

Painter, C., (1989) *Learning the Mother Tongue*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pages 12-15

The later protolanguage

In Figure 3.3, we see the way in which this protolanguage had expanded by the time another four months had passed.

Expansion of the linguistic system took the form of additional meaning choices within existing functions, and one additional function where vocalisation accompanied a 'let's pretend' situation, or constituted a kind of play with patterns of sound (and perhaps meaning). By this age, Halliday's son, Nigel, had an even more extensive system of signs (Halliday, 1975), and there are doubtless other children who have produced smaller ones (see Carter, 1979). There will certainly be some variations too in the kinds of occasion that call forth vocalisation in different children.

What we need to consider here are the limitations and possibilities of this kind of linguistic system. With his protolanguage, Hal was able to 'communicate' with his inner circle, cementing relationships and engendering feelings of intimacy. He could express his reactions to the world outside, defining his own personality as he did so. Moreover, he could get what he wanted in the way of refreshments, playthings, attention, and comfort (to the extent that his communications were successful of course).

Perhaps the first question to ask is this: how necessary was it for the child to create a symbol system in order to do all this? It seems to me that in principle an infant could probably do all these things without evolving a protolanguage. But it is difficult to envisage as extensive a set of specific meanings as Hal created—meanings that were related to one another in differing ways—being conveyed without a vocal or gestural symbolic system.

There is a further question to consider here, which is this: if he went on expanding his protolanguage, would he be able to do with it all the things we as adults do with language—to argue, threaten, invite, cajole, denounce, explain, and so on?

Let us consider the social roles children adopt or impose as protolanguage speakers. They appear to be of the following kind: demander (addressee as supplier) of food or objects; seeker (addressee as provider) of comfort, aid, or attention; expresser of feelings; participant in a game, and the like. And, as I have just suggested, these roles could also be played out non-linguistically.

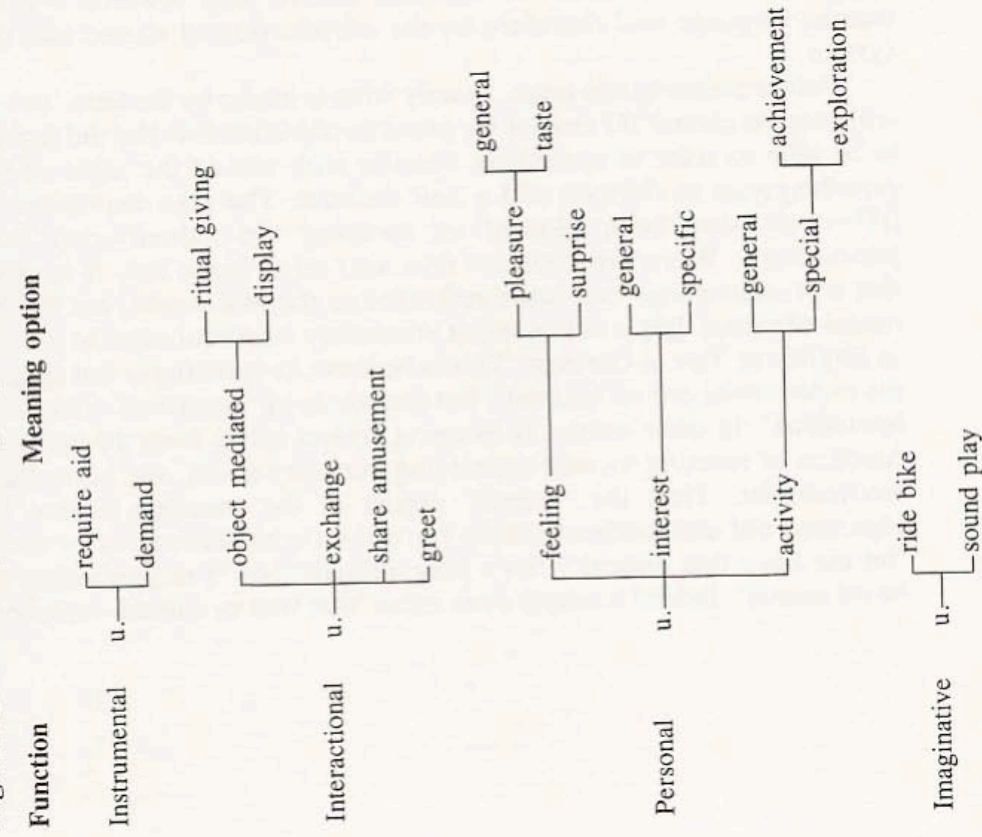
However, there are many things adults do when they speak that involve them in adopting or assigning roles that can only be expressed by means of language. Examples would be those involved in seeking, providing, or disclaiming information; promising; expressing doubt or certainty; and so on. No matter how

