

Transforming Personalized Speech: Bridging the Worlds of Home, School, and Clinic for the Preschooler with Language Delays

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Teachers and speech and language therapists worked with language-delayed and language-disordered preschoolers in a program to remediate communication problems (Haas, 1993). Despite these efforts, the children failed to demonstrate generalization of learned communicative strategies across settings. Only when professionals recognized and accepted the established communicative signs of the child's home were they able to collaborate with the mothers in transforming and creating new communication patterns that met the child's needs in a variety of settings and contexts.

Dans le cadre d'un programme visant à remédier à des problèmes de communication (Haas, 1993), des enseignants et des orthophonistes ont travaillé avec des enfants d'âge scolaire aux prises avec des troubles du langage et des retards dans le développement du langage. En dépit de ces efforts, les enfants n'ont pas réussi à appliquer, d'une manière générale et dans des contextes différents, les stratégies de communication qu'ils avaient apprises. C'est seulement lorsque les praticiens ont reconnu et accepté les signes de communication établis au sein du foyer de l'enfant qu'ils ont pu collaborer avec les mères pour transformer les modes de communication existants et en créer de nouveaux qui puissent répondre aux besoins de l'enfant dans divers contextes.

A semiotic act is any act, linguistic or otherwise, that projects cultural meanings and can be interpreted as the realization of such meanings. (Halliday, 1984, p. 34)

In this article we examine what we came to view as a "necessary" collision between the cultures of communication established in the world of home and the world of school for young children with language delays. The challenge for educators, parents, and therapists is to convert this necessary collision into a new, expanded, healthy, and enriching semiosis rather than to thwart each other and devalue the power each inherently holds. It is a question of who is invited to participate in building the entrance into complex social communication for these particular children, and whether the participants in each world of the child can agree to recognize the other's signs and symbols of progress. Further, we sought to discover what indexical references members of each world not only agree to

understand but deliberately use as further bridges into an ongoing semiosis of communication acts.

In our examination of the semiosis occurring in the two different cultural worlds of family and community, it is important that we begin by defining the condition known as a language delay in both worlds.

THE TWO WORLDS OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR THE CHILD WITH LANGUAGE DELAYS

Within the large public community represented by the institution of school, language delay is viewed as a disabling condition marked by the profound absence of expressive speech—a passive approach to communicate expressively or to initiate discourse with others. The communicative structures these young children possess are seldom formally observed in the school setting. Children with language delays do not come to school with developmentally appropriate or typical verbal speech patterns, that is, with the ability to engage in conversations with their peers or teachers and to answer questions. These common linguistic activities of preschool children are the forms of speech communication teachers expect. Teachers often interpret their absence as evidence that the child has no communication strategies, an assumption which precludes the teacher from recognizing the personalized communication strategies the child has developed and used successfully at home. Further, the assumption that these children lack communication prevents the teacher from acknowledging whatever progress and success the child does demonstrate. The indexical markers of typical school progress, that is, standardized tests, which most schools traditionally use to indicate the child's success to parents and the world at large, are incongruent with the signs of everyday progress understood by the parents of children with language delays.

In our study, these children's parents had their own definition of developmental progress, which functioned satisfactorily in their home environment. The teachers' understanding and language of progress was based on their understanding of the typical idealized child's standardized tests. The teachers were accustomed to using a child's standardized test performance to communicate the progress/success of early intervention programming. The children with language delays, although making discrete improvements in their communication capacities, did not improve on their test scores. Therefore, when a teacher indicated that the child was not making progress, the parent was amazed because she/he had been marking the child's communication advances. These families did not regard an expressive language delay as a communication problem.

The delayed ontogenesis of expressive speech sets up conditions whereby the parent and child must construct meaningful signs and signals that initiate and sustain their social interaction. The resulting context-bound semiotic exchanges

actualized through embedded familial strategies signify a competent and “good parent image.” The culture of the family embodies efficient, effective, and caring codes of behaviour signifying the adult’s role as the primary transmitter of cultural knowledge to the child. This can be clarified by looking at an example in a case study report (Haas, 1993) examining the communicative interaction of three preschoolers with language delays and their mothers across three different settings.

Tim (all names used in this article are pseudonyms), a three-year-old, had been identified by physicians, special educators, and school psychologists as having a “developmental disability.” Extensive multifactorial evaluations found that Tim was significantly delayed in areas of cognition and language when compared to other children this age. In interviews, Tim’s mother, Betty, consistently reported that Tim’s language was “good, very good” and “he talks to us all the time at home.” What salient features in the ongoing social interaction between mother and child resulted in this disparity between the mother’s and the school’s perception of the problem?

