

EARLY COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

MELITA KOVAČEVIĆ

¹ Department of Speech and Language Pathology, Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation, University of Zagreb, Croatia

This introductory paper discusses traditional approaches of early communication and language development. A brief historical overview of the developments has been presented. New technologies, scientific breakthroughs and improvement of standards of living emphasize the importance of an interdisciplinary approach which leads to qualitative changes in research and practice. At the same time, however, those changes require both adaptation to new circumstances and different education of experts. Discussion of various aspects of interdisciplinarity in the field follows introducing the readers to the set of heterogeneous papers with a common denominator - research of early human development with an emphasis on communication and language development.

The areas of early communication and language development were traditionally related to certain professions. Psychologists studied early communication, linguists were involved in language development and speech therapists would step in if the language development was impaired. The approach to these areas was very simplistic, especially in terms of their relevance to this aspect of human development, failing to emphasize their interrelationship with other aspects of development or their impact on the individual's subsequent development. Furthermore, the lack of universal terminology posed certain obstacles and the failure to recognize this fact only made things worse.

Let us first take a look at how these fields are defined in dictionaries, glossaries and encyclopedias. Psihologijski rječnik (Petz, 1992, Dictionary of Psychology) explains the word *communication* only as the process of emitting, transmitting and receiving messages. The same dictionary defines *language* basically as a linguistic category with no mention of language development or how it relates to thinking, and the reader is referred to *psycholinguistics*. The author of

the dictionary explains that psycholinguistics is a term increasingly used as a synonym of the psychology of speech (language). He continues to say that the field of psycholinguistics includes a variety of disciplines, but that it applies methods which are largely those of psychology. By contrast, the encyclopedic dictionary of psychology published in 1979 (edited by Eysneck, Arnold, Meilli) pays much more attention to *language*. It sees it as a linguistic category, but at the same time recognizes its ties with communication and speech emphasizing the variety of approaches to language and including the aspect of language disorders. The authors apply the same approach when defining *communication*, which they view from different perspectives and relate to different areas. As far as *psycholinguistics* is concerned, they emphasize its interdisciplinary concerns and heterogeneity. However, when establishing fields it is based on and what it focuses on, linguistics comes first and psychology only fourth, following communication and information science. Various contemporary textbooks on developmental psychology deal to some extent with the issues of early communication and language

development, but only in sections within chapters providing students with very basic insights. These issues are covered within the areas of cognitive development or early social and emotional development. On the other hand, there are numerous books on language development available today which view these issues from a large number of perspectives. They have, undoubtedly, been recognized as an independent area, as an entity combining knowledge gained by a variety of experts. In the often quoted *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (D. Crystal, 1992), which provides an extensive analysis of language and covers a large number of language aspects, language development is paid due attention. A quick glance at the contents allows the reader to see that the presented material represents the gist of knowledge from various fields. Language development, whether normal or impaired, is the subject of (developmental) psycholinguistics. The child's mastery of the language system is in the focus of interest, early communication being the starting point and precondition of the subsequent language development, which is defined as language acquisition at the child's early age.

In the classic among books on the fundamentals of linguistics, *Language and Linguistics*, John Lyons suggests that the question 'What is language?' is just like the question 'What is life?' This question is extremely complex and its answer must partly depend on who asked it or who the answer is meant for. In the above examples from a number of publications varying both in terms of which profession they are geared at and the time when they were written, it is obvious that there is a considerable level of disagreement as to the facts that are presented to the reader. On the one hand, there are different interpretations of the same term in different professions (which is not surprising), but even within the same profession interpretations do not always coincide. The claim that psychology is the cornerstone of psycholinguistics may not be wrong by itself, but psychologists have devoted it little space in their publications,

at least when it comes to Croatian authors. On the other hand, even though the child and his/her development, especially language development, represent a focal interest of psycholinguistics, today it is almost impossible to imagine a title of a book on the fundamentals in linguistics or a glossary of linguistic terms, at least those written and published outside Croatia, that would not include interpretations of these areas. What can be, then, concluded on the basis of the discussion so far? First of all, it is a fact that, historically speaking, the issues of early communication and language development were at one time studied in certain fields exclusively. Furthermore, generally speaking, only thirty-odd years ago these aspects of development were not considered to be of much relevance to the overall human development. Their cumulative effect was not recognized – they were often viewed monodimensionally. However, in the last fifteen years these aspects of human development have been given more attention in research projects and publications clearly outlining the disciplines which are concerned with them.

