When he was young, my son used to love playing cops and robbers. One day, we ran out of the house, leapt into the car like Starsky and Hutch, and as we wheel-span out of the drive, he came out with the immortal words: ‘Stay your eyes on that car in front’. The episode has entered into family folklore; he has never lived it down.

‘Stay your eyes on that car in front’ is an example of a clever mistake. It is quite a creative thing to say – certainly not something that a seven-year-old is ever likely to have heard – but it is also not quite right. So why did he say it? What does it tell us about his knowledge of language at the time? And why does he not say things like this now that he is an adult?

The answers to these questions can tell us a lot about what children know about language at different points in development, and about how best to respond to them when they say things that sound a bit odd.

**WHY DO CHILDREN MAKE CLEVER MISTAKES?**

‘Stay your eyes on that car in front’ is not the kind of thing that a very young child would say. But clever mistakes have many forms. Some involve putting a word like ‘stay’ in a sentence in which it does not belong. These mistakes can often look quite complicated, and it is not always easy to understand what is causing them. Others, like ‘sheeps’, and ‘eated’, involve using a word with the wrong ending, and it is much easier to see where the child is going wrong. For example, a child who is saying ‘eated’ instead of ‘ate’ has added ‘-ed’ to ‘eat’ because they heard it used this way in words like ‘kicked’ and ‘jumped’.

These simpler kinds of mistakes can appear very early in children’s speech. For example, when parents are asked about the kind of mistakes their children make, some of them report mistakes like ‘eated’ and ‘drinked’ when their children are as young as two years old.

Mistakes like ‘foots’ and ‘sheeps’ can appear even earlier than this. For example, in one study, a child called Ari was found to use the words ‘sheeps’ and ‘deers’ to describe collections of sheep and deer when he was only 20 months old. This was before he was even putting two words together to make simple sentences.

Mistakes like ‘Stay your eyes on that car in front’ do not start appearing until children’s speech becomes a little more complicated, and persist well into the primary school years. We owe a lot of our knowledge about these mistakes to Melissa Bowerman, a linguist who kept detailed records of all the unusual things that her daughters Eva and Christy said between the ages of two and 11. She noted down these examples on bits of paper, together with the age at which the child made them, and filed them away so that she could come back to them later to work out where they were coming from.

Although Eva and Christy made different mistakes in response to the different situations they found themselves, the kinds of mistake they made were remarkably similar. For example, both children made mistakes in which they attached ‘un-’ to the beginning of words to reverse their meaning.

So, on one occasion, Eva’s response to being caught in a chasing game was to shout: ‘Uncapture me!’ On another, while telling a ghost
clever mistakes

Here are some clever mistakes that children make when learning English:

Clever mistakes

Two sheep
He goed to the park yesterday
I hate you and I’m never going to unhaite you
The magician disappeared the necklace
Don’t say me that or you’ll make me cry
I poured the cup with juice
Maggie covered paint onto the wall
He pulled it unstapled

Correct examples of pattern

Two dogs
He played football yesterday
I’ve locked it and I’m never going to unlock it
The magician broke the necklace
Don’t tell me that or you’ll make me cry
I filled the cup with juice
Maggie sprayed paint onto the wall
He pulled it apart

A child who is producing mistakes like ‘We goed to the park’ is learning how to talk about past events

Adulat's should repeat the child's clever mistake with the correct words and continue the conversation

For example, a child producing mistakes like ‘sheeps’ is building knowledge about how to talk about more than one thing. So, they might benefit from lots of talk about the difference between one dog and two dogs, or one sheep and lots of sheep.

Or a child who is producing mistakes like ‘We goed to the park’ is learning how to talk about past events. So, they might benefit from lots of talk about what they are going to do at nursery today and what they did at nursery yesterday.

IN RESPONSE

It is tempting to think that the best way to respond to clever mistakes is to point them out and correct them. But, over the years, psychologists have found that this strategy doesn’t really work. Martin Braine describes two attempts to correct children when they made clever mistakes – and you can see (box, immediately right) how unsuccessful his efforts were!

In the first case, although the child is happy to humour her father and repeat his correction (‘Other... spoon’), she doesn’t seem to have any intention of using this combination in her own speech, and follows it up immediately with the request: ‘Now give me other one spoon’. In the second case, although ten repetitions of ‘Nobody likes me’ do eventually have some effect on the child, they don’t seem to have the desired effect, and simply result in a different kind of mistake: ‘Nobody don’t likes me’.