Investigating the communicative interaction in the home setting using ethnographic methods, the researcher, Haas, uncovered existing but embedded communication strategies. Time was an important consideration in this study. Haas spent three full years working with different parents, teachers, and other professionals. Trust between the parents and researcher developed over the many weekly hours of informal and formal observations and interviews conducted at the homes, at the school, and during therapy sessions. Each interview served as informed sharing, and provided concrete documentation of each participant’s emerging beliefs and understandings. Through videotaped observations of the children in a shared interactive dialogue, however, the most powerful information was exchanged. Each week the child was videotaped in the classroom with typical children. Later, each mother, viewing her own child, sat with the teacher/researcher and both discussed what they saw. Each mother could identify communication strategies her child used and, at the same time, could see how the idiosyncratic strategies functioned in the classroom as compared to the expressive speech used by typical children. The mother could also appreciate why the therapist wished her to change her home communication strategies. The exchange was exciting and empowering for both parties.

As a participating mother, Betty observed and attributed meaning to many of her son’s motoric movements. She interpreted Tim’s rapid flailing of arms as a request for objects in his visual field and also as an indicator of his affective state. Betty responded to Tim’s non-verbal requests, intuitively reading and interpreting these mutually established signs. In other instances, Tim would initiate “arm flailing” as Betty acted on other objects in the environment, such as rolling a ball toward him. If she terminated the interaction, Tim would reinstate his motoric signs, successfully engaging Betty in social play. Arm

flailing also conveyed Tim's pleasure in the ongoing activity. In this example, "the sign [arm flailing] [was] implicitly regarded as a communicative device taking place between two human beings intentionally aiming to communicate or to express something" (Eco, 1979, p. 15).

In the classroom, however, the teachers searched for linguistic signs of requesting behaviour or the more common and refined pointing gesture. When these did not occur, the professionals regarded it as further evidence of Tim's severe retardation. When Tim demonstrated the idiosyncratic signs from home (arm flailing) in the school classroom, the teacher regarded these movements as self-stimulating behaviours and attempted to extinguish them through planned ignoring. The professionals regarded Tim's personalized idiosyncratic signs as deficiencies and his home strategies for communication not only went unrecognized but were in fact, devalued in school. Only through interactive video watching sessions were the embedded familial strategies explicated to the teacher. The interactive video sessions used in the research study played an essential role in the professionals' understanding how linguistic transference can occur between the worlds of school and home.

To explain the significance of these familial strategies, we must trace their historical development and their relationship to building a stable context of communicative potential for the child. In the case of Betty and Tim, Haas (1993) traced the ontogenesis of the sign "arm flailing." The semiotic process of interpersonal communication was revealed through Betty's narrative reconstructions presented during two years of formal and informal interviews. From Betty's perspective, Tim, born three months premature and weighing only 965 grams, represented a fragile, dependent infant with a precarious existence. Unable to touch and hold Tim in the hospital, Betty established a social connection through verbalized communication: "I'd put my head almost through those holes and talk to him. And I'd talk to him about garbage day, fishing anything I could think of to talk to him about" (Betty, Interview transcript, Haas, 1993).

Searching for a response to her social initiations, Betty observed and gradually attributed meaning to the subtle changes in Tim's motor behaviour. Betty interpreted as a response to a communicative act what initially began as the infant's attempt to maintain an organized and stable response in a stimulating environment (Brazelton, 1982). The belief that Tim was an active participant in the communicative interaction encouraged Betty to continue to establish a context of expectation for motor movement in response to verbal communications. As Tim gradually gained greater control over his motor movements, these communicative strategies became routinized within the family, and allowed the family efficiently and effectively to meet their child's physical and emotional needs. Consequently, the generacy of the sign, as discussed by linguistic anthropologists Merrell and Anderson (1990), was at a level corresponding to what Charles Peirce, forerunner of the American school of semiotics, refers to as "Thirdness." In this sense, each

family participant deduced the meaning of the motoric movements and, as such, each family member intuitively knew that Tim was capable and competent in the use and interpretation of their sign systems. They were unable, however, to articulate that system definitively to people outside the familial communication contexts. Such idiosyncratic communication systems evolve naturally from each family's unique experiences, emerging to meet particular needs and becoming so intricately embedded in the parents' understanding of "family" and "family functions" that the strategies become an inherent and invisible part of everyday life.

