Naming

Words stand for concepts, and concepts grow as youngsters grow. Learning new words and learning new meanings for old words go together. The size of a person's vocabulary may well indicate growth, but we cannot take quantity at face value. Everything depends on how maturely learners understand a word. They can acquire vocabulary only as they can grasp the concepts, and this understanding will depend on worldly experience and logical development.

As things in the environment become increasingly singled out for learners by seeing other people behave toward them and pointing them out, by physically engaging with them, or by comparing them by means of their own sensorimotor equipment, they form increasingly separated concepts of these things. Finer conceptualizing of anything—colors, musical tones, feelings, political positions—depends partly on experience in the area of the particular subject matter (Eskimos distinguish more kinds of snow than people usually do in temperate climates) and partly on the sensitivity of a person's overall mental and physical development. Differentiating the environment, differentiating concepts, and differentiating names all influence each other.

Concepts develop in the same direction as the rest of mental growth—toward broader generalization and finer elaboration. Concepts will extend further over time and space. Children may at first understand the concept of duty as household or classroom chores, then perhaps as some local allegiance or patriotism, then much later as giving every part of creation its due. Similarly, they will gradually expand the concept of trading baseball pictures with friends to bartering among tribes and to the complex of tariffs and balance of payments that comprise international trade.

At the same time, the number of members in a class concept swells, spreading also over time and space, because learners discover from refining their discrimination that these classes have subclasses. At first, the concept of watergoing vessels is limited to the few boats a person has had experience with—a rowboat with outboard motor, let's say, a simple sailboat, and pictures of ocean liners. The concept is vague and global, failing to distinguish less visible traits such as the purpose or the power source and not even distinguishing much about silhouette and structure. Gradually the learner distinguishes yacht from tanker, motor-powered from sail-powered, river-plying from ocean-going, and so on. Discriminating catamaran from schooner from clipper makes one realize that a whole subclass of sailing boats exists having in turn its own membership of subclasses and unique instances.

A less physical concept may not break down into such a definite and systematic branching of particulars but may nevertheless comprise specialized submeanings, as the general concept of duty eventually comprises, as one grows, the concept of a customs tax. As with all abstracting, the combined power of generalizing and elaborating creates hierarchical knowledge of increasing internal complexity.

Growth Sequence 8: Toward concepts of broader applicability, of larger membership, and of greater internal complexity of subclasses.

In some cases children learn a more general word first, and in some cases a more specific. Surely most children learn *boat* before *dinghy* and call every water-navigating vessel a boat. Many children call every quadruped *dog* at first, whether the animal is a horse, goat, or tiger. By contrast with *boat, dog* represents the case of learning first the more concrete word and moving upward to the more abstract (*quadruped,* or perhaps *mammal*). How specific or general are the words children first learn depends on what is most practical, so that you can expect vocabulary to begin with both concrete and abstract words. What you can count on for consistency is that both will be somewhat misused until the concept fills out in the other direction. Calling all quadrupeds *dog* is overgeneralizing the word, which designates only some quadrupeds, and calling all water-navigating vessels *boat* is overconcretizing (since for any one instance that a person has in mind, a more specific word exists).

Growth Sequence 9: Toward vocabulary that more precisely fits the generality level of the concept the user actually has in mind.

Naming by parts of speech

The most explicit way to verbalize a concept is to name it with a word especially assigned to it. If a concept is conventional enough to be assigned its own word, and if the speaker knows that word, she may affix the word to the concept. Tradition recognizes nine kinds of words, the grammatical parts of speech—nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, pronouns, articles or determiners, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections (the last of which we will not consider, since they do not name things but vent feeling). A crude sort of growth

order may be plotted among these parts of speech, of some value in the early years, but longer-range growth centers on *alternatives* about how to name things. Naming with single words is itself only one alternative.

