

LEXICAL-SEMANTIC POSSIBILITIES OF CHILDREN'S SPEECH: A REVIEW AND EXPLORATION OF EMERGING MEANING

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Abstract: This review synthesizes research on the lexical-semantic development of children, focusing on the *emergent* qualities of meaning construction. It moves beyond simple vocabulary acquisition to explore how children actively shape and refine word meanings through creative use, analogy, metaphor, and interaction. We examine phenomena like overextension and underextension not as errors, but as windows into the child's developing semantic categories. Furthermore, we investigate how children combine words in novel ways to express complex ideas that go beyond the conventional meanings of the individual words. We argue that the lexical-semantic system of a child is not a miniature adult system, but a dynamic, generative space where meaning is constantly being negotiated and redefined. This review identifies key research areas where a focus on emergent meaning provides valuable insights into child language development.

Keywords: Lexical Semantics, Children's Speech, Emerging Meaning, Word Meaning, Semantic Development, Overextension, Underextension, Creative Language, Novel Word Combinations, Child Language, Language Acquisition.

Introduction: Beyond Acquisition - The Active Construction of Meaning

Traditional approaches to lexical-semantic development often focus on vocabulary acquisition: tracking the number of words a child knows and assessing their understanding against adult definitions. While important, this approach risks overlooking the truly remarkable feature of child language: the active *construction* of meaning. Children don't passively absorb definitions; they experiment, hypothesize, and creatively apply words to their world, thereby shaping their own understanding of those words. This review shifts the focus to the emergent nature of meaning in children's speech, examining how children, through their unique cognitive processes and social interactions, actively build and refine their lexical-semantic system.

Children's speech development encompasses complex lexical-semantic processes that reflect their growing cognitive and linguistic abilities. This article reviews current research on how lexical-semantic organization evolves in children's speech and explores the emergence of new meanings as a window into their linguistic development.

Development of Lexical-Semantic Organization

From early childhood, children's semantic networks undergo notable changes. Initially, their word associations tend to be "phonologically based", producing "clangs" — connections grounded in sound similarity, such as alliteration or rhyme (e.g., "candy"—"can", "dig"—"fig"). This phonological focus predominates in preschool and kindergarten but diminishes quickly with formal schooling, giving way to more "semantic" associations that involve meaning relationships like category membership or functional links (e.g., "horse"—"cow", "saddle").

This shift marks a critical developmental trajectory: children move from a "primitive" sound-based lexical organization toward a more mature, meaning-based system. Semantic responses

increase sharply with age, indicating that children increasingly build dense networks of word meanings and their interrelations. This process is a core component of expanding verbal fluency and conceptual understanding.

Framing Overextensions and Underextensions as Explorations, Not Errors

Overextensions (using a word too broadly, e.g., calling all four-legged animals "doggy") and underextensions (using a word too narrowly, e.g., only applying "bird" to robins) are often treated as errors in vocabulary. However, when viewed through the lens of emergent meaning, they reveal valuable insights into the child's current understanding and hypothesis-testing process.

- **Overextensions as Categorization Tests:** Overextensions can indicate the salient features that the child is using to categorize objects. For example, calling a ball, an orange, and the moon "ball" may reveal a focus on the shared feature of roundness. The child is actively testing the boundaries of the word's meaning, expanding it based on perceptual similarities.
- **Underextensions as Narrowing Down:** Underextensions suggest that the child is still refining the necessary and sufficient features for a particular category. They may be focusing on specific, personally relevant instances of a word, gradually expanding their understanding through experience.

Instead of simply correcting these "errors," caregivers can use them as opportunities to engage with the child's current understanding and provide targeted feedback, further shaping the child's emerging meaning.

The Power of Novel Word Combinations: Syntactic Bootstrapping and Beyond

Children frequently combine words in ways that adults wouldn't, creating novel phrases that express nuanced meanings. These combinations are more than just random pairings; they demonstrate the child's ability to apply grammatical rules and exploit semantic relationships to convey complex ideas.