The idiosyncratic sign system of the home empowered each family member and enabled Tim to view himself as part of the social family unit and as an independent self. His knowledge and use of the signs allowed him to enter the social world of his significant others, determine the status of others, and participate in the "exchange of goods and services" (Halliday, 1978) in that limited setting. The semiosis occurring in the home was indicative of organized joint actions between participants deployed on the basis of meanings that each actor indicated to himself/herself and others (Blumer, 1986).

The functional and successful communicative interactions in the home signified three important messages: (a) the mother (Betty) was regarded by the family and by herself as a responsive, caring, and protective parent—the "good parent image," (b) the child (Tim) was an active participant in the construction of meaningful communication, and (c) each participant had established a pre-symbolic knowing of complementary and interdependent relationships in the home. What we have described here is a generacy of signs, a development that moves from simple to complex within the home, which functioned efficiently and effectively but only in the closed semiotic sphere of the home.

THE COLLISION OF TWO COMMUNICATION WORLDS: HOME AND SCHOOL

The necessary collision between the home and school worlds of communication occurs when professionals present the parent with information disparate from the intimate cultural knowledge of the family. The school professional informs the child's family that there is a problem, in fact a "disability" in the child. This disability that was not detected by and that remains invisible to the family is conspicuously present to the teacher in the classroom. In the semiosis of the school world, the child cannot gain entry into the social world of his peers and teachers. This dis-abling occurs not because of the child's lack of language but rather because the tools of his sign system have been taken away, disregarded, and devalued. The semiosis of the classroom is structured to build on the expected and already-in-place linguistic skills of verbally expressive children. The indexical markers of the school are primarily highly symbolic dialogical interactions removed from the here and now, such as the discussion of favourite holiday events. It is a process that engages the child in "multidimensional

communication” using speech within its own context. Thus, “being appropriate to the situation is not some optional extra in language; it is an essential element in the ability to mean” (Halliday, 1978, p. 34).

The collision of these two separate worlds of communication acts leads participants to seek interventions to remediate the child’s “disability.” In many instances these interventions entail assistance of specialists such as the speech and language therapist.

The speech and language therapist’s role is often one of regulator instead of mediator between the worlds of school and of home, developing a “new network of choices, in terms of the role relationships set up by the speaker for himself and the hearer and the encoding of these in the semantics of language” (Eco, 1979, p. 6). The therapist in the regulator role suppresses the sign system of the home and seeks to stimulate the growth of conventional linguistic activity, which embodies for the child a new and distinctive culture. The therapist and child begin constructing a new foundation of linguistic signs and symbols. Subsequently, in the structured context of the clinic, the child responds in well-trained and practiced “clinic” speech—constructing a specialized speech for the therapist in the clinic. The techniques and strategies are taught to the parents, and the parents are encouraged to implement these speech forms in the home and community. All participants strive to generalize these learned skills to the home and most importantly to the school context. Time and time again the child demonstrates success—typical speech—in the clinic but because of contextual differences between settings there is little evidence that these learned skills generalize. Why is it that the attempt to construct and create links between the child’s structural knowledge and demonstration of the language in the clinic fails to be transferred in the larger community?

The structural aspects of the school, that is, the exclusive focus on learning and reproducing a particular communication style, forces other aspects of cultural learning to recede into the background and limits the child’s repertoire of useful adaptive strategies. In Tim’s case, the professionals made definite assumptions regarding his ability to use a sign system and neglected the ecological and historical features of the family (Ogbu, 1981).

Teachers and therapists expect parents to embrace enthusiastically new communication strategies critical to the child’s successful entrance into the semiosis of the school world, but they fail to realize that their attempts to extinguish the child’s familial linguistic code represent devaluation of the home’s sign system. The professionals’ rejection of the child’s communicative strategies has a dual significance. First, it indicates the professionals’ lack of acknowledgment of the parents’ idiosyncratic communication strategies. Second, and of equal importance, it is a sign to the professionals that the parents are not skilled in meeting this primary caregiving role. By advising the parents to ignore established, embedded familial strategies and to replace them with the ideational,

interpersonal, and contextual resources, participant and circumstantial roles of the school disrupt the semiosis within the home.

When Betty followed the clinical speech therapist's suggestions to ignore Tim's hand flailing and verbally model the structure "roll ball" in their game of roll and catch, Tim turned his head and disengaged himself from the social interaction taking place. Tim was unable to rely on his previous experiences and was confronted with the absence of a basic level of mutual understanding. This resulted in a breakdown of a previously rich and powerful communicative interaction. Furthermore, the use of delaying techniques in adult responses to Tim's non-verbal signals, intended to encourage verbalizations, interrupted the smooth and efficient flow of interpersonal exchanges at home. In the familial world, the degeneration of semiosis rendered the parents and child powerless. Easy daily routines became complicated and difficult, often interfering with expected outcomes. The parents did not perceive the cost of implementing new strategies as worth the destruction of the systematic functioning of family life.