Concepts of objects are easier than concepts of relations, and concepts of time-space relations are easier than concepts of logical relations. Because some parts of speech name one of these sorts of concepts and some another, parts of speech vary in degree of learning difficulty. So growth in use of the different parts of speech is linked with abstractive growth of concepts. The hardest parts of speech of all are those that do not refer to the subject matter but refer rather to the communication about the subject matter. Let's call this communicating about the communication itself *meta*-communication, *meta* meaning on a higher plane. Whatever is meta in respect to something else governs it and is necessarily more abstract and hence more difficult.

Varying abstractive difficulty Proper nouns, common nouns, and pronouns represent a definite abstraction hierarchy corresponding to a growth sequence in the preschool years. A proper noun like *Wyoming* refers to only one particular item—something literally in a class by itself. A common noun like *state* refers to a whole class of like items, each of which alone might, like Wyoming, have a proper name. Children find proper nouns easier to learn because a singular referent requires little abstracting and because virtually no choice exists for how to refer.

One alternative does exist always, however, for proper nouns as well as for common nouns: a speaker may substitute a pronoun for the original noun and refer to Wyoming, for example as "it" or Mommy as "she." Pronouns are comparatively sophisticated because they are relatively metacommunicative. Who "it" or "she" designates depends on the context, on a double reference, first from "it" to "Wyoming" then from "Wyoming" to the concept or image of Wyoming.

I, you, and *it* are the algebraic *x, y,* and *z* of ordinary language. They serve exactly the same purpose in speech that "unknowns" serve in math—to act as a variable function in a system so that a particular value may be assigned to each, relative to values assigned other functions in the system. For example, of three people talking together about each other any one may be *I, you,* or *it* from one moment to the next, depending on who is sender, receiver, and referent of the talk at that moment. Tom, Dick, and Harry are like numbers or particular values that may be plugged into *x, y,* and *z* (*I, you* and *it*) such that if two are known, the other is known. In other

words, pronouns are to proper and common nouns what algebra is to arithmetic, a further abstraction. This is why children learn how to use pronouns last.

Whereas nouns, verbs, adjectives, and some adverbs tend to name concepts of *things,* articles, prepositions, conjunctions, and some adverbs tend to name concepts of *relations.*

Adjectives name the traits by which class concepts are formed. Let's replace "articles" with the more modern grammatical notion of "determiners," which includes not only *a, an,* and *the* but *some, any, all, a few,* and any other expressions of quantity, including numbers themselves. Whereas adjectives express quality, determiners express quantity. Concepts of quantity overlap with concepts of logical relations, for *the, any, all,* and *some* also say how broadly a statement is to apply. So determiners are harder than nouns, verbs, and adjectives, quantity being generally more abstract than quality and more directly tied to logical relations.

Prepositions and conjunctions express only concepts of relations—spatial (*in, above, through*), temporal (*after, during, until*), and logical (*if, unless, because, despite*). In this way, they are fairly specialized, like determiners. Relations of time, space, and logic may also be expressed by adverbs (*now, later, farther, downward, therefore, nevertheless*). So the so-called functor words—determiners, prepositions, and conjunctions—may as a class be assumed to belong to a later stage of growth than the other parts of speech, as samples of small children's speech show. Older learners will have "acquired" all the parts of speech but will vary according to how often they use the more relational and metacommunicative words, that is, how explicitly they can *name* the connections among their concepts as opposed to egocentrically assuming them when explicitness is intended and desirable.

Reading the lists from left to right, we can summarize the increasing abstractive difficulty of parts of speech as follows:

proper nouns	common nouns	pronouns	
	verbs	prepositions	conjunctions
	adjectives	determiners	adverbs of relations
	time-space adverbs		

Growth Sequence 10: From the use of words naming *things* to words naming *time-space relations,* then to words naming *logical relations,* when explicitness is intended and desirable.

