The stage has been reached when spoken language can be considered and its early stages traced to the level of simple sentence formation. Taken at face value, this should not present too complex or lengthy a task, that is, until one begins to question what is meant by “language”.

Language: a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures or marks having understood meanings; audible, articulate, meaningful sound as produced by the action of the vocal organs; the words, their pronunciation, and the methods of combining them used and understood by a considerable community and established by long usage; (rearranged from Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, 1971, p. 1270).

In spoken language, the only form of language to be considered here, words are clearly paramount and words are such a basic commodity in the economy of human intercourse that no definition is needed in order to appreciate what is meant when “word” is referred to. But what in fact is a word, particularly when we are listening to a young child, or when a child has some difficulty in expressing himself in words, or is unable to articulate the sound pattern of the word correctly? The three facets of the definition of language quoted all include the idea of meaning, and it goes without saying that a vocal utterance which fails to be understood is not language, providing that certain assumptions are made about the linguistic, intellectual and other connections between the listener and the speaker. How does it come about that the child who has not yet uttered words comes to share the linguistic conventions of the community into which he has been born? Even more fundamentally, how does the child come to use these particular audio-motor signs we call spoken words in a way which indicates that meaning is being shared between speaker and listener? Though such a word as “impossible” should only be used with the greatest caution, and preferably not even then, it would appear to be impossible for any child to learn to talk unless he is exposed to the speech of others.

What are the rules which govern the interaction between two speakers, and especially between the competent adult and the little child who has only just begun to talk? It was because of the awesome complexity of the task faced by the child in

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learning language that some linguists were driven to postulate the existence of an innate “Language Acquisition Device”. Chomsky formulated the components of such an acquisition model:

“A child who is capable of language learning must have
(i) a technique for representing input signals
(ii) a way of representing structural information about these signals
(iii) some initial delimitation of a class of possible hypotheses about language structure
(iv) a method of determining what each such hypothesis implies with respect to each sentence
(v) a method for selecting one of the (presumably, infinitely many) hypotheses that are allowed by (iii) and are compatible with the given primary linguistic data.”

(Chomsky, 1965, p. 30)

In discussing how a child understands spoken language he goes on to say:

“Thus what is maintained, presumably, is that the child has an innate theory of potential structural descriptions that is sufficiently rich and fully developed so that he is able to determine, from a real situation in which a signal occurs, which structural descriptions may be appropriate to this signal, and also that he is able to do this in part in advance of any assumption as to the linguistic structure of this signal.”

(Chomsky, 1965, p. 32)

If one were considering the child from the point of view of adult language such a conclusion seems almost inevitable, and it is easy to sympathize with such a view. There is an element of truth in it, in that all human beings normally acquire spoken language. But so there is in the homunculus theory of human intra-uterine development, in which it was held that either in ovum or spermatozoon there was a perfect, preformed microscopic replica of the adult. In a conceptual sense there is. The advent of the microscope revealed the theory to be quite untenable in practice. The processes of mammalian embryogenesis and the processes of language development each depend on the emergence and progressive differentiation and organization of structures, cellular in the one, cognitive and communicative in the other.

The format of the description which follows is based on the words and word combinations which a child characteristically utters in the period between the first and third birthdays. It is important to remember that language, and language acquisition, is not purely linguistic. Cognitive function, the interaction between mother and child, and the relevant aspects of auditory processing and motor performance need constantly to be borne in mind, both for the normal development of language in the child, and in attempting to understand what happens when it is delayed or damaged. This multidisciplinary, panspecialist approach creates linguistic problems of its own: every field of knowledge has its own vocabulary and, what is more important but less obvious, its own traditions of converse and forms of enquiry. Much fruitless hypothesis formation and subsequent debate would be avoided if it were realized that though English speakers share a common tongue, we frequently do not speak the same language. Linguists and paediatricians, psychologists and physicists, speech therapists, teachers and parents each think and talk in different ways, with vastly different perceptions of the child.