

**College of Education for Humanities**  
**Department of English**

Lecture Four

**First Language Acquisition - Developing Semantics**

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**Developing Semantics**

-It is not always possible to determine so precisely the meanings that children attach to the words they use.

-during the holophrastic stage, many children use their limited vocabulary to refer to a large number of unrelated objects

**Bow-wow**

One child first used bow-wow to refer to a dog and then to a fur piece with glass eyes. The word bow-wow seemed to have a meaning like “object with shiny bits”. Other children often extend bow-wow to refer to cats, cows and horses. This process is called **overextension**.

**Definition of overextension**

-A term used in L1 language acquisition to refer to the situation where a child extends the meaning of an object to other things

-The most common pattern for the child is to overextend the meaning of a word on the basis of

- Similarities of shape,
- Similarities of sound,
- or similarities in size.

and, to a lesser extent, on the basis of movement or texture.

## Examples:

### > Similarities of shape

The word *ball* is extended to all kinds of round objects, including *a lampshade, a doorknob and the moon*.

### > Similarities of sound

*Ticktock* is initially used for a watch but can also be used for *a bathroom scale with a round dial*

### > Similarities in size,

The word *fly* was first used for the insect and then came to be used for *specks of dirt and even crumbs of bread*

### > Similarities of texture

The expression *sizo* was first used by one child for scissors and then extended to all metal objects.

## How does the process of semantic development happen?

1. The semantic development in a child's use of words is usually a process of **overextension initially**, followed by a **gradual process of narrowing down the application of each term** as more words are learned.
2. Overextension takes place in children's *speech production*; however, it isn't necessarily used in *speech comprehension*<sup>1</sup>.

**Example:** One two-year-old used *apple*, in speaking, to refer to a number of other round objects like a tomato and a ball, but had no difficulty picking out the apple, when asked, from a set of round objects including a ball and a tomato.

3. Concerning lexical relations

- > In terms of **hyponymy**, the child will almost always use the "middle"-level term in a hyponymous set such as animal – dog – poodle

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<sup>1</sup>Speech comprehension is our ability to hear sounds and transform them into information.

-This may be connected to a similar tendency in adults, when talking to young children, to refer to flowers (not the more general plants or the more specific tulips).

- In terms of **antonymous relations**, the child seems to acquire certain antonym pairs, like "more/less", before/after, and buy/sell after the age of five.

### **Later development**

The main features of the child's first language acquisition after the age of five (Later development) involve the following:

- **Development of antonymous relations:** certain antonym pairs, like "more/less", before/after, and buy/sell after the age of five.
- **Production of complex structures:** The ability to produce complex sentences and engage in extended discourse develops gradually.
- **First language acquisition and second language learning:** By the age of five,
  - they have completed the greater part of the basic language acquisition process.
  - They have become accomplished users of a first language.
  - According to some, the child is then in a good position to start learning a second (or foreign) language.