large a protolinguistic system might be, its user could not do with it all or any of these things that we feel are normal for even an immature speaker of language proper.

What is the limitation of the protolanguage that prevents it from doing this? The most obvious shortcoming of the system would seem to be that only those in very close contact with the child would have a chance of understanding his or her vocalisations. While this is perfectly true, this restriction of membership of the speech community is not the kind of limitation I have been talking about. To consider the limitation of functional potential, we have to look at the nature of the infant symbol, or sign. Obviously one key limitation here is the apparent lack of representational or experiential content to the sign. By this I mean the child's inability to refer specifically to any 'bit' of outside reality. One cannot query, assert, or deny without some means of referring to things, persons, actions, and the like. A first step towards a more mature language will therefore be the introduction of names into the system.

Before pursuing this point, exactly what is meant by the term 'name' will become clearer if I answer the possible objection that Hal did appear to be able to refer to something specific with one of the signs of his protolanguage at thirteen and a half months. The sign expressed as Ue]-'t-th'-has been glossed as meaning 'an animal-oooh how interesting!'. When we consider this, and other signs too, it is clear that a protolanguage can make reference to the real world, but not by means of names. Ue] is not an infant vocabulary item equivalent to animal in English or Tier in German. This is because its meaning is not simply the experiential one of 'animal', but the whole of 'an animal-oooh how interesting'. In other words, its meaning derives solely from the personal function of reacting to, and expressing curiosity about, the immediate environment. Thus the 'animal' aspect of the meaning cannot be separated out and made available for use on other occasions to mean 'let me have that animal', 'let's play animals', or 'I'm pretending to be an animal'. Indeed it cannot even mean 'that was an animal-oooh how interesting!'. So even though a child could go on increasing his or her repertoire of sounds, inventing new ones for each of the above meanings (should he or she wish to express them), it is clear that the limitation of the protolanguage is not essentially one of size, but of kind.

Figure 3.3 Hal's protolanguage at 13½ months



Note: u. = utterance

Function	Meaning option	Main realisation	Gloss
Instrumental	u. require aid	[ʔə] (a grunt)	'somebody do something!'
	u. demand	[mā] ('mah')	'I want that'
Interactional	u. object mediated	[dɪ] ('dee')	'here you are'
		[adʒà] (loud) ('uh-jah')	'see what I'm doing/ see what I've got'
	u. exchange	raspberry noise; [ʔə :: ʔə] ('a-a')	'I say—you say'
	u. share amusement	[æ :: hæ ha] ('hahaha')	'isn't this hilarious?'
Personal	u. greet	[dàda] (+ smile) (dadda)	'it's you! / you and me!'
		[æ] ('a')	'I like this (you know)'
	u. feeling	[m:::] ('mmmm')	'this tastes good'
		[ou] ('oh')	'ooh!'
	u. interest	[gà] ('gah')	'that's interesting'
		[tθ] ('t-th')	'an animal—oh, how interesting!'
	u. activity	[gà] ('gah')	'I'm busy (with this)'
		[adʒà] ('ajah')	'managed it!'
		[adà; adá adá adà]	'I'm busy sorting (contents of) this out'
		[br:::]	'I'm riding a bike'
Imaginative	u. ride bike		'tra-la'
	u. sound play		