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Form and function in language learning

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FORM AND FUNCTION IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

For many years the literature of child language has dealt with the growth
of concepts. Already Preyer[1] made it the center of his careful study and nume-
rous other, psychologists as well as linguists, since then have debated the
problem for or against him. Stern[2] is one of those who tried to come closer
to a solution by establishing a hierarchy of concepts of different scope, viz.
individual concept, plural concept and general generic concepts. There are no
doubt several levels of concepts, with varying degrees of abstractness in the
adult language. One has obviously to expect the young child's concepts to be
less abstract and less precise than are the concepts of adults. But one must
also have in mind that many of the concepts of adults on an everyday level
are imperfectly circumscribed and differ from the child's concepts only in
degree of vagueness. Also the truism that words have sharp, logical and un-
varying meanings in the developed language is a superstition which has long
been exposed and is, fortunately, slowly dying out. Not that this opinion has
been accepted generally. Erdmann[3], e.g., showed more than 80 years ago
that the meaning of words, regarded descriptively, varies from situation to
situation and that there is hardly any word, even in the reaches of scholarly
language, for which one definition is invariably correct. Lewis[4] stresses the
fact that the semantic categories of adults as of children are practical and
functional rather than scientific. Nevertheless, the fact that not only children's
words but also the words of adults have a wavering and ill-defined reference,
is not often faced in the discussion of children's concepts.

The views concerning children's concepts range all the way from acceptance
of a great generalization[5] to denial of the existence of concepts until after
several years; the application of one word to a variety of situations is then

[1] W. Preyer, „Die Seele des Kindes", Leipzig 1882; 9th ed. 1923.
[2] Cf. Cl. + W. Stern, „Die Kindersprache. Eine psychologische und sprachtheoretische
Untersuchung, 4th ed. 1928.
[3] Cf. K. O. Erdmann, „Die bedeutung des Wortes", Leipzig 1900.
[4] For details, see M. M. Lewis, „Infant Speech", London 1936, 220 ff.
[5] Cf. M. Cohen, „Journal de Psychologie XX", 1923, 637; W. Preyer, „Die Seele des
Kindes", 1882, 92.

explained by the poverty of the vocabulary and the operation of vague associations.[6] Other views distinguish between the child's representations and the adults' „notions" or recognize variations in the precision and scope of concepts.[7] The growth of concepts beyond the range of active vocabulary is emphasized by Cohen, Preyer et al.[8]

The question whether or not children invent or create words is still the subject of many a study. So are extensions of meanings and other unconventional handling of imitative material. The first need in trying to solve this problem is a definition of what is meant by *"invention"* or *"original creation"*. For some researchers these terms include classes of free, unconventional handling of conventional linguistic elements particularly the coining of derivatives and compounds not current in standard language. For others only the use of phonetic words without a prototype in the standard language is covered by them. The closer insight, however, has revealed that the purely imitative aspect of language is restricted to the acquisition of basic vocabulary items and to the sounds of which they are composed. The learning of more abstract patterns of language in syntax and morphology does not proceed by imitation of fixed phonetic material but by application of abstract linguistic principles to variable phonetic material, i.e. by analogies.[9] The patterns of word-formations stand midway between these fields. Of many examples which illustrate their originality, let us quote at least one:

On the question as to where was his cousin, the boy answered: *"Na autokiádě"* (= *na Spartakiádě*). He must have heard the correct term for the sport games; the name *Spartak*, however, has a single meaning for him as yet, i.e. *a type of auto*. This was evidently the only thing the boy registered when hearing this unusual word and used this sole aspect as an emergency solution to overcome the vocabulary deficiency.

It is commonly known that children begin to speak at about the time when — to use Piaget's terminology — the sensory-motor period is ending. During this period they learn to organize the booming buzzing confusion of the variety of sensations shat impinge upon them into a world in which they are objects which can be perceived by a variety of senses and which continue to exist even when they are not perceived and which are distinct from themselves. This is, no doubt, an essential preliminary to acquiring the means of referring to objects and activities and relationships in terms of adult frame of reference.

Another major achievement of the child during the sensory-motor period is the acquisition of the function of symbolic representation. In Piaget's opinion this begins as imitated activity.[10] When the child plays at *"going to sleep"* or *"eating a meal"*, this is its form of representing those activities. When these representations become internalized they can form the basis of insightful behaviour which anticipates the result of an action and enables the child to act with foresight. This type of behaviour is instanced by Piaget's

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[6] For details, cf. W. Wundt, „*Volkerpsychologie*", vol. I, Leipzig 1900.
[7] Cf. H. Delacroix, „*Le Langage et la pensee*", Paris 1924.
[8] Cf. note 5.
[9] These analogies, especially the false ones in many a case help to disclose the principles the child is governed by on his way to mastering the language.
[10] Cf. J. Piaget, „*Sprechen und Denken des Kindes*", Düsseldorf 1972, 23: French original 1932

daughter who at the age of 20 months came to a door with some blades of grass, put them in front of the door, then seeming to forsee that in pulling the door towards her to open it she would crush the flowers under it, she bent down and picked them up, moved them back before opening the door. A younger;child would have to go through the whole procedure in a trial and error fashion and would not have perceived the mistake until the evidence of the result of his action was before him.

The extralingual aspects — especially gesticulation and mimics — are the very first recognizable steps towards the child's faculty to communicate.These are produced as the earliest reactions on adults' comments — underlining thus the well-known fact that the child does understand the meaning and function of a word before he is able to reproduce the form of it and that the motoric skill is prior to speaking ability. Hence of course the first demands on the part of adults: *"do something"* and not *"say something"*. Of many data illustrating this fact let us mention here at least one:

The first reaction on being asked to show, how tall he is, the boy threw up both his hands above his head. This is the ususal way with toddlers in the pram. Alongside the development of motoring ability further activities are added, such as tip-toeing, jumping in the air etc. The first utterance to accompany this action was, in the observed child, a long open vowel, viz. *Ia::I.* Gradually, this vowel was replaced by a protoword *Ita:::I,* often realized as a polysyllable heavily stressed and with rise and fall of intonation to enlarge the effect. Evidently the child believed that the longer he keeps his arms above his head, and, concomitantly, the longer is the duration of the accompanying word, the taller he is. With gradual mastering the proper values of the phonemes he stopped using the extra-long vowel and arrived at the naming unit corresponding to that of adult language, viz. *"tak"* (= *so much*). At about the same time another change in his behaviour was observed: instead of throwing up both his arms, he just held up one; finally, the gesticulation was abondoned completely and the spoken word alone replaced the former combined reaction.

The period in which words are tied to an action is no doubt a very important stage in the development of word function. Here is an example to illustrate the fact:

One of the very frequent baby words is ,,*pápá"* (= *bye bye*). The use of it starts very early — as a cue for waving goodbye, one of those little drills performed by all children. As soon as, however, children come to utter this word, other function seems to prevail. Thus the boy under observation would repeat ,,*pápá"* and run into the cloakroom where his coat, cap, boots and the like were kept, i.e. the instruments for implementing the fulfilment of his wish to go out and therefore associated with it. Consequently, he said *"pápá"* with reference to articles of clothing he usually wore when going for a walk. Next came the predicative usage, utilized to announce that somebody was not present, as the child's answer to question as *"Where is Daddy?"* — *"pá"* reveals. The concept of greeting, however, was not forgotten. The meaning of it, nevertheless, became more sharply defined. Alongside a newly acquired word, viz. *"dobrou noc"* (= *good night*), *"pápá"* lost its former semantic territory as a universal greeting. The boy went on using it during the day until the moment when he was taken to the bathroom to have his evening bath.

Having his bath, being put into his pyjamas, getting his teddybear he used to sleep with — those were the extralingual realities which made him to say *"dobrou noc"* to anybody who might appear within this semantic environment. With the appearance of the greeting *"dobrý den"* (= *good morning*), *"pápá"* became further delimited. Contrary to his usage in the above mentioned situations, he now used *,,pápá"* only when leaving a place — as a farewell while on arrival — in accordance with the common usage — *"good morning"* got the upper hand. Apparently, the boy had already mastered the knowledge of *"what-is-supposed-to-be-said-when"*, while, as the next example illustrates, the ignorance of *"what-is-supposed-to-be-said-whom"* still persists; he would say *"good morning"* on meeting people in the street. This might seem pretty natural. Upon the question, however, what is the name of the girl he gave his friendly greeting he answered: *"I don't know her but I want her to play with me"*. — On the other hand, he did not say *"good morning"* to a neighbour and being asked why, he said surprisingly: *"Why should I, we know each other, don't we"*. In other words, *"good morning"* serves the purpose of getting acquainted with somebody, while the proper meaning is as yet unknown to him.

The next example reveals a further possible handicap in the child, viz. the lack of knowledge of *"who-is-supposed-to-say-what"*. He said *"thank you"* when handling a sweet to his aunt. What made him do so? Surely he had no model from the part of adults for this use. At first he probably had no idea there is convention to say *"thank you"* only on the part of the recipient and not on the part of the donor. One can hardly expect that a very young child would use phrases like *"Don't mention it"* (= rough ecquivalent of Czech *"prosím"* as the correct answer in a giving-taking act is. And yet the boy had this item in his vocabulary, its meaning, however, was delimited to what we may perhaps call the asking function. He would repeat *"prosím prosím"* when begging for something, prompted, no doubt, by the adult an imperative form *"popros"*. The common usage of this word is evidently a much later acquisition. On the other hand, even the very young child says *"thank you"* — both on correct and incorrect occasions — and one can find data documenting this fact in various children, Czech and foreign, most probably as a result of being often taught *"Say thank you when you get a sweet"* or *"what do you say when you get something?"*

Looked upon from this point of view, it is only natural that when offering a sweet to an adult or to his peer, he anticipates the expected answer and says *"thank you"*. This becomes a usage before he figures out that only the recipient should say it, not the donor.

From what we have said follows that a very important part of mastering words is learning what the occasions are on which adults say them. This is, as justly pointed out by L i s e M e n n,[11] an aspect of their function, and is conceptually separate from their referential meaning. Names of objects may have a clear reference but an obscure function for children at certain stages of language development, they may be part of the passive vocabulary and yet not used spontaneously.

As commonly known, the easiest way to master the suitable setting words

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[11] Cf. her case study in the development of word form and word function *,,Pattern, Control, and Contrast in Beginning Speech"*, Bloomington, Indiana, 1978, 40 ff.

into appropriate semantic environment are various drills defining brief actions and interactions and nursery rhymes. And yet, even this strategy has many a drawback. There are numerous items in nursery rhymes — not used in common wordstock — memorized in children's games, having, however, no motivation as for their meaning. And here we are confronted with a question: can not having a knowledge of when or why something is said by adults inhibit a child from saying it? This is a much more delicate aspect of meaning than referential meaning. And what is more, if the child knows the appropriate occasion for an utterance is, how can we know he knows the referential meaning?

There are many data illustrating the child's correct usage of the proper labels in nursery rhymes. He never uses them, however, outside this naming game situation. Let us have some examples: *"Kolo, kolo mlýnský, za čtyři rýnský"* — a nursery rhyme about a mill-wheel which was brokem and the price of which is four Rhine dollars. The child has, no doubt, a knowledge of the meaning of a wheel. He can easily imagine that this wheel goes round and might be broken (as all the children fall down at the end of the round-dance, as the nursery rhyme describes). One has to doubt, however, whether the child may have any idea about the attribute *"mlýnský"* (= *of mill*) when he has never seen a mill, real or in picture, and we cannot but take for granted that the substantivized adjective *"rýnský"* — designating an old fashioned golden coin — is a meaningless word for him. Here is another example of a label in a naming-game situation: *"Řežme dříví na polínka, ať má čím topit maminka"* (= *let's saw wood into logs so that mummy can make fire*). The item *"polínka* (= *small logs*) says nothing to a child who grows up in the city in block of houses, centrally heated, with electric or gas stoves. He has learned it in certain context, memorized it as a guiding element for performing certain activity, viz. the imaginative sawing of wood. Its function is, in our opinion, delimited to having a certain number of syllables, needed for rythmical reasons and forming rhymes which are easy to remember. No analysis of a sentence as a string of referential meanings is performed by the child as yet. This idea of ours might be supported by the child's reaction on the question: *"What have you done at nursery school today"* — as *"We did "let-us-saw-wood-into--logs"* and not as *"We have sawn wood"*.

Nevertheless, the insight that things have their names must lay somewhere behind the more superficial knowledge that adults say things at certain times. Without understanding that things have names a child hardly could do correct labelling: the expected results might be very like the wild types of over-generalization, such as *"wau"* or *"qua"* in most unusual situations. But we shall come back to this problem later on; here I want to point out a fact that certainly seems puzzling: the originally correct words are later on replaced by incorrect ones — both in form and meaning — similarly, as the former correct grammatical forms become incorrect at more mature stage of language development. And this is a very important evidence that the child's vocabulary (similarly as his grammar) is generated, not imitated. The faulty, unconventional words are the best positive indications that the child has started generating constructions independently from the adult system. His first rules are applied with broadest generalization and greatest distribution. As for the vocabulary, the child — at this stage of language development — stops

using those words the meaning of which is obscure and replaces them by others, which — on basis of visual, acoustic or semantic association are provided with meanings corresponding to his linguistic competence. Hence the explanation, why the boy, instead of correct *"polínka"* started to use *"kolínka"* (=*small knees*) where there was suitable motivation — contrary to obscure *"polínka"*.

There are further interesting features of the symbolic function which must have implications for language learning. Vygotsky[12] has drawn our attention to the failure of the child to appreciate the arbitrariness of the relationship between words and their referents. When asked if a dog whose name is „*Bull*" had horns the child replied that if it is called *"bull"*, it must have horns. Vygotsky illustrates his point by referring to the story of a peasant who said he wasn't surprised that learned men had discovered the size of the stars and their paths, what puzzled him, however, was how they had learned their names. Let us offer another example: The two-year-old child in the Zoo — on seeing a snake for the first time — says: „*Look, there is a long tail and it is walking*". How puzzled he must be when he gets the information that it is not a *tail* (when it looks certainly much more like a tail than any animal he knows) that it does not *walk* but crawls because it has no legs — contrary to any other animal the image of which he has stored in his mind.

Many of these ideas fit into a scheme advanced by Brunner[13] for mental development which, he says, is shaped by a series of technological advances in the use of mind. The child's earliest means for encoding information is what Brunner calls "enactive". That is to say, things are represented in terms of the activity that the child can perform on them. It has been noticed that young children group objects according to a functional criterion, e.g. *a drum and a club — to make noise with, a bucket and a shovel* — as instruments for *activity in the sand-pit*. The associations with the spoken word might be shocking, as the following example illustrates: A two-year-old boy, equipped with the necessary instruments, makes sand pies in a sand-pit. All of a sudden he says: *"Crucifix"*. Being asked whether he knows what he has said, his first reaction is: *"Yes"*. After a moment, however, he admits, he does not know what the word means, he maintains, however, that it is used when something goes wrong. The boy must have overheard this curse, was attracted by the unusual form and recalled it in situation where the sand was probably too dry and he could not succeed in making nicely shaped pies.

Another important feature in mastering the language is the ability to organize material into hierarchical structures in which some elements are subordinate to others. This ability develops gradually and its development must have tremendous repercussions for the scope of children's utterances. The concept *"rose"* and *"flower"* can coexist for the child for some time before they are organized into a system in which the former is subordinated to the latter. Work of children's classification of objects is also relevant to the development of hierarchical structures. Vygotsky aptly describes children's early grouping of objects in concept formation experiments as heaps. They are lumped together on the basis of haphazard and fluctuating criteria. Later they become complex. A complex grouping may contain objects each one of which

[12] Cf. L. S. Vygotsky, „*Thought and Language*", M.I.T. Press 1962, 70, Rus. orig. 1934.
[13] Cf. J. S. Brunner, et al., „*Studies in Cognitive Growth*", New York, 1966, p. 12—32.

is linked to one other in terms of one attribute in the fashion of a chain but with no one attribute in common to all of them; or they may be linked to one object which is the focus but each linked to it according to a different criterion.

In deciphering them, we are confronted with many a difficulty. One of the much-quoted examples of the child's strange behaviour goes back to D a r - w i n. Though he did not focus his attention on language learning and reports about the total psychological development of his grandson, he made a very interesting observation: the boy used the naming *"qua"* to refer to a *duck, milk, spilt wine, a bird on the tree, an eagle on the coin, the coin itself and a teddybear's eye.* How are we to interpret this?

The simplest possibility is that the child is naming the objects to prove he knows them but has overgeneralized the word ,,qua", as the proper labels of the quoted objects are unknown to him as yet. Vygotsky's chain complex is the next possible explanation. ,,Qua" was originally used as a naming unit for a duck in a pond. Then the child incorporated the pond into the meaning and by focusing attention on the liquid element, ,,qua" was generalized to *"milk"* in one situation, to *"spilt wine"* in another situation. The duck, however was not forgotten, since *"qua"* was used to refer to *"a bird"* sitting on a tree and to *"a coin"* with an eagle on it. Then, with the coin in mind, the child applied *"qua"* to any round coin-like object, such as *"teddybear's eye"*. — Even items not recognizable as interjections may contain a many-sided signification at early stages of language development. H. Francis[14] has the following examples: ,,*lulu*" to name any circular or spherical object, ,,*Tee*" to name the cat Timmy as well as other animals such as cows, horses, dogs etc. Aitchison[15] has this interesting example where a chain of items is formed linking them under one name: a child says *"ba"* when he is in the bath, when given a glass of milk and when seeing the kitchen tarps. Another child saw the moon in the sky one evening and ever since has thought anything that shines is the moon, viz. street lamps, headlights, reflected bulb in the window. McNeill argues that these utterances show a linguistic sophistication which goes for beyond the actual sound spoken. He claims that the child is not merely involved in naming exercises, but is uttering holophrases, e.g. *"ba"* might mean *"I am in my bath"* or *"Mummy's fallen into the bath"*. He justifies his viewpoint by claiming that misuse of words shows evidence of relations which the child understands, but cannot yet express, cf. the following example: a child said *"ha"* when *a cup with hot milk* was put in front of him. The same protoword was, nevertheless, used to name *an empty cup* or *turned-of stove*. This shows, that *"hot"* is not merely the label of hot objects but that something is also said about objects that could be hot. This claim of his[16] seems to be overimaginative. It does, nevertheless, encapsulate a modicum of truth, i.e. that one-word utterances may be more than mere labels. Their main importance lies, no doubt, in the light they throw on a child's conceptual representation of experience.

Let us draw attention to another feature, viz. the interrelation between

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[14] Cf. H. F r a n c i s, ,,*Language in Childhood, Form and Function in Language Learning*", London 1975, 32

[15] Cf. J. A i t c h i s o n, ,,*The Articulate Mammal*", London 1976, 103.

[16] Cf. D. M c N e i l l, ,,*The Acquisition of Language*", New York 1970, 24.

phonetic consistency and semantic coherence, a trade-off relation resulting from the problem adults have with recognizing children's utterance-types. As a rule, an utterance is recognized by adults (mostly by mothers) and responded to as having content only if it has sufficient semantic and phonetic coherence for the adult to become aware of it as recurrent. A type with high phonetic consistency, however, can be recognized as the same unit in a great variety of uses, was shown in the above mentioned examples; reciprocally, high semantic coherence means that a world with a poor phonemic consistency is recognizable, e.g. the child is supposed to be saying *"bác"* while something has fallen down whether he says *Iba:I, Ibo:I, Iba:tI, Iba:sI* etc.

In trying to characterize what ends children accomplish by speaking, the following example seems to be interesting: the child would use the name *„kutululú"* for anything what was rolling, be it *a marble, a ball, an apple* etc. On seeing the rotating *tape-recorder*, his comment was again *"kutululú"*. The field of application had become very broad: *a revolving chair, a gramophone record, a typewriter rubber, an old fashioned coffee-mill.* One day he said *„kutululú"* and pointed to the gramophone not rotating at the moment. The same expression was uttered by him when caught in the act of turning a knob on the tape-recorder. The primary use — as an accompaniment to action — was nevertheless maintained. Here then, there is one dimension of autonomy: a word that at first accompanies a certain action is found helping to express the meaning *"I want to perform the certain action"*, or, to put it differently, a word that at first means *„the tape-recorder is rotating"* comes to help in the communicating of the two expanded messages, viz. *"I want the tape-recorder to rotate"* and *"The tape-recorder is able to rotate (and thus to tell the fairy-tale")*. In other words, the former nursery form *"kutululú"* had changed from being a signal of on-going action to a symbol which referred to rotation, actual or potential, desired or merely contemplated. Thus in analyzing the events in which children encounter and use speech, it is just as important to consider what they are doing and talking about as it is to trace the social aspects of communication. It is generally known that young children talk about the here and now, but as they grow older, they gradually free themselves from this restriction until they are able to refer readily to events at other times and in other places. The basic learning of language is achieved, however, in the process of communicating about on-going events. Let us illustrate this idea on some observations of ours:

In the observed child — at early stages of speech development — all his utterances were tied to on-going events. His noun-phrases identified people, animals, toys, household objects, parts of the body, dresses and food, all of which he could see at the time in the room, outside the window or in the picture. He used to talk to himself as he was playing, as many other children do. What is the reason for this? Luria[17] suggested that the child uses his speech to plan and direct his play. In fact, we may confirm that children express their intention before they carry out an action, cf. *"uděláme bác"* (= *we are going to fall down*). But at the same time they use perceptions of objects and relations to enlarge their language. The observed boy, e.g. phrased his remarks

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[17] Cf. A. R. Luria, *„The Directive Function of Speech"*. In Word 15, 341—352.

in accordance with his actions, preceding, simultaneous and following, viz. *"Georgie has eaten everything"*; *"I am riding my tricycle"*; *"We are going to do bác"*. Even on occasions when he referred to objects or events outside his immediate sphere of attention, the links with his activity were apparent. E.g., playing with his plastic aeroplane, all of a sudden he threw it in the air and said: *"It left for Cuba"* — the toy plane evidently triggered off the memory of when he waved off his cousin at the airport when leaving with his parents for Cuba. These minimal extensions from here and now represented the first spontaneous use of remarks that referred to other places and to events more distant than the immediate past or anticipated actions. — Here we have one of many examples illustrating the extension of action and relations:

The child mounts a ladder and announces the fact: *"I am mounting the ladder"*. This happened many times as this was his favourite activity in the garden. One day, however, he was mounting the ladder and said: *"To se nesmí"* (= *that's not allowed*). How do we explain this? Evidently someone told the boy before that he must not do it and he came to understand the relation between mounting the ladder and the forbidding of this action. A few days later he said at the same situation: *"A nehapám"* (= *I shan't fall*) evidently rebelling against a warning that was addressed to him on an occasion when climbing the ladder. Beside the good semantic match with an adult model he had shown an extension as far as grammar is concerned. He did not repeat the form he must have heard sometimes in the past, viz. *"you will fall"* but created the rebelling answer in the first person and negative form.