Grammatical options in naming

Parts of speech differ only secondarily in the kind of concepts they refer to; they differ first of all in the specialized grammatical role each plays in a sentence. It is not the case that nouns name only things, verbs only actions, and adjectives only qualities. The noun *descent* refers to an action, the verb *encase* to an object (casing), and the adjective *lumpy* refers to objects. In keeping with the truth that thought may be cast into alternative language forms, we could say that the pudding is lumpy or that lumps float in the pudding, depending on the desired emphasis and effect. So a certain kind of concept may take one of several parts of speech when translated into language. This is why it is misleading to define *nouns* for students only as names of a person, place, or thing, and *verbs* only as actions. All parts of speech name, and they name concepts, and several may name the same concept. The difference between the adjective *helpless* and the adverb *helplessly* is not a difference in concept but in *how one wants to get the concept into the sentence.*

To some extent, the language form into which speakers cast a concept merely reflects their choices about how to cast a more complex idea of which the concept is only a part. That is, one has options about how to get the concept of encasing or of helplessness into a statement of a larger idea. One may choose to place the concept in a subject or object role (noun) or into a modifying role (adjective or adverb), or to predicate a statement by means of it (verb). One may choose to convey causality by saying that such and such was the *cause* (noun) of the effect, that such and such *caused* the effect (verb), that the effect happened *because* such and such (conjunction), or that the effect happened *because of* such and such (preposition). The grammatical specializations of vocabulary that we call parts of speech exist to offer options about how to relate a concept to fellow concepts interacting in the same statement. Thus it is that naming depends in turn on the more inclusive process of stating.

Growth Sequence 11: Toward increasing ability to name a concept by a part of speech befitting the role of that concept within a statement.

Rhetorical options in naming

Something may be named by more than one word. Diction, in the sense of word choice, concerns alternative naming. This goes beyond mere synonyms, which are different words for the same concept

(*imitate, emulate*). You may point to your car and call it a vehicle, a sedan, a chariot, a lemon, a liability, or a relic. In your discourse these all refer to the same thing—what you are pointing to. The physical referent of all is the same, but each word applies a different conceptualization to it. So besides a choice among synonyms for the same concept, a sender has choices about how to verbally ticket nonverbal things, with the result that the receiver is influenced to regard the nonverbal item from only one of many possible viewpoints. The idea that a rose by any other name may not smell so sweet reminds us that naming guides response.

Maturity in naming relates of course to increasing size of vocabulary, but much more is required—some detachment from language and some liberation of mind, some wit. Beginners tend to fuse word with thing and only gradually differentiate symbol from symbolized to the point where they can detach a word they have associated with a thing and replace it by another name. Studying foreign languages certainly enhances this detachment, precisely by forcing the mind to accept alternative names for the same concepts. Seeing clearly the independence of matter from mind is a prerequisite for virtuosity in naming, and this is a factor of general egocentricity, because such detachment is tantamount to separating self from world (*I* from *it*).

Figurative names Naming may be literal or figurative. Calling policemen *centurions* overlays on the concept of modern policemen the concept of Roman military officers and thus makes a double reference. Such metaphorical naming opens up limitless possibilities for wit and imagination, since virtually any two items in the universe may be classed alike by some attribute or other. In this way *naming can be a way of stating.* Calling policemen centurions states, in effect, that they have the professional dedication, self-discipline, and inherited esprit de corps that characterized these Roman officers. Naming figuratively is an *implicit* way of stating. In fact, the more any name departs from the most commonly used label for something, the more it tends to make an implicit statement while, or under the guise of, merely naming.

Distinguish this deliberate originality, however, from the naïve speaker's use of a single word to make a statement, exemplified in the extreme by small children's tendency to say, "Hat," for example, when they mean, "I see a hat lying over there." This way of making a word do duty as a sentence is very different of course. In both cases, a word is not only naming a concept but is relating that concept to one or more other concepts. Adults too might say, "A sail!" meaning, "I see a ship," in which case they are using the figure of speech called synecdoche (letting a part stand for a whole). The difference lies in awareness, or lack of egocentricity. In a sense, children are merely

using synecdoche too, but they have no choice, and unless the receiver is especially close to the speaker both in the moment and physically in general, he will not understand, because no public convention supplies the missing elaboration.

Growth Sequence 12: Toward increasing versatility and originality in naming.