

# Introduction

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## Chapter Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- Discuss the difference between communication and language.
- Discuss the difference between symbolic and nonsymbolic communication.
- Discuss the notion of communicative intent.
- Define the concept of language.
- Identify and describe the receptive and expressive language modalities.
- Identify and describe the linguistic parameters.

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Most children grow up and acquire speech and language without requiring individualized, professional help. However, some children, for a variety of reasons, do not achieve communicative proficiency on their own. Consequently, their ability to get their needs met by interacting with others and engaging in activities is undermined. Moreover, these children often become socially isolated with severe consequences. This book is written on behalf of these children and for the professionals charged with helping them.

In this first chapter, the foundation is provided for the remainder of the book. The basic concepts of communication, speech, and language are introduced and elaborated on. Providing this background for the reader serves as a foundation for understanding the later topics, including language acquisition, language disorders, and, of course, language intervention, the most important topic in this book.

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### Communication

Communication is pervasive in life. Birds sing. Lions roar. Dogs bark. Human infants cry. Each sends a message. **Communication** refers to the exchange of information (McLaughlin, 1998). There is a sender, a receiver, and the information exchanged. Although other creatures communicate, the focus of this book is on human communication. Human communication has been traced back to the mists of time.

### *Symbolic and Nonsymbolic Communication*

Human communication need not be symbolic. To communicate symbolically, the speaker uses a **symbol** to stand for something else, its referent. The relationship between the symbol and the referent is arbitrary. That is, the symbol does not resemble the referent. Rather, the two are tied by community consensus. For example, the word *lion* is a symbol for a large, ferocious feline. However, there is no resemblance between the word *lion* and that large, ferocious feline. A lion is called a lion simply because those in the linguistic community call it a lion. An example of nonsymbolic human communication would be when a hungry 2-day-old infant cries and the mother responds by making an accurate assessment of why her baby is distressed and provides nourishment. Clearly, the child has communicated. The sender (infant) transmitted the information to the receiver (mother). However, the crying directly communicated the distress of hunger. At this young age, the infant did not use crying to symbolize hunger. Instead, crying was an aspect of the distress the hungry child was experiencing.

### *Communicative Intent*

During the first year of life, a child typically develops **communicative intent** (Hulit & Howard, 2006). The child demonstrates that he or she means to communicate by his or her behavior. A child may point toward a cookie while vocalizing and gazing back and forth between the caretaker's face and the cookie. If the caretaker does not respond immediately to the request for the cookie, then the child will likely persist. By persisting, the sender expects the receiver to take note. The child possesses communicative intent. Interestingly, people report similar behaviors in their dogs and cats, which suggest that these animals also have communicative intent. For example, when someone approaches a dog's food, the dog may growl menacingly while glaring at the person and baring its teeth. This behavior may persist, signaling the unambiguous warning, "stay away or else."

Had the child in the cookie example been about 2 years old, he or she may have said, “eat cookie” to request the cookie. In making the request using words, the child has actually used language. The child has uttered a primitive sentence. The sentence is devoid of grammatical markers and includes only substantive words. Nonetheless, it is a linguistic message. As shown, a child may communicate the message either linguistically (eat + cookie) or nonlinguistically (vocalize + point + gaze coupling). Both forms of human communication are common.

## Language

Now that communication has been defined, the concept of language will be addressed. From a linguistic perspective, **language** refers to a system of symbols and rules for combining these symbols to communicate a message (Hegde, 2001). Language has a generative quality, which means that with a finite set of symbols and a finite set of rules for combining these symbols, an individual may express an infinite number of correct utterances. That is, the symbols are combined and recombined in numerous ways to send messages. Therefore, when a child says a primitive utterance, such as “eat cookie,” he or she may not be simply parroting an adult but instead may be engaged in the creative act of uttering a sentence that never existed before, at least for this child.

### *Linguistic Modalities*

Symbolic communication, or language, facilitates human communication. The entire world (objects, events, emotions, etc.) is **mapped** linguistically by labeling (symbolizing) each concept with a word. Then, theoretically at least, individuals put their thoughts into linguistic form and send any imaginable message to others. The process of putting messages into linguistic form is referred to as **formulating language**, or encoding. The language to be conveyed is called **expressive language**. Once the message has been formulated linguistically, individuals can convey the message to others. One option, or expressive modality, is to use speech. **Speaking** refers to using the **vocal tract**, or speech structures, to express the linguistic message. Other expressive modalities include writing and gesturing, as in American Sign Language.

Another person receives the message using the receptive modalities. The receptive modalities include listening to spoken language, reading written language, and feeling gestural language by touch. Feeling gestural language by touch is not often mentioned; however, it represents a viable

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receptive modality for the deaf–blind population. Braille is also received through touch. The message receiver is said to decode, or **interpret**, the linguistic message. As such, the sender formulates, or encodes, the message, whereas the receiver interprets, or decodes, the message. The language the receiver interprets is called **receptive language**. When individuals are impaired in receptive or expressive language, they are at a distinct disadvantage in life. However, by strategizing, it is sometimes possible to compensate by relying more heavily on an intact modality to reduce dependence on an impaired modality. For example, hearing-impaired children may acquire speech-reading skills to augment visually their residual hearing abilities. This compensatory strategy may improve their success in communicating.

