

Some early problems with verbs

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Abstract

The paper reviews some of the problems which arise in teaching verbs to language-handicapped children, first with reference to different types of input structure, then with reference to the question of selecting verbs to teach early in a programme. It outlines a set of criteria for choosing verbs, and proposes a technique for evaluating them.

A specific difficulty with verbs is one of the most widespread symptoms of early language handicap. Typically, grammatical profiles of children show an ability to use some minor sentences (such as *yes* or *no*), nouns, pronouns and other 'empty' words (such as *there*, *that one*), perhaps even some adjectives – but there is a singular absence of verbs. When we try to elicit them, we are met with avoidance, silence or irrelevance. A typical exchange between a teacher (T) and her pupil (P) was as follows:

P is looking at a picture of a street scene

T What can you see in the picture?

P That.

T What's that called?

P Bus.

T Yes, a bus. And who's in the bus?

P Man. Man in.

T What's he doing, that man?

P Bus.

T Yes, he's in the bus. But what's he doing there? He's –

P In it.

What-doing questions presuppose verbs, as do *what's happening* questions. Children cannot answer them until they have some verbs at their disposal. 'What's he doing?' *Running, driving, sweeping*. For children who are having difficulty with verbs, therefore, these types of question pose special difficulties. To use one of these questions to a child who has no verb ability is a bit like asking someone who has lost a left leg to stand on his left leg!

These questions are sometimes called 'open' questions, because they permit an open-ended number of responses. At the opposite extreme, there are ways of eliciting verbs which give the child no choice at all. This is what T did next in the above dialogue:

T He's driving the bus. What's he doing? He's –

P Driving.

This is effectively a kind of imitation task, using a prompt stimulus. It is not much more advanced than a formal imitation task, of the 'Say what I say' type. Either way, we would be wrong to conclude that the child's response was a reliable indication of his ability to use the verb in his spontaneous speech. It might simply have been a kind of 'echo'.

To allow for this effect, many Ts next check whether P has any productive control over a form by using an alternative question technique (sometimes called a 'forced' alternative question), as in:

T Is he running or jumping?

P Running.

This question stimulus is a stage more advanced than the prompt type, because P can no longer simply imitate. He must choose one or the other. T, of course, must make sure, when carrying out such an investigation, that the correct answer to an alternative question is varied – sometimes the first alternative should be the answer, sometimes the second. Also, when assessing (as opposed to teaching) T must control the stress pattern of the sentence, to avoid giving an extra clue to P by making one of the words much more prominent than the others. The most neutral intonation for such a sentence (in a southern British accent) would be with a rising tone on the first verb and a falling tone on the second, as in:

T Is he rúnning/ or jùmping/.

However, when teaching a verb, using this technique, it is common to find T strongly emphasizing the target verb.

Forced alternative techniques work quite well, if the child has a reasonable auditory working memory, and has the cognitive ability to know what an alternative is. In some cases, it may be necessary to check this point, by seeing whether the child can make simpler choices between labels (e.g. 'Is that a boy or a girl?'). If children cannot do this, they will probably not be able to cope with the more complex demands of an alternative question. Nor will they be able to cope if they are at a more primitive stage – for instance, not even being able to use *yes* or *no* systematically when asked to identify a stimulus, or mixing up positive and negative responses.

Which verb?

All of this, however, presupposes that a decision has been made concerning the choice of verb to teach. In the above example, T happened to want the verb *drive*, and in the later example, *run* and *jump* were used. But were these good verbs to use? The question of deciding which verbs to teach first, in a language-teaching programme, is too important to be left to chance. Verbs are central to the subsequent development of sentence structure (most sentences contain a verb, and the choice of verb has a great deal to do with the use of other elements in a sentence). If children are put off verbs, by early failure, their subsequent language progress receives a major set-back. Careful selection of verbs to use in speaking, listening, reading and writing is an essential first step. There are a lot of verbs to choose between (see the list on p. 49). A set of criteria therefore needs to be devised.

Actually, the criteria already exist, in the way Ts work with the children. What seems to be lacking is any kind of consistency of approach, or an awareness of alternative ways of proceeding. In approaching this task for a recent book, therefore (Crystal, 1984), my first step was to ask a number of Ts what sort of factors they would bear in mind in deciding which verb to teach first. I was given a wide range of replies, and grouped these into several types, adding a few criteria from language acquisition studies. There were 11 criteria in all, which fell into two main categories: FUNCTIONAL and FORMAL. The functional criteria are all to do with the contexts in which the verbs were used by or to the children. The formal criteria relate to the structural characteristics displayed by the verbs – aspects of their pronunciation, grammar and meaning.

