TRAINING FUNCTIONAL EXPRESSIVE LANGUAGE:
THE ACQUISITION AND GENERALIZATION OF
FIVE-ELEMENT SYNTACTIC RESPONSES¹

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A single-subject multiple-baseline design using within- and across-subject replication was employed to study the acquisition of expanded "agent-action-object" sentences and the spontaneous generation of this form in the natural environment. Three young language-delayed subjects were trained to describe various agent-action-object relationships with a five-element syntactical form. The language training strategy was a synthesis of the developmental-psycholinguistic and behavioral models. Dynamic interactions between familiar persons and objects were the stimulus events that the children mapped. A five-element syntactical form, previously absent from the children's language repertoires, was trained during individual sessions. Concurrent with baseline, training, and followup, each subject's language was monitored in another setting, the classroom during free play. After onset of training, the core elements of the complex syntactic form were spontaneously emitted by the child in its natural environment. The free-play data reflect individual differences in the emergence and frequency of each child's spontaneous use of the agent-action-object form. The acquisition and maintenance of the specific lexicon and syntax trained were tested by posttraining probes and responses to videotape presentations. These probes revealed generalization and maintenance of both the lexical and syntactical forms acquired in treatment. The main purpose of any language-training procedure should be to provide language that is functional for the child in the natural environment. This study, which documented the spontaneous usage of the core agent-action-object syntactical form in the natural environment, effectively trained a functional syntactical rule.

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