

Now it's getting complicated: The language that children need for school



Dr. Anna Theakston

Co-Director LuCiD Centre

University of Manchester

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Formal language

- To succeed at school, children need to be confident in understanding and producing *formal language*
- What is formal language??
 - Varied vocabulary
 - **Complex sentences**



[LuCiD's *Communication* research theme focuses on how children learn **complex sentences**]

Complex sentences...



- Link ideas together:

- Adding information: *The flowers with stripes are unusual*
- Clarification: *You must eat the orange that I put in your bag*
- Time: *After dinner, you can have some cake*
- Cause: *We need our coats because it's cold*
- Consequence: *You can join in again if you apologise,*

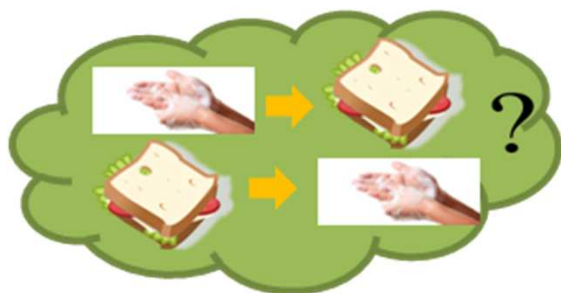
- Take different perspectives:

- *I think it's raining*
- *He thinks it's raining*



Why are complex sentences difficult?

- Order of information in the sentence & the real world (French & Brown, 1977)
- Before you eat your food, **wash your hands**