### *Speech and Language as Communicative Tools*

The role of speech and language has been placed in the broader perspective of communication by a model called the speech chain (Denes & Pinson, 1993). According to this model, the message starts off as an idea in the mind of the speaker (cognitive realm) and undergoes numerous transformations: encoded into language (linguistic realm), sent along the nervous system to move the speech structures (physiologic realm), transmitted through the airways as sound waves (acoustic realm), impacted on the listener's ear to stimulate the ascending auditory pathways (physiologic realm), organized at the cerebral cortex into language (linguistic realm), and, finally, decoded into a message (cognitive realm) in the mind of the listener. The message then has gone full circle. What started as an idea in the mind of the speaker went through numerous transformations and ended up as an idea in the mind of the listener. It is apparent from this model that all of the information in the speaker's message has to be represented in each transformation, including in speech and language. Speech and language serve in this model as communicative tools. Furthermore, when a child requests a cookie from an adult and gets it, the child's use of communication as a behavior has been strengthened. The converse is also true. When a child requests a cookie and the request is ignored, communication as a behavior has been weakened.

### *Linguistic Parameters*

For professionals interested in fostering language development in children, simply knowing the definitions of language and related terminology is insufficient. Consequently, they have turned to the linguistic

parameters to gain further insight into a child's language proficiency. Linguists have identified different parameters that occur simultaneously during speech (McLaughlin, 1998). Language consists of five parameters: (1) phonology, (2) semantics, (3) syntax, (4) morphology, and (5) pragmatics, which are defined next. Children can fall behind their peers in any one or more of the **linguistic parameters**. Therefore, each parameter represents a vehicle for viewing the child's language level and for monitoring language development.

**Phonology** refers to the sounds of spoken language. It includes the individual speech sounds or the consonants and vowels that differentiate words and are called **phonemes**. Phonology also includes the **prosodic features**, stress, intonation, and rhythm. The prosodic features are sound patterns that can only be identified when listening to the overall utterance, and they cannot be perceived by listening to individual phonemes. **Stress** is the extra strength or loudness placed on some linguistic unit like a syllable or word. **Intonation** is the pitch envelope over the utterance, and **rhythm** refers to the stress timing, or the beat, of spoken language.

The parameter called **semantics** addresses the meaning of language. It includes word meaning and much more. For example, everyone understands the meaning of the sentence, "The grass is green." But the following makes no sense "grass the green is," even though the same words are used. Consequently, it is apparent that in a sentence there is meaning that exceeds the mere meaning of individual words. This basic or underlying meaning arising out of the sentence is called *propositional meaning*.

**Syntax** refers to the rules of word order. Syntactic rules apply on the sentence, clause, and phrase levels. An example of a syntactic rule follows: A kernel sentence has the basic subject + verb + object order (e.g., *The dog chased the ball*). However, by changing word order (exchanging places between the subject and object noun and making other changes), this kernel sentence has been transformed into the passive sentence, "The ball was chased by the dog." The passive form emphasizes what was done rather than who did it.

**Morphology** is the parameter that concerns the rules for using word forms and inflections. A **morpheme** is the smallest linguistic unit to have meaning. There are two types of morphemes: lexical and bound morphemes. In the phrase "The baby's rattle," there are four morphemes and they have been underlined. Three of the morphemes (*the*, *baby*, *rattle*) are called lexical morphemes because they are part of the lexicon, or vocabulary. The possessive marker *'s* is called a **bound morpheme** because it has to be bound, or attached, to a lexical morpheme to have meaning.

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**Pragmatics** concerns the rules that govern language in a social context. Its reach is broad and inclusive and ranges from such diverse topics as using politeness markers (*please, thank you*, etc.), to taking turns in conversations, and to repairing conversations that have broken down.

As children develop and become more mature, they are expected to become more proficient linguistically. Linguistic development occurs in each of the parameters of language. As time passes, most children speak more clearly, use more complex grammatical forms, send more nuanced messages, and engage more skillfully in conversations. However, some children fall behind their peers in one or more of the linguistic parameters, with unfortunate consequences. These children need to be identified and helped so they can lead more productive, less isolated lives. Helping these children develop linguistically is the topic of this handbook.

Most children acquire language relatively autonomously through exposure. However, a caring and knowledgeable adult can facilitate language development. Because of the serious negative consequences of not developing linguistic proficiency, speech-language pathologists and others have tried to develop intervention approaches to help these children. Such thinking has led clinicians to reflect consciously on the nature of language. This ability to reflect on language is called **metalinguistics**. Fostering the development of metalinguistic skills in children may actually enhance their language development. However, sufficient cognitive development is a prerequisite to the acquisition of metalinguistic skills.

### Chapter Summary

The concepts of speech and language are discussed and placed in the broader communication perspective. The expressive and receptive language modalities are described, and the linguistic parameters are identified. These basic concepts are related to language acquisition and language disorders. Although most children acquire language without individual professional help, other children do not progress sufficiently to keep up with their typically developing peers. Children who need extra help acquiring language represent the focus of this book.

## Terms from the Chapter

Bound morpheme (5)	Phoneme (5)
Communication (2)	Phonology (5)
Communicative intent (2)	Pragmatics (6)
Expressive language (3)	Prosodic features (5)
Formulating language (3)	Receptive language (4)
Interpreting language (4)	Rhythm (5)
Intonation (5)	Semantics (5)
Language (3)	Speaking (3)
Linguistic parameters (5)	Stress (5)
Mapping (3)	Symbol (2)
Metalinguistics (6)	Syntax (5)
Morpheme (5)	Vocal tract (3)
Morphology (5)	

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