The method of exploiting the child's understanding through the study of much he understands, is open to danger of its own; we may easily overestimate the ammount a child comprehends. Considering the way in which we interpret the child's abbreviated utterances in terms of the situation in which they are produced, e.g. *"mummy tea"* could mean *"give me some tea"* in some circumstances and *"mummy is drinking tea"* in others — it would be reasonable to suppose that many instances of comprehension by the child are attributable to interpretations of the same kind on his part in terms of environmental cues and not in terms of the grammatical features of the adult utterance. How is the child to realize that differences in function of form call for entirely different words? If he used for each object or action the word which the standard speaker uses for it, in close imitation, no semantic mistake would occur; but the ability to speak would be greatly hampered. To simplify the learning process and to extend the range of expressible experiences, the child must form his own semantic clusters. To this extent originality can be claimed for the child's handling of meanings. As in the domain of morphology and of word-formation, all independent applications of standard principles the result of which happen not to coincide with standard usage, are doomed to eventual extinction, as the relentless corrective force of the standard language ideal imposes itself on the child's speech. Acts in which the child tampers with meanings are no doubt caused by his lack of linguistic experience. The linguistic poverty leads, as shown before, to the extension of meaning. But that does not take away from the fact that he performs a semantic extension of some words, an act which is closely related to comparison or metaphors of the standard language. Most authors put the poverty of vocabulary and lack of experience on the same level. The generalization of meaning in children

is taken for granted. And yet, in our opinion, the child's early words have a **vague meaning** rather than a **general**. As justly pointed out by Leopold[18] caution is necessary in the interpretation of the fact that words are used in a wide range of applicability. According to his observation, both his daughters made excessive use of the word *"pretty"* not because a strong power of abstraction allowed them to subsume a great number of impressions under one abstract concept but because they lacked specific terms for many things and had to be satisfied with a vague emotional reaction. As soon as more adequate vocabulary had been acquired, the use of *"pretty"* was heavily reduced. In our opinion, generalization has common features with abstraction on some level, the levels, however, are different. A distinction between abstracts of lower order which results from intellectual vagueness and abstracts of higher order which result from intellectual discipline is necessary. Some distinctions existing on the lower levels may appear not indispensable and thus are left unexpressed in many languages. There are differences in analyzing the extra-lingual reality both in different language communities and in children in spite of the fact that the extra-lingual reality is virtually the same. The child analyses and names the reality in accordance with the concept apparatus he has at his disposal. The lack of words is, however, not the only reason for the extension of meanings. Children perform it, too, when they know the correct words. They proceed similarly as adults do. The needs for the coining of new naming units are common to children and to adults but differ of course according to the concrete extra-lingual situations. Still more different may be the means which may be used in coining the needed new naming units.

Theoretically, three possible approaches may be thought of: first, one can resort to entirely new material, i.e. one may coin a word which has no connection whatever with the naming units already existing in the language: second, some modification of the already existing naming units may be resorted to, and, finally, one can use a naming unit already existing and provide it with new meaning. The first two approaches however frequent in children are more interesting from the point of view of word-formation, which is not the core of the present study. Let us therefore resort to the third possibility, viz. the use of existing language material to serve new needs. This approach is frequent both in adult and in child language, though of course on different levels. While in the former, new terminologies are coined for new terms of various technological branches and instances of social sciences, in children it is the common wordstock where items get their proper meanings in accordance with the standard usage, which have been so far inaccessible for them. An interesting case of the semantic transfer of this kind in adult language is supplied by the Czech term *"železnice"* (= *railway*) which was formerly used to name an *ironmonger's wife* and only with the invention of the railways came to be used in the new meaning.[19] Similarly, many a term in child language is obtained by a simple transfer of the terms already recognized in other semantic spheres. Some of them are in coincidence with the common usage (cf. e.g. *"taška"*,

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[18] Cf. his study „*Semantic Learning in Infant Language*". In Child Language. A Book of Reading, AaronBar Adon- Leopold eds., New Jersey 1971, 98.

[19] Cf. J. Vachek, „*Linguistic Characterology of Modern English*," Bratislava 1973, 47.

the former meaning of which was *the covering material for roofs*, nowadays, however, is used as a term for any kind of *the bag*), others are not, as illustrated in the next examples:

The child had the verb *"pršet"* (= *to rain*) in his vocabulary. The vague meaning of it was no doubt *"water falls down"*. This knowledge made him, in most probability, use the verb in ;the situation such as *"I'm going to have a rain"* instead of the correct *"I'm going to have a shower"*. There is association being, however, based on a mere contiguity and therefore too loose to allow the adult to use the same unmodified word in standard Czech.

On the other hand, there are examples, where the term "extension of meaning" fits rather from the point of view of standard language, while in child language the term "lack of limitation of meaning" would be a more adequate description, cf. the following example: the boy says on a chilly day: *"Ugly frost, it bites my ears"*. The standard restriction of biting to the use of teeth is a form of specification for which the child has not yet felt a need. Instead of saying that poverty of the vocabulary forced the assumption of related meaning by this verb, it is, in our opinion, better to say that the proper related verb has not yet been learned because no finer specifications have been required as yet by the child. This distinction is important. It means that the child, in using the verb *"to bite"* for unstandard purposes, did not perform an extension of meaning, but, on the contrary, failed to grasp the limitation of the standard definition. The similar explanation holds good for the naming unit *"krajíc"* (= *a slice*). The child uses it correctly in reference to a slice of bread, incorrectly, however, transformed this item to other kinds of food, cf. „*a slice of cake*", *"a slice of sandwichloaf"*, *"a slice of sausage"*, i.e. in situations where the adult applies special terms such as *"plátek dortu"*, *kolečko salámu"*, *"řez sandvičky"*.

Both the extension of meaning and its limitation proceed gradually. As an illustration the baby word *"kutululú"* might be recalled. The boy used it first with reference to the rolling ball. Later he applied it to name *the ball, marbles, apples, cherries*. The basis for grouping these objects together must have been the fact that they were able to roll. Next came the attachment of this word to other subjects which could perform the function of rotation, such as the *gramophone record, the disc of the type-recorder, the piano chair*. Simultaneously, however, the name was used for objects which had nothing to do with rolling or rotating, viz. *the garden water hose, the shower hose in the bathroom, a curled up earthworm*. Evidently, the visual concept of being of spherical or circular shape lay behind the child's behaviour. — Naturally, some of these extensions found the approval of the environment, some were indulgently admitted, others were rejected. An example of how material can be prominent in the child's attempt at classification of standart usage is the nursery form *"wau wau"*. This onomatopoeic cry is satisfactory and for a certain period a single designation for any mammal. Children — at tender age — do not mind the fact that mammals differ greatly in looks, size, that they produce various noises. Even after breaking down mammals into species, children do not bother with details. They are satisfied with the fact that dogs bark, cats miaow, cows moo, and this reality becomes an outstanding attribute which gives the name to similar mammals though the child rarely hears the onomatopoieia, as he mostly refers to sculptures and pictures of animals.

The extension, however, proceeds along various paths of association. Here are some examples: a child calls a fur cap *"wau wau"*. This behaviour does not, in our opinion, mean that *the dog* and *the cap* are identical objects for the child, but rather, that the fur brought dog's fur to his mind. But they are even more far-fetched associations. A boy asks for his *picture book* by saying *"wau wau"*. To say that the meaning of the word *"wau"* was extended to include a book would be, in our opinion, a mechanistic way of describing the child's behaviour. What actually made him behave like this, is no doubt, that —˙in wanting a book, he recalled primarilly his favourite Čapek's book *"Dášenka"* which is full of pictures of this puppy and this imaginary stimulus produced the accustomed linguistic reaction for any picture book, where no doubt at least one picture of a dog — an attractive animal for any child, certainly appears. This case too, might be called transfer of meaning. If one, however, does not know the context, the child's behaviour is certainly puzzling.

Considering the types of words used, rather than the purpose of the whole utterance Bloch[20] makes the point that proper names are first to have an exact meaning. That is to be expected because the variability of reference of standard words applies least to names. Still, even in this domain, children's usage is not without vaccilation. Bloch himself excepts *Papa* and *Mama*, which are — in his opinion — rather late in having exact meaning, not because the child recognizes the shifting reference of the words in standard usage, but because he extends their application for a while to all men and women regardless of their relationship to any other person. There is, however, difference in young children's usage the naming units *"mummy"* and *"daddy"*. According to our observation a child hardly ever addresses *"mámma"* any other person but his own mother, while the naming unit "táta" serves as a denotation for all men he comes across, be it in person or in picture. In the observed boy the first split was between *"my mummy"* and *"a mummy"*. His comment like *"This is not a mummy, she has no baby"* reveals the fact that the concept *"mother"* is closely associated with the presence of a baby at the very moment when the child is naming her, e.g. *a woman is pushing a pram, a woman has a baby in her arms, is feeding him, putting him into a cot*, etc., while there is no such delimitation for the concept *"father"*.

But to come back to proper names and their having exact meanings. Even in this field a progress is evident. The boy used to name — for a certain period — all dogs *"Asta"* which was the proper name of the neighbour's *alsation*. Why did he do so or what made him to abandon the former naming unit *"dog"* which he used as a universal name for all animals and for all dogs later on? Evidently he became aware that even dogs have their names and *"Asta"* was the first and — at that moment the only name he heard in addressing the dog, and, consequently, applied it to all dogs. Leopold[21] has a similar example in relation to persons. His daughter called a girl who visited her occasionally by her name „*Rita*"; she, nevertheless, used the same name for Rita's friend „*Helen*". The latter never came without Rita and since the two girls' posi-

[20] O. Bloch, „*Les premiers stades du langage de l'enfant*". In Journal de Psycholologie ›
XVIII, 1921, 706;
[21] Cf. 1c. in note 18, p. 99.

tion in her life was of merely incidental importance, she felt no need for separately identifying them until a later time when the progressive refinement of linguistic thinking granted Helen her own distinctive name.