The following verbs are taken from three sources: a 5+ word-list taken from children's written work (Edwards and Gibbon, 1964); a 6-year list, based on frequency and educational need, taken from Hutt (1973); and a frequency list of 5-year spoken vocabulary, using the data from the Bristol Child Language Project (Raban, 1982). *Be* and other auxiliary verbs are excluded. * indicates items which might well belong to some other word-class than verbs (e.g. *stick* might be noun or verb); word-counts usually do not make this clear. + indicates items appearing in all three lists—only 6 items, as it happens.

Edwards and Gibbon		Hutt		Raban	
bring	pick	ask	roll	bang*	look*
buy	play*+	brush	run	buy	make+
call	put	build	say+	come	need
come	rain*	catch	sew	cut*	open
dance*	read+	clean	shout	do	play*+
dig*	ride*	comb	sing	drink*	put
do	run*	cook	sit+	eat+	read+
draw	say+	crawl	skip	find	say+
dress*	see	dance	stand	finish	see
eat+	set*	dig	sweep	gallop	show
fall*	shine	draw	swim	get	shut
fly*	show	drink	talk	give	sit+
get	sit+	eat+	tell	go	stay
go	skip	hang	think	got	stick*
got	smoke*	iron	throw	have	stop
grow	snow*	jump	tie	hear	take
have	swing*	kick	walk	help	tell
help	take	listen	wash	hold	thank
jump*	walk*	make+	write	hurt	think
like	want	paint		keep	try*
live	wash*	pass		know	turn*
look*	watch*	play+		leave	wait
make+	work*	read+		let	want
paint*		ride		like	watch*

Functional

(i) The verbs should express a clear, physical, dynamic ACTION (such as *jump*, *kick*, *drink*) and not be abstract, static, vague or mental (such as *know*, *do*, *have*, *feel*, *change*). It should be noted that these dynamic verbs can be classified into several types – most importantly, into whether the action has a clear beginning-point (*open*, *knock*), a clear end-point (*kick*, *fall down*), or has no clear-cut boundaries (*play*, *run*).

(ii) The verbs should be FAMILIAR to P – a notion which usually needs to be interpreted in two ways: familiar in the domestic setting (*eat*, *drink*, *wash*), or familiar in the 'professional' setting of school, clinic, or occupation (*climb*, *dance*, *write*) (cf. Hutt, 1973: 17).

(iii) The verbs should be USEFUL to P, in terms of his social or academic success – *drink*, *go (toilet)*, *play*, *like*, *look*, *stop*.

(iv) The verbs should be easy to DEMONSTRATE (thus *kick*, *catch*, *walk* – but not so easily *run*, *climb*, *eat*, in normal clinical settings!); there is no

point in requiring that the verbs should be easy to draw – it is in the nature of verbs to be undrawable.

(v) The verbs should be easy to LEARN, in the sense that they are among the earliest verbs to appear in the normal language acquisition process (*go, see, got, do, give, take*).

(vi) The verbs should be FREQUENT in adult language – which, in terms of the adults P frequently interacts with, will involve motherese (*cuddle, play, smack*) and teacherese (*say, listen, show*).

(vii) The verbs should have no unfortunate CONNOTATIONS for P – a point more important when dealing with Ps who have problems of a behavioural, emotional or psychopathological kind (*hurt, kill, crash*).

Formal

(viii) The verb should be part of a definite lexical set, so that a clear meaning contrast can be drawn, as in *eat vs drink, walk vs run, walk vs play*. Verbs such as *climb, look* and *jump* are not so easy to relate in this way. What is the opposite of *look* – other than *not look*?

(ix) The verb should have a regular internal structure (i.e. morphology) – at least as regards the use of the *-ing* ending, which is an early development in language acquisition (*running, eating*). This makes the static, cognitive verbs of the language less helpful – verbs such as *like, smell, want* and *have*. Later morphological irregularities might also be borne in mind, preferring regular *walk, kick* and *jump* (past tenses *walked, kicked, jumped*) over *run, eat* or *drink* (past tenses *ran, ate, drank*).

(x) The verb should have a pronunciation which presents as few problems as possible – single-syllable verbs rather than polysyllables, or verbs with simple consonant-vowel or consonant-vowel-consonant structure (such as *go, run*) rather than verbs with consonant clusters (such as *play*). Verbs which preserve the basic pronunciation processes which are found in the speech of young children might be particularly useful – *kick*, for example, with its identical initial and final consonants.

