point in time, and they are able to respond accordingly. Similarly, children adjust the informational content of the referential devices they use based on the needs of their addressees. For example, many studies have looked at it; one of them I have quoted here.

So, what they found was that they used pointing and verbal language to indicate the location of a hidden toy, hidden for the mother. So, they kept pointing to a hidden object that the child knew but the mother did not. So, they used a combination of gestures and language. Similarly, when the pointing gesture was not enough to refer to an out-of-reach toy with a specific sticker, they used verbal description, not just pointing. So, they depend on taking into account their addressee's and their hearer's perspective.

In the second case, the child was asking for a toy that was out of reach for her, but the mother could not figure out which one she was talking about. And that toy, there was a particular one that had a specific sticker attached to it. So, that is when they stopped pointing and started using more verbal language. So, this is taken as an example that children are capable of understanding the mental states of the hearer. So, in English, most of these examples come from studies on English-speaking children; at least the ones that I have quoted here are mostly. So, in English, when introducing an object for the first time in conversation, the indefinite article a or an will be used, not the, and subsequently, the will be used. So, whenever you are trying to refer to the object that has already been talked about. So, let us say the mother talks about a cat, a story about a cat, and what the cat was doing. So, when she introduces the cat, she will say there was a cat in my neighbor's house like this, and successively, whenever she refers to the cat, she will say "the cat.

" This is how the English language works. So, these kinds of reference terms lie on a scale of accessibility; this is the technical term. So, when you are, how accessible the term is in your mind? So, this is determined by the degree to which the referent is active in the hearer's consciousness. Similarly, the use of nouns and pronouns is important. So, when you introduce a new object, you use a noun; subsequently, you will be using a pronoun to refer to the same thing. The equivalence of this is the scale of accessibility: how accessible the object is.

So, if the referent is introduced recently in the conversation, then it is assumed to be highly accessible to the hearer's mind; hence, pronouns will be used. But if the referent is completely new, then a pronoun cannot sufficiently distinguish between many possible referents, and as a result, you will be using a noun. Now, this has been seen in slightly older children but not in younger ones. So, in 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds, Tomasello and his group found this particular behavior, but not in 2-year-olds. So, they used the full phrase, "the clown is jumping." And when the listener could see the events being described, less informative expressions were used, such as saying "he is jumping". So, when the person he was talking to could not see the events, he or she describes that the clown is jumping, creating a fully informative sentence. Remember our Gricean maxims of informativeness. So, they know that the person he is talking to does not know what is happening.

So, she gives the entire sentence: "The clown is jumping." But when it is visible to the other person, it is less informative; he is jumping. So, when the listener could see the events. In many other studies, for example, in one recent study from 2015, 1 to 4-year-old children viewed short videos in which a speaker named one of the two toys. During the child's naming, first they viewed the short videos where the person was naming things, and then when the child had to name, children of all age groups were shown to spend most of the time looking at the speaker's face because they used the speaker's gaze direction to locate the correct target toy. So, when they had to name the toy, they first saw the video where the adult was naming the toy, which means the adult was naming the toy by looking at it.

And that is why, when the child was asked to name the toy, they looked at the adult's face to figure out which one was the referent. So, this is yet another way to see that

children actually figured out how to use various kinds of social cues with reference to the words. Similarly, there are many other complex factors. For example, discourse novelty and speaker intent have also been studied. So, 2-year-old children assigned a new label to an object that was novel to their interlocutors but not to themselves.

They already knew the object, but they were asked to give a label to the object that the other person had not seen. So, they could do it quite well. So, in a related study, 2-year-olds assigned labels to objects that were presented in an intentionally, but not in an accidentally, novel context. So, basically, by changing the context of the conversation, the researchers tried to see what the child does. So, what they found out was that the child could assign labels according to the situation of the interlocutor.

So, if they did not know they were using the proper nouns and the proper kind of articles, and if they knew it, they did not. So, the results show that children actively monitor their communicative exchanges with other interlocutors and use this information to interpret the referential intentions of these interlocutors. So, basically, a number of works in this domain suggest that children are generally aware of the factors governing the use of reference words in a given situation. However, it takes a little while for them to use it like adults. For example, we saw with many instances that they do understand the interlocutor's, meaning the other person's intent, and mental state, but this does not mean that they can use that understanding as an adult.

So that takes a little bit of time. For example, one particular study looked at this from three language groups: Korean, Inuktitut, and Italian. Children aged between one and a half and three years were subjects in this study, and their spontaneous speech was analyzed. In all three languages, it is possible to omit the reference word if the referent is very accessible. For example, it is grammatical to say 'drinking some milk' and omit 'the cat' when the reference is easily accessible from the previous discourse in the matter.

It is also possible in Indian languages. So, you do not need to. If you just talked about the cat in the previous sentence, then you can follow it up with just drinking the milk, not saying the cat was drinking the milk. So, across all three of these languages, the result is that the children were sensitive to this constraint, which means they behaved like the adults would. Like adults, they were found to omit the reference words when the referent was easily accessible. So, they all omitted the phrase "the cat," not the cat itself. However, if this is not the case, children tend to produce a word to identify it often in a full noun phrase.

So, basically, what they found out in a cross-linguistic study was that children do understand that when the word was introduced recently, they do not need to because the grammar of these languages allows for not using the subject all the time, and they could do it as well. However, they did not do this 100 percent of the time. That means they had some errors, though they could do it on many occasions; in some cases, they did not. In many cases, they were uninformative and introduced a new topic of conversation without specifying who or what they were referring to. So, in the flow of conversation, the children were also found to be uninformed; suddenly, they introduced a new object without saying what it was.

So, that is the finding of this particular study, basically pointing to the fact that though children do understand these things and figure them out, they also figure out the other person's intentions, mental states, and knowledge states, but they are not always correct; they do make mistakes. So, they can be over-informative or under-informative. For example, a sentence like "Look at the cat; the cat is drinking milk." There is no need to repeat 'the cat' in the second sentence; here, pronouns could have been used, but they are not. Overall, the finding is that children take time to learn all the factors responsible for choosing the correct reference word.

So, this is about references. So, what is in a nutshell about this whole idea of reference is that you understand that the words linguistic labels refer to something in the world. But the way you encode that information in your language depends on your understanding of the interlocutor, the hearer, and the other person in the conversation setup. And children tend to have behavioral outputs that show they figure this out to a large extent, if not 100 percent of the time. So, this is where we complete Lecture 2 of this module.

In lecture 3, we will take up another aspect of communicative competence. Thank you.