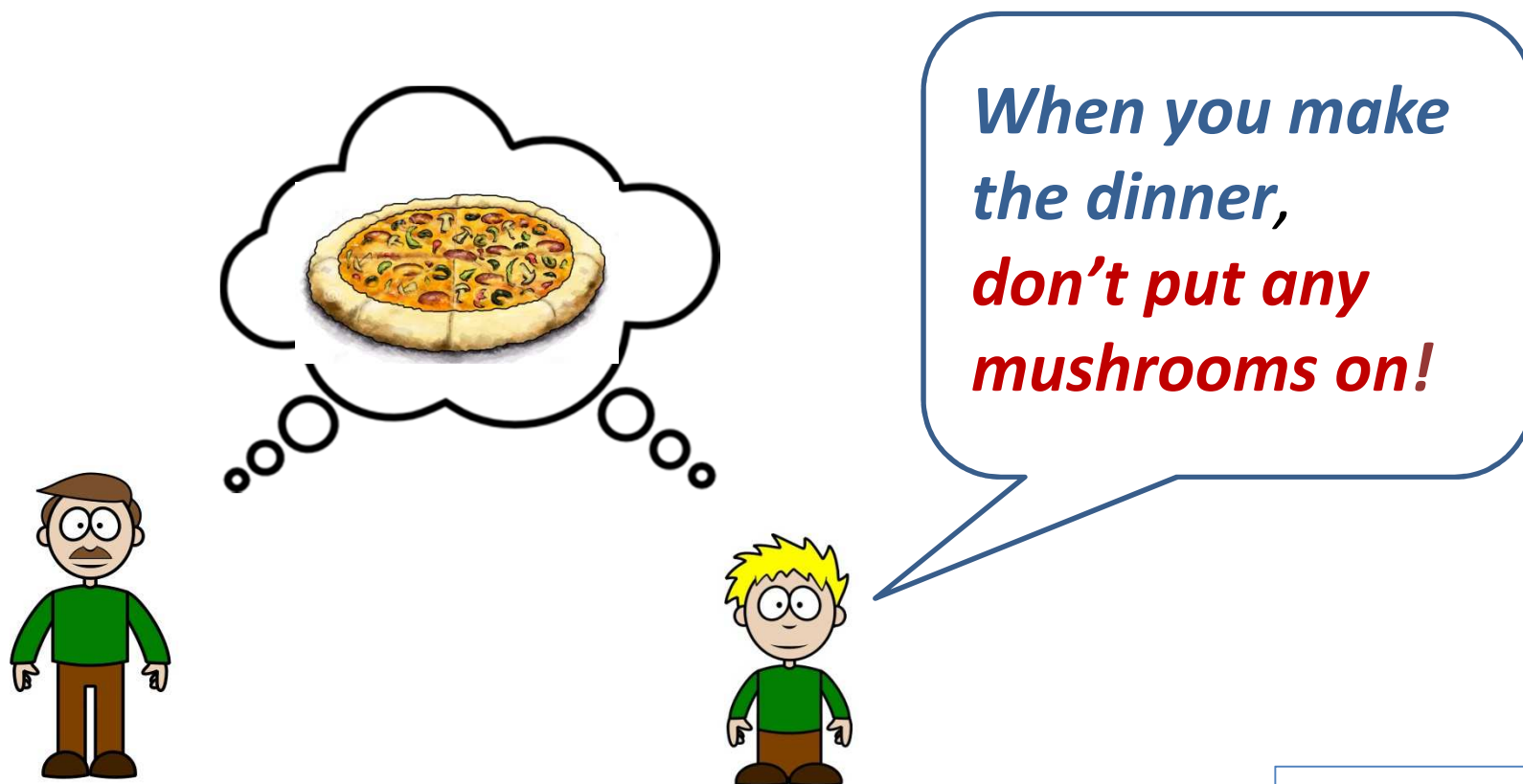


- Sit on the carpet after you've finished your pictures



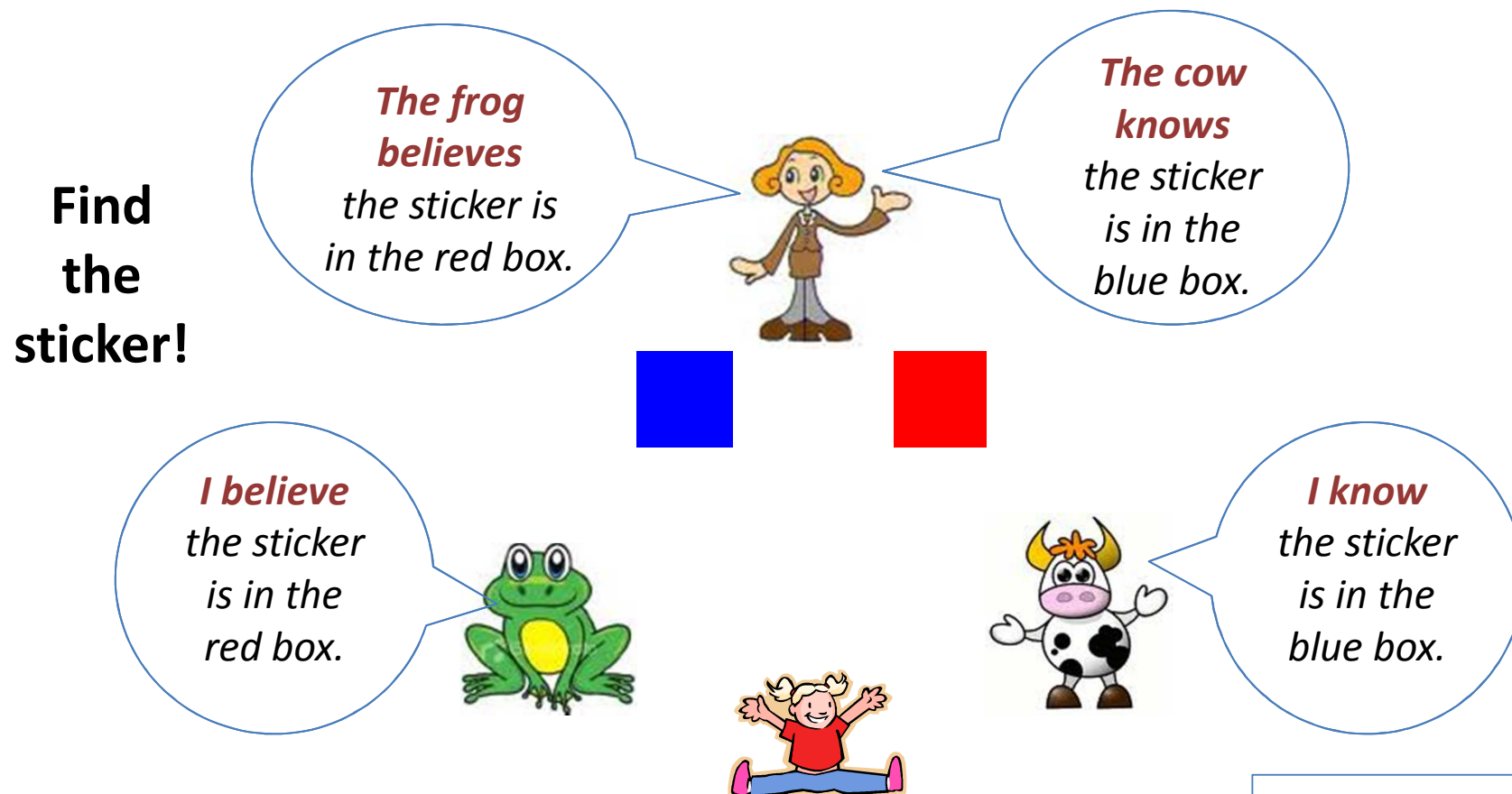
Why are complