

Putting Two Words Together

Something very exciting important happens when children begin to put two words together. Their first words are exciting enough but when they start combining two words together, that is when the fun starts. In order to appreciate the importance of this stage of language development, it's worth looking at one of the fundamental building blocks of language: grammar.

We all know - and perhaps remember from elementary school lessons - that language is based on grammar. In essence, grammar describes the rules of language - parts of speech, use of punctuation, etc. But at its heart, grammar is a description of how we combine the elements of language - sounds, words, phrases - into sentences that can express our thoughts and be communicated to other people. The key point here, and the one that speaks to the power of a language system, is the idea of *combining the elements of the language*. The elements of a language are somewhat set and finite. First, any language only uses a certain number of sounds that the human voice is capable of producing. Secondly, every language has a set number of words, more or less. If you pick up a dictionary of the American English language, for example, contained within its covers are all the words that comprise the language at that point in time. Words do come and go in a language but a dictionary roughly contains all of the words used by the speakers of that language. The rules of grammar describe how we combine those sounds and words into sentences and that is the creative aspect of language use. There might be a dictionary of the all of the words in a language but there can't ever be a dictionary of all of the *sentences* that can be produced with those words. The rules of grammar allow us to take that finite set of sounds and words and create an infinite or unlimited number of sentences, which brings us back to the young child putting two words together.

Consider what happens when a child takes a word like, *more*, and starts combining it with other words in her vocabulary. She may already have used words like *book*, *puppy*, *juice*, *out*, and *mama* to label things and people in her environment. Now she can combine those words with *more* to express her desires and needs: she may want *more* juice, for you to read another book, to pet her puppy again, to go outside to play in the snow, and for her mother to come back into the room. Once she figures out this rule of combining words, what she can express is only limited by the number of

words in her vocabulary; as that list grows, so will her production of sentences.

Once we recognize this creative quality of language, we begin to understand that what human beings do with sounds and words is so much more powerful - and interesting - than what the smartest parrot can do with its ability to imitate and mimic human speech. It may be true that some of early language development is built upon imitation; the first words may be learned this way and babies very often develop the same vocal inflections and accents of the people with whom they live. But human language is capable of much more than simply *reproduction*. When the young child utters the word, puppy, she is repeating a word she has heard; but when that young child says, *more puppy*, she is likely producing a sentence that she has never heard spoken before. The power of language - of its elements and its grammar - is that it gives us the possibility of producing novel sentences to express novel ideas. And it all begins when a young child puts two words together.

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