To sum up, in examining the infant vocabulary under the aspect of form and function, we have to take for granted that meanings of words, including proper names, are vague at first; that the dearth of vocabulary compels the child to use words for purposes to which they are not adapted from the adult point of view; only progressively the meanings become sharper and thus closer to the standard. This process is parallel to the gradual refinement of the phonetic and syntactic systems, although the progress is in most areas less easily definable than the evolution of constructing phonemic series. Chambers[22] has a neat metaphor to illustrate the haziness of meaning and the growth in clarity. *,,The child's intellectual landscape is like meadow in a dense fog. Nearby objects are clear. Those next removed in distance are dim. Remote ones are in a light of mystery. Beyond lies the great Unknown. The child unquestionably perceives the world through a mental fog. But as the sun of experience rises higher and higher, these bounderies are beaten back. The inexperienced user of a new word chops now on one side, now on the other side of the line".* As the vocabulary grows, each item needs to embrance less and less semantic territory, or, vice versa, as meanings become more sharply defined, more and more words are needed to express the meanings now excluded from the semantic sway of the words of the earlier, limited vocabulary. Additions to the vocabulary and reductions of individual semantic complexes are two facets of one process. Both are features of the progressive mastering of standard model. It is probably best — at present stage of our knowledge about the acquistion of word meaning in the child — not to assign priority to either of them. The associations between separate semantic units and corresponding phonetic complexes is much less close in child language than it is in standard languages. The linguistic accident of homonymy is a restricted phenomenon in the latter, whereas it plays a considerable part in the child language. Unless the history of each child form is established carefully, observes are likely to be misled by homonyms into assuming many more instances of unorthodox handling of meaning than necessary.

The process of the acquisition of the speaking ability as a whole — interesting as it is for general linguistics — is anything but simple and obvious. The semantic learning is both similar to and different from phonetic, morphological and syntactic learning. As the child gropes for the exact phonetic form and learns to imitate it with growing exactness, he keeps on widening and restricting word meanings — with many failures along the way. Semantic learning is more difficult because the standard language itself is arbitrary in the range of applications which it allows for different words and shift meanings with the context, whereas the phonetic material of a word is relatively fixed and tangible. It is more difficult, too, than the learning of morphological devices and of the means to express syntactic relationships, because these devices are limited in number. Fortunately the space for semantic learning

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[21] Cf. W. G. Chambers, *,,How Words get Meanings".* In Pedagogical Seminary, XI, 1904, 30 ff.

is immense. It starts at the very beginning of language acquisition, for words without meanings are useless for the purposes of communication, and goes on continuing through the whole life.

FORMA A OBSAH DĚTSKÝCH JAZYKOVÝCH POJMENOVÁNÍ

Autorka se ve své stati zabývá otázkou formy, obsahu a funkce jazykových pojmenování u dětí v raných stadiích osvojování jazyka. Na dokladech vybraných z řeči českých dětí — a v konfrontaci s údaji o mluvním vývoji dětí jiných národností — ukazuje, že obsah i funkce prvních dětských slov je velmi vágní a že osvojení pojmu v celé jeho bohatosti je dlouhodobý a vysoce náročný proces. Rozdíly ve funkci jazykových pojmenování signalizují rozdíly ve způsobu myšlení. Malý počet slov, jež má dítě k dispozici jako prostředek k dorozumívání, je nutí používat jednotlivé výrazy v situacích, kdy tyto v řeči dospělých ke stejným účelům používány nejsou. Řečeno jinými slovy, dětská pojmenování nerespektují konvenčnost, na druhé straně jejich obecnost, spojena zpravidla s různým stupněm abstrakce, je podstatně vyšší, než je tomu u dospělých. S růstem slovní zásoby se obsah i funkce dětských slov postupně ohraničuje a upřesňuje. Mizí interjekce onomatopoického původu i slova typicky dětská, jejichž primární funkcí je vyjádření jisté situace, činnosti, případně děje, zatímco obsahová stránka výrazů vstupujících do slovní zásoby nově se mění podle okamžité potřeby. Postupně se mnohoznačnost dětských slov a tím i možnost jejich široké aplikability snižuje. Tento proces je paralelní s postupným osvojováním jazykového systému v rovině foneticko-fonologické, morfologické a syntaktické, je však podstatně náročnější. Dítě musí — současně s osvojováním nových výrazů — zvládnout nejen náležité extenze obsahu a funkce toho kterého slova v daném kontextu, ale také jeho ohraničení v souladu s konvencí v jazyce dospělých, což nezřídka způsobu dětského myšlení odporuje.