We have already emphasized the development of modern technologies and science in general, which results in individual developments in some segments of science – both natural science or social science/humanities. Also, the significance of the development of science or communities in general should not be neglected. The old saying 'a stitch in time saves nine' is reflected in modern society as care for the human being from his/her earliest age, the prenatal period. An overview of the situation in the countries of Western Europe and the US indicates increasing emphasis on preventative measures and early monitoring of the child's development. A case in point is the Netherlands, but also Scandinavian countries, which are marked by a very high standard of living. It is the living conditions and available funds that helped them focus on care at the earliest age. However, such a major breakthrough cannot be effected merely through ample means; it requires a

different quality of interrelationships between different professions, mutual respect, learning from one another and a truly cooperative relationship both in terms of practices and research. In other words, if we want to prevent, for example, language and speech pathology in a later stage of development, the knowledge of the pediatrician alone does not suffice at the child's earliest age, but needs to be supported by that of a speech therapist or psychologist.

On the other hand, the shift 'backwards', towards the origins of life is mirrored in the area of research, i.e. science. The development of modern technologies such as the ultrasound (from standard to three-dimensional, with the four-dimensional being developed) and a variety of neuroimaging techniques have allowed access to the unknown and have helped unravel numerous mysteries. Opening up new possibilities of pathology prevention in the child's development, uncovering the significance of the early dual mother-child relationship, gaining new insights into brain morphology and damage that affect the development of early communication and subsequent language development has led to a major breakthrough in this area. The alliance of prenatal medicine and psychology has clearly shown the importance of this period for the child's subsequent development (M. Kovačević, 2000). The prenatal period has also been recognized as a period crucial to subsequent language development (Z. Babić, 1993). Early language development has been seen from a new perspective and different theoretical models explaining the acquisition of language components are emerging (M. Kovačević, 1996). Brain lesions and available data on early lesions and their ties with language development cast a new light on the area of early communication and language development, both in research and in diagnostics and rehabilitation, but also in defining or redefining theoretical concepts. Today the knowledge we have on these areas is increasing at a tremendous rate – the comparison of the literature from the 1980s and that of today shows that our

current picture of prelinguistic communication and early language development is much clearer and includes many more details. It is safe to assume that the efforts to combine different analytical levels, such as those of genetics, cells, neurons, context etc. with different areas of human activity, such as linguistic, social, cognitive, emotional, will lead to an even clearer picture of human development, which will result in more effective diagnostics and treatments. We have to admit this is something we have not achieved yet.

Putting together the pieces to create a coherent picture of language development raises the issue of language development continuity. To what extent is language development related to socio-emotional development? What are prelinguistic universals? What impact do cultural differences make? Different questions may also be raised. What is the true value of theoretical precepts resulting from research on normal and impaired communication and language development? A possible, and, by all means, rational answer would be that their significance is determined according to their role in the prevention and treatment of delayed and impaired communication and language development. We believe that the papers published in this special issue will at least partly contribute to the efforts to present some of the most recent theoretical and developmental insights gained in a variety of fields, but also their application in diagnostics and treatment.

This special issue is a result of the international conference *Early Communication and Language Development – Interdisciplinary approach: New perspectives and their application*, held in Dubrovnik on October 1-4, 1999 and organized by the Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation, University of Zagreb and the International Centre of Croatian Universities in Dubrovnik. The conference was attended by participants from Croatia and a large number of European countries and US. A number of plenaries were delivered in those four days, some serving as the basis of the papers

presented here. They include a wide range of topics and areas and share the goal of bringing together insights that can contribute to a better understanding of early communication and language development.

Although the papers originate from fields which have not yet established an adequate

level of mutual communication, which accounts for occasional impenetrability of terms, we believe that this is a step towards bridging the gaps between them and hope that the readers will recognize the common thread.

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