

Finding the Words...

by Marge Blanc

To Tell the "Whole" Story Natural Language Acquisition on the Autism Spectrum Part 3

Welcome to our third installment in the continuing story of Natural Language Acquisition on the spectrum! In this third edition of our column, we will take you through the "generative" steps in this process...and, finally, language development will begin to look more like what you thought it would!

To review, in column one (May-June 2005), we introduced the idea that kids use Stage 1 language gestalts (whole phrases "lifted" from other sources) purposefully. In column two (July-August 2005), we continued the story of the natural language acquisition process through "mitigation: of language gestalts into their component parts...shorter phrases that can be "recombined."

We introduced two children, Will, 14, and Dylan, 4 (called "Daniel" in column one), to illustrate the extremes...and consistencies...of the process. I say "extremes," because while both children made excellent progress, Dylan moved from Stage 1 to Stage 3 in about a half year, and Will has not done so yet, after a year. And, I say "consistencies," because their process is basically still the same! While some things were easier for Dylan (he had less language to mitigate from...to find the commonalities among), some are easier for Will (his articulation is better and people understand him more often; he is familiar with a wider variety of language and so "generating" language, when he is read, will not be so foreign.)

So in our continuing story, we will pick up where we left off at the end of the last column. Stage 3 was where Dylan learned to isolate single words and began to generate his first original, "from scratch" phrases. Yes, Dylan's language sounded a lot less "colorful" at this stage, but his short phrases were "transparent" to his partners, and they literally meant what they said!

After 7 months of language therapy, we had helped Dylan successfully isolate single words...the component parts of his gestalts and the building blocks of his future...generative language. His utterances sounded a lot like those of a two year old at that stage, but we knew that his thinking was way beyond how he sounded! We knew that once he caught up with his

peers linguistically, he would actually be ahead of them in his use of story, metaphor, and imagination!

Those of you who have watched a more "typically-developing" child acquire language know what two-year-old language sounds like. It isn't necessarily grammatically accurate, and it's "all over the map." With the same two words (e.g. Mommy + sock), a child can combine them both ways, the mean innumerable things, including, "These are Mommy's sock," "Mommy, put my socks on," "I'm gonna give my socks to Mommy," etc.

Stage 3 combinations of single words lead, eventually, to all the more-sophisticated sentences of the English language, and are not to be taken lightly! Variousy referred to in language development literature, this "pivot grammar" is nicely outlined in Developmental Sentence Types of Pre-Sentences (a part of Developmental Sentence Analysis), which illustrates that kids need to use tons of two-word phrases in their play, so that their grammar eventually develops variety and flexibility. These rudimentary two-word combinations are more like combinations of concepts than word classes...and lay the groundwork for thinking about concept relationships with language...and, ultimately, all the grammatical relationships that follow.

In our clinic, we try to help kids make the most of Stage 3...by setting up situations where all kinds of conceptual categories naturally "bump into" each other. We help kids put words to these conceptual combinations, and don't worry about how "accurate" they sound. When Dylan was at Stage 3, a typical conversation sounded like the following [D is Dylan; C is a clinician]:

D Basketball. [making a ball out of playdough]
C Basketball.
D All right, basketball. [finding a "basket" to throw into]
C Throw it in the basket.
D To basketball.
J Oh, basketball.
D We...to basketball.
C Pass it! Pass it!
D One, two.
C One, two. Want more? Oh, ugly [referring to some gray playdough]
D I..yuck.

It is telling that at Stage 3, Dylan didn't use accurate sentences, and we didn't care! We wanted him to explore, explore, explore...and to hear and use words in all kinds of combinations! In our clinic today, just as ten years ago, we spend plenty of time at Stage 3, knowing that kids will naturally move on to Stage 4 when they are ready! As you can see, we believe in this process, because we have seen it unfold scores of times. We don't need to teach kids to use, "I want..." and "I see..." prematurely, because, when they are ready, they will use these sentences...and so many more...naturally!!

As you look at the Developmental Sentence Type sidebar, I think you will be struck by the utter breadth of variety...all about a ball and eating cookies! Study these word (and conceptual) combinations carefully, and see how the whole world can be described in two-word phrases! Then think how much we miss if we make the mistake of jumping from single

words to "I want..." sentences prematurely!

Well, dear reader, everything up to this point may sound terribly logical...but, you may be wondering how you will ever set up a situation that promotes language like Dylan's. You might be thinking that your child just wants to sit in front of the tv...so how will you get him up and moving enough to want to throw a "basketball," or discover yucky playdough? It is a matter of combining your intimate knowledge of your child's loves with his current sensory motor system. If he loves Tigger and Pooh, then finding them hidden in surprising places, and discovering them leaping from the pillow to the floor may be just funny enough to provide the back-drop for phrases like, "It... 's Tigger!!!!" When Pooh emerges from a second pillow, "And Poooooh's pillow" might be the natural language model. As you run from the room with "Tigger aaaaand Poooh!!!" you will know if you've successfully become the Pied Piper or not. And what your child says (or doesn't say) give you invaluable feedback for your next models...but don't feel shy saying tons that no one seems to find interesting at all...you may hear them said back to you when you least expect it...just like you did those earlier "gestalts" no one meant as a model! [See Table]

