Training in the Use of Double-Function Terms

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Twenty first-, second-, and third-grade children were tested, trained, and retested in their use of double-function words (e.g., hard, deep, bright). Children first understand such words as they refer to inanimate objects, then to people in a physical sense, and last to people in a psychological sense. Wide variations in initial understanding and trainability of double-function words occurred. It is easier to train children to understand a double-function word as applied to a person in a physical sense than in a psychological sense. Words with tactual referents (sweet, warm, dry, cold, hard) are understood earlier than words with visual referents (bright, crooked, sharp, deep), but words with visual referents show greater gains after training. Several possible explanations of these results are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Asch and Nerlove (1960, p. 283) state that “Most, probably all, of the terms that describe psychological activities or the properties of persons also describe the properties and the activities of things. Words such as hard, deep, bright are obvious examples; we will call them ‘double-function’ terms since they refer jointly to physical and psychological data.” Asch and Nerlove found that children’s mastery of double-function terms shows a regular development with age. From 3 to 4 years, children use the terms mostly in reference to objects and in a few instances to describe the physical properties of persons. From 5 to 6 years, the children use and understand the terms mainly as they refer to

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objects and as applied to persons in a physical sense. At this age, a few instances of a psychological usage of double-function terms appear. This occurs mostly with the word *sweet* and stands in a psychological sense for a "good" person. From 7 to 8 years, there is a great increase in the understanding of the psychological sense of the terms, but a connection between the physical and psychological senses of the terms has not formed. From 9 to 10 years, there is an increase in the comprehension of the psychological sense of the terms, and some ability to state the double function. From 10 to 12 years, there is no further increase in understanding of the psychological sense, but there is an increase in the ability to state the double function.

As Asch and Nerlove (1960, p. 291) point out, "The striking finding is not that the psychological meanings appear later in development, but that they are initially divorced from the corresponding object reference." Double-function terms are initially homonyms. Later, children reach a stage when they can discern the relations between the meanings of a particular double-function word. With homonyms, the perceived identity of a term is a function of its contextual properties. For instance, in the following two sentences, *The ring on her finger* and *The ring of the telephone,* the two distinct meanings of the word are clear as a result of the contextual background differences. But the double-function terms are not only phonetically identical but also similar in meaning when they occur in different contexts. The younger children in Asch and Nerlove's study most often failed and sometimes firmly rejected the relation. It is, as Asch and Nerlove (1960, p. 292) point out, as if "the name were less a conventional symbol and more an indelible part of the thing itself" for the younger children.

It is important to note that double-function words are homonyms for the child only in the sense of the limited linguistic understanding that the child brings to bear on them. Homonyms, in adult usage, do not have multiple aspects as do double-function words. It is as if, for the child, only one function at a time can be concentrated on initially. When he concentrates on one function, he loses the other(s) and *vice versa.* In this respect, the developmental aspect of double-function words accords with the Piagetian stage-by-stage analysis of the relationship between language and cognition (Sinclair, 1970). Briefly, we note the age correspondences between the attainment of double function and the emergence of various seriations and conservations within the broadly defined stage of concrete operations.

Also, the role of similarity does not seem to be important in the process of acquisition of double-function terms. For instance, the child is familiar with the use of the word *hard* to refer to hard objects. Since he already