

The Development of Reference in Early Childhood: the Roles of Communicative Motivation, Cognitive Abilities and the Caregiving Environment

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Over the first 5 years of life children become increasingly effective communicators and remarkably aware of the co-operative nature of communication. Yet, while these developments come naturally to typically developing children, large individual differences can be observed in children's language abilities even before they begin school. I have been interested in exploring the nature of children's early communicative skills and the factors that drive development and explain individual differences. The studies I will present focus on children's ability to refer to things and to comprehend reference. I will explore how these can improve as a consequence of 1) the child's motivation to engage in and repair communicative exchanges, 2) the child's growing social and cognitive abilities and 3) the scaffolding provided by caregivers in dialogue. The emerging picture is one where children actively seek to refine their model of language, fine tuning their expectations as their experience accrues and cognitive abilities improve.