<i>Developmental Sentence Types of Pre-Sentences</i>
<p style="text-align: center;">Nouns and Noun Elaborations:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Ball, a ball, balls, more balls, this ball, my ball, now ball, Daddy ball, big ball, baby ball, ball truck, not ball, another ball?, what ball?, and ball</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Designators and Designative Elaborations:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Here, there this, that, it, those, these, this?, here? Here ball, these balls, there now, there one, not there, that ball?, who that? And here.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Verbal and Verbal Elaborations:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">imperatives (eat!), basic elaborations (eating, ate, can't eat?), eat cookie, eat now, eat it, not eat, eat it?, what eat?, and eat, wanna eat</p>

So let's return to Dylan's story. When he had been in therapy for a little over a year, his use of generative grammar had been at Stage 4 for a few months. A language sample at that time revealed Stage 4 constructions (Developmental Sentence Scoring levels 1-3) such as the following, and a few Stage 5 constructions (DSS levels 4-6):

- I slam it.
- Door's lock.
- You go in there, Mom.
- I want move mattress.
- I got magic!
- Go get a magic.

Dylan still produced numerous utterances at Stage 3, where he experimented with word (and concept) combinations:

It two books.
Red and blue.
My...me.
All done balloon.
Some magic?

Highlights of Developmental Sentence Scoring levels

- 1 It, I, my, you, simple verbs, not , Is it?
- 2 He, she, verb+s, verb+ed, gonna, gotta, let's, what, where
- 3 We, they, those, more, some, and, to...
 - 4 Can't + verb, don't + verb
 - 5 But, so, or, if, when, how
 - 6 Could, would, because
- 7 Why, everybody, first, last, passive voice (has gotten)
- 8 Embedded clauses (I got soaked when it rained)

A few months later, Dylan still had a few Stage 3 constructions, but was more solidly at Stage 4 and 5. Typical utterances included:

I gonna running.
Don't move!
I rolling.
Scary monster.
I can fall.
I get a pillow.
Mommy, no out.
I don't like it.
Whoa, I'm gonna get bounce.
Hey, can't falling.

Another 8 months later, Dylan's language was a mixture of Stage 4, 5, and Stage 6 (DSS levels 7 and 8), with constructions such as the following:

Yickes, she's got hurt.
Curious George is...climb tree
You get the rhino.
I'll teach him on a rope.
What you going?
I take him map.
I gotta fix.
Oh, the ship and the house.
Where did the ladder go?
Tigger, are you promise?

By the time of the preceding language sample, Dylan was 6 and a half years old, and while clearly "language delayed," was producing a nice variety of original sentences in near-non-stop dialogue! Did Dylan still produce language gestalts? Did he still love to quote from his favorite videos? You bet he did...but, usually, now, it was to "research" an idea, or to find a subject he wanted to understand. Quoting from "Lion King" was not a cause for panic, or a warning that Dylan was "regressing." He was still a gestalt learner natively, and he still looked to whole stories, whole ideas, and whole patterns as his prime source of meaning. It was not surprising, then, to find him reciting whole lines. But, unlike a few years ago, it was clear, too, that Dylan would "mitigate" from these gestalts quickly, find what he wanted from them, and use them in his own unique ways.

Dylan continued his steady language progress for another half year, and at the time of his dismissal, Dylan was speaking with far greater accuracy, and was regularly reformulating sentences to make them more understandable to his listeners. A few examples from that time include:

We got it...we got the treasure, Pooh.

Pull...let's pull...let's pull the rope!

Oh, Tigger, you got to get the anchor.

What's this? A star!

I don't want to, Marge...I don't want to balloons...I don't want to blow a bubble.

As we conclude this story of Dylan, and complete the progression of Natural Language Acquisition on the spectrum, we should recap the journey. In three years, from the age of 4 to 7, Dylan moved from using language gestalts (Stage 1), to mitigating them and recombining them (Stage 2), isolating single words and beginning to generate original phrases (Stage 3), developing simple sentences with a variety of pronouns and verbs (Stage 4), using a variety of verb tenses and phrase relationships (Stage 5), and forming complex sentences with more advanced verbs and conjunctions (Stage 6).

While, at age 7, Dylan's story was far from complete, he was clearly on his way as a generative language user! As Digest readers know, Dylan has since gone on to tell his own story in the book, *Walk Awhile in My Autism*...and we know that Dylan will continue to teach us as he continues to grow up!

In the meantime, your child, too, can benefit from Dylan's story...and Will's example...and, in our next column, we will highlight the "how to's" of the Natural Language Process...and help you "plug into" the system at the right place for your child!

References

Lee, Laura L., Developmental Sentence Analysis, Evanston, IL:Northwestern University Press (1974).

BIO

Marge Blanc founded the Communication Development Center, in Madison, WI 10 years ago. Specializing in physically-supported speech and language services for children with ASD diagnoses, CDC has successfully helped scores of children as they moved through the stages of language acquisition. Contact Marge and her associates at:

Communication Development Center
700 Rayovac Drive, Suite 200
Madison, WI 53711
lyonblanc@aol.com