- **Syntactic Bootstrapping:** The structure of the sentence can provide clues to the meaning of unknown words. A child hearing "The boy is gorping the ball" may infer that "gorping" is an action being performed on the ball.
- **Creative Constructions:** Children often create verbs from nouns ("I'm keying the door"), adjectives from nouns ("That's a lot of rock candy! Let's rock-candy this room!") or use existing words in unconventional ways. These novel uses demonstrate their understanding of underlying semantic relationships and their ability to flexibly adapt language to express their thoughts.

These creative combinations highlight the generative nature of the child's lexical-semantic system. They are actively using their existing knowledge to build new meanings and expand their communicative repertoire.

Emergence of Figurative and Evaluative Meaning

Older preschool children (around 5 to 5.5 years) exhibit developing abilities to comprehend and verbalize "figurative meanings", such as metaphors and proverbs, which enrich their expressive speech. This stage of development is marked by improvement in recognizing emotional nuances, evaluative functions in language, and the use of phraseological units to convey social and emotional information.

Lexical-Semantic Challenges in Developmental Disorders

Children with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) demonstrate notable difficulties in lexical-semantic processing compared to typically developing peers. They struggle to form rich

semantic representations and create connections between words, leading to sparser semantic networks with fewer mature lexical associations and more sound-based or unrelated responses. Research highlights deficits both in learning new semantic links and in productive semantic organization, underscoring the importance of early support to enhance semantic development machinery in these children.

The Role of Metaphor and Analogy in Expanding Semantic Space

Even young children demonstrate an aptitude for metaphor and analogy, albeit in simplified forms. This ability to see connections between seemingly unrelated concepts is crucial for expanding their semantic understanding.

- **Early Metaphorical Thinking:** A child might describe a rough texture as "scratchy like a cat," drawing on their existing knowledge of the cat's claws to understand the sensation.
- **Analogical Reasoning:** Comparing one situation to another based on shared relational structure allows children to transfer knowledge and make inferences. For example, understanding that "a bird flies in the sky" can help them understand that "an airplane flies in the sky."

The development of metaphorical and analogical reasoning is a key component of emergent meaning. It allows children to go beyond literal definitions and explore the more abstract and symbolic aspects of language.

Social Interaction and the Negotiation of Meaning

Meaning is not solely constructed in isolation; it is negotiated through social interaction. Caregivers, peers, and the broader social environment play a crucial role in shaping the child's understanding of words.

- **Joint Attention and Shared Context:** When a child and caregiver focus on the same object or event, it creates a shared context for learning. The caregiver can then label the object or describe the event, helping the child to associate the word with its referent.
- **Conversational Scaffolding:** Caregivers often provide scaffolding, offering prompts, clarifications, and corrections to help the child express themselves more effectively. This feedback helps the child refine their understanding of word meanings and grammatical rules.
- **Cultural Transmission:** Language is embedded in a specific cultural context. Children learn not only the words themselves but also the cultural values, beliefs, and practices that are associated with those words.

Implications for Language Acquisition Research and Education

A focus on emergent meaning has several important implications for both research and education:

- **Shifting Focus in Assessment:** Assessments should move beyond simple vocabulary checklists to include measures of children's ability to use words creatively, understand metaphorical language, and engage in meaningful conversations.
- **Encouraging Creative Language Use:** Educational practices should encourage children to experiment with language, take risks, and express their own unique perspectives.
- **Capitalizing on Social Interaction:** Creating opportunities for collaborative learning and meaningful conversations can foster the development of both vocabulary and semantic understanding.
- **Developing Intervention Strategies:** Interventions for children with language impairments should focus on building not just vocabulary size but also the ability to use language flexibly and creatively.

Conclusion: A dynamic and generative system. Children's lexical-semantic system is not a static repository of definitions but a dynamic and generative space where meaning is constantly being negotiated, refined, and expanded. By shifting our focus from acquisition to emergence, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the remarkable creativity and cognitive abilities of young language learners. Future research should continue to explore the complexities of this dynamic system, examining how children actively shape and reshape language to make sense of their world. The lexical-semantic possibilities of children's speech are not just about learning words, they are about building meaning.

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