These examples suggest that young children can’t really make use
of this kind of adult correction. One reason for this may be that children are not learning language by thinking about what is and is not allowed; they are learning it by picking up the patterns that their parents use and making them their own. If you think about it, this is not very surprising. After all, how else could a child learn something as complicated as language at an age when they are still unable to tie their own shoelaces?

In view of this fact, a better way of responding to children’s clever mistakes is to repeat what the child said, using the correct words (for example, ‘Keep my eyes on that car in front?’ ‘Okay, I won’t make you giggle’), and then to carry on with the conversation. This strategy is similar to the strategy described in our earlier article on word learning (‘Word for Word’) and it has two advantages over a correction strategy.

First, it encourages the child to keep talking and listening to what the adult says in response. Second, it often results in the adult providing lots of different examples of how to say the things that the child is interested in saying. For example, an adult who responds to ‘Stay your eyes on that car in front?’ by continuing with the game is likely to provide lots of different examples of how to express the child’s meaning correctly (for example, ‘Keep my eyes on that car in front? Okay, I’ll keep my eyes on the car in front. You keep your eyes open for any other bad guys’). This will probably be more useful to the child than repeated corrections from an adult.

Fortunately, carrying on with the conversation is exactly how most parents do respond to their children’s clever mistakes. There are two reasons why parents tend to respond in this way. The first is that they are usually more interested in what their child is trying to say than they are in how she is saying it. For example, only an unusual parent (or a psychologist) would respond to a clever mistake like ‘Nobody don’t like me’ with the words ‘No. Say nobody likes me’. A much more natural response would be to say something like: ‘That’s not true, sweetheart. Everybody likes you.’ The other is that parents are often delighted with their children’s clever

Here are two examples of parents’ attempts to correct their children’s language:

**Example 1**
Child: Want other one spoon, Daddy.
Father: You mean you want the other spoon.
Child: Yes. I want other one spoon, please, Daddy.
Father: Can you say ‘the other spoon’?
Child: Other … one … spoon. Father: Say other.
Child: Other.
Father: Spoon.
Child: Spoon.

**Example 2**
Father: Other … spoon.
Child: Other … spoon. Now give me other one spoon.
Father: Okay. I won’t make you giggle.

**Language Impairment**

Here are examples of the speech of a four-and-a-half-year-old child and a teenager with language impairments:

**Story told by the four-and-a-half-year-old**
The man got on the boat. He jump out the boat. He rocking the boat. He drop his thing. He drop his other thing. He tipping over. He fell off the boat.

**Sentences produced by the teenager**
Then he went home and tell mother — tell what he doing that day. Then about noontime those guy went in and eat and warm up. That boy climbing a rope to get to the top the rope.

Adapted from Language Development. E Hoff (2008), Wadsworth
NOT SO CLEVER MISTAKES
Of course, not all of the mistakes that children make are as clever as those described above. A different but very common kind of mistake occurs when the child leaves out something that an adult would put in. Two- and three-year-old children make many errors of this kind, leaving lots of different things out of their early sentences. For example, they often produce sentences like ‘Kick ball’ instead of ‘Kick the ball’; ‘Want a biscuit’ instead of ‘I want a biscuit’; ‘Daddy singing’ instead of ‘Daddy is singing’ and ‘Dolly need a drink’ instead of ‘Dolly needs a drink’.

These mistakes are different from the kind of we have discussed so far because they reflect the fact that the child is still in the process of learning a pattern — as opposed to using a pattern that they have already learned in a way that isn’t quite right. While very common in the speech of two- and three-year-olds, this type of mistake disappears gradually as the child learns to fill in the gaps. But, interestingly, they are also common in the speech of older children with language problems.

The ‘Language impairment’ box on the previous page provides some examples of the speech of children with language impairment. First, a four-and-a-half-year-old child is telling a story; and following that, there are several examples given of sentences that are produced by an older teenager.

In both cases, the key thing to notice is that although the children’s speech is quite complicated, there are lots of things missing from their sentences — the same kind of things that tend to be missing from the speech of typically developing two- and three-year-olds. This is important because it means that a child who is still leaving these things out of his sentences after the age of four may well have a particular problem with language learning, especially if they are doing this despite producing quite long sentences.

AN END TO MISTAKES
All the mistakes described here are obviously things that we, as adults, know you cannot say in English. Eventually the children who are making them will come to know this too. But how does this happen?

To stop making mistakes, children have to do two things. First, they have to learn the patterns that will allow them to say what they want to say. Second, they have to learn which words they can use with certain language patterns.