(xi) Lastly, there is the question of which syntactic considerations we should take into account. As we are trying to make remedial sense of a grammatical hypothesis, there is more to discuss at this point. The most important factor is that the verbs should allow an easy transition to the next stage of syntactic development. In the context of early verb learning, this usually means that the children are at the single-element sentence stage of development, and hope to proceed to sentences containing two elements (e.g. *see ball*). In this respect, verbs which in their everyday uses are solely TRANSITIVE (i.e. verbs like *catch* and *give*, which take an

object), or solely INTRANSITIVE (i.e. verbs like *go* and *run*, which do not take an object), are not as useful as verbs which readily permit BOTH transitive and intransitive uses. To see why this is so, let us consider a response to the question 'What is the man doing?'. A one-element reply with a transitive verb (e.g. *catching*) is a problem, because this usage is weird without an object; and by definition, someone who is at this stage cannot yet cope with verb-object constructions. On the other hand, to reply with an intransitive verb (e.g. *going*), while presenting no problems of usage, does not lead to an ability which can easily be carried over into the next stage (where there are no adult verb-object sentences of the type *going the garden*). If P has been taught only intransitive verbs, then when T comes to teach the next stage, where verbs have to take objects as well, a whole new set of verbs will have to be introduced. Fortunately, there is a possible way out of the dilemma – the use of 'double-function' (or QUASI-TRANSITIVE) verbs. A verb such as *eat* eliminates the problem, for this can be used acceptably in isolation (*he's eating*), and also with an object (*he's eating a cake*).

These are not the only idiosyncrasies of syntax or meaning which need to be checked, in choosing verbs. *Wash*, for example, creates syntactic difficulties, because its reflexive use is so common (as in *wash yourself*). *Brush* creates lexical difficulties, because it so commonly goes with words like *hair* or *teeth* (for the young child), and this expectation may interfere with what a child wants to say, as in:

- T (*showing picture of a man brushing the floor*) What's he brushing?
 P ———
 T He's brushing –
 P Teeth.

But I hope the above examples are sufficient to illustrate the range and complexity of the decision-making process, which we are all subconsciously involved in, when we teach a language-disordered child.

The Basic Remedial Matrix

It is convenient to summarize sets of factors of this kind into a single chart, or matrix, which I have called a *Basic Remedial Matrix* or *BRM* (Crystal, 1984). Across the top of the matrix, the 11 verb criteria are listed. Down the side, the different verbs are listed. Each verb is assigned a value – let us say, H (for 'high-value', to be taught early), L (for 'low-value', to be

left till later), and ? for 'cannot decide'. Table 1 illustrates a small set of verbs which have been rated in this way, and leaves a few rows blank for readers to fill in themselves. According to MY intuitions, *go* is the best verb; it had a much higher rating than I was expecting. *Kick*, by contrast, came out lower than I was anticipating. In this way, it ought to be possible to accumulate a set of ratings for candidate verbs, and arrive at an overall weighting, which would motivate their early or late choice in a teaching programme. At the very least, the actual process of making the decisions about value can be instructive. When we are forced to commit ourselves to a decision about whether a verb is, say, useful or familiar, it can bring the problem of teaching and learning into much clearer focus.

Table 1 Basic remedial matrix for selected verbs.

Criteria	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Verbs										
<i>eat</i>	L	H	H	L	H	H	H	H	L	H
<i>kick</i>	H	?	?	H	L	L	?	L	H	H
<i>go</i>	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	L	H
<i>want</i>	L	H	H	L	H	H	H	L	H	?
<i>drive</i>	L	?	L	L	L	L	?	L	L	L
<i>dig</i>										
<i>find</i>										
<i>know</i>										
<i>have</i>										

BRMs can be used to clarify any area of language teaching – though of course the criteria will vary depending on the subject matter. To draw up a matrix for sounds, such criteria as ease of articulation or audibility would have to be grappled with. Different areas of grammar would raise individual problems. The important point is that all criteria should be made explicit and be applied systematically. The issues should not simply be taken for granted, as can so easily happen when T uses a combination of intuition and experience to choose a verb, on a certain day, for a certain child. Would other Ts have chosen the same verb? Most children are in contact with several adults, in the course of their school or clinic day: will the same kinds of verb be in use, or will the child have to cope with a range of conflicting teacher/therapist intuitions about what is important? When we consider such potential difficulties, the need for a principled approach is evident.

Of course, all of this is programmatic, at present. If the technique is felt to be helpful, then it needs to be investigated in a systematic manner. The first step would be to determine the extent to which Ts had shared intuitions about such criteria as usefulness and familiarity. Then it would be necessary to think about the effect of certain variables, such as the type

of handicap, P's age (obviously a crucial factor, if working with older children), P's sex (do we rate *kick* as more useful for boys?), and so on. Other methods of rating could be tried. Above all, we have to determine the different weightings which might be attached to these verbs, when considered from the viewpoint of comprehension, as opposed to that of production. Familiarity with such verbs as *look*, *listen*, *put* and *show* is presupposed by many teaching situations, and are plainly important for comprehension work – but hardly so crucial for work on production. A further variable would be the extent to which P was being exposed to vocabulary in written materials, which often differs greatly from that of speech – graphic simplicity motivating the frequent use of such verbs as *hop* or *see*, in some schemes.

I believe that this kind of study is well worth doing. Indeed, I do not see how we can avoid doing it, if we want to place our remedial decision-making on a sound and consistent foundation.

References

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