CREATING A HEALTHY AND ENRICHING SEMIOSIS

Reconciliation between the home and school worlds begins with a paradigmatic shift in the professional's perspective. The teacher takes on the role of enquirer, searching for further embedded strategies unique to the child and family. Using videotapes interactively, the teacher and parent can begin to view the communication of the mother and child in the home, of the child at school, and of the child and therapist in the clinic. Ongoing dialectical analysis of the tapes allows each party to disambiguate familial and conventional strategies within each context. As the parent and teacher engage in a genuine dialectic of meaning, the home culture as expressed in the child's communicative acts is viewed as valuable. The family is credited for their responsive, caring interactions nurturing the child's expression of self and helping to establish "critical socializing contexts" (Bernstein, 1964). Finally, as these embedded familial strategies become fully recognized by the professional as intentional signs of communication, they can be gradually transformed by the incorporation of conventional linguistic codes. The result of these information exchanges is that both the teacher and the mother recognize the importance of the communication strategies of each world. They become partners in creating a network of bridges assisting the child in his entrance to different worlds. Professionals and parents systematically engage in techniques to establish reciprocal transference of communicative strategies rather than generalization across contextual fields.

Once these bridges are constructed and the child moves within and between the two worlds, professionals and parents naturally begin to evaluate the child's communicative competence. How can we invite the participation of, and empower other vital members of the child's world in our construction of these

bridges? Have we truly raised the gates to allow the child to move freely between worlds or is the child given only limited access and for how long?

RECOGNIZING THE SIGNS AND SYMBOLS OF PROGRESS

Haas (1993) found that parents participating in the preschool program she investigated agreed that their children had made substantial gains in the knowledge and use of conventional language during their three years in the program. These preschoolers, who were identified as having “communication deficits and delays,” were able to establish friendships with peers, join in games, sing songs, take on the roles of others, actively explore their environments, and confidently meet the challenge of separation. At the end of their three-year participation in the integrated preschool class, however, the children faced the mandatory evaluation process to determine their future educational placements.

During the preschool program, the school’s markers of success had become more relevant and important to the parents. They believed their child had progressed in significant ways: “I can see that it’s working now . . . by how much he’s changed. He’s a completely different boy, he’s talkin’ more, he’s doing a lot more things” (Interview transcript, Haas, 1993).

The formal indexical markers the school used to measure achievement, however, were those attributed to a “mythical typical child,” whose knowledge about the conventional system of language and its use make up the sum total of “idealized linguistic competence” (Halliday, 1984, p. 5). The families and non-mythical children with language delays who had spent considerable time and effort reconstructing their family culture and ways of interacting found themselves trapped at the bottom of the staircase for school success.

The formal structure operating in school time meant that the children were class-graded at the end of predetermined periods. These fixed schedules were not appropriate to the progress of these children. They had indeed moved considerably forward, but others, their same-age peers, had moved far beyond.

Standardized assessments instituted by the school functioned as indisputable signs of failure despite obvious changes in the child’s communication strategies and parents’ new understanding. The family’s labour-intensive achievements were again devalued by the institutional system. Yes, these children had learned to dress themselves independently, to take turns, to gain others’ attention appropriately, and to enter the ongoing play of others by requesting permission or by extending an offer of assistance—but their learning went unrecognized in the school world. These mothers and fathers were confronted with the realization that no intervention would or could “catch him up” to the idealized mythical and successful student.

This project demonstrates, through the case study of Tim, how and why language interventions often fail to generalize to other settings even when

professionals are careful to include the family. In addition, we have suggested an alternative to the notion of generalization—the transference of newly developing sign systems to form networks bridging the world of home to the world of school. Our research has also helped us to explicate the difficulties arising when two separate worlds fail to agree on common markers of success. In answering our initial questions, however, we are faced with even greater concerns: (a) What does it mean when the school fails to recognize intra-individual progress and values only an idealized level of performance? (b) Why, in our society, is it all right to take 10 or 20 years to attain a Ph.D. but not all right to study for 10 years to attain a high school diploma? We are faced with a challenge to redefine our communication strategies, our school symbol systems, and our markers of success in learning. Otherwise, those students labelled as delayed will continue to find that time has run out—in the artifact of the race for grades in a time-dependent graded system, the sprinters will claim the prizes and the long-distance runners will never appear to be part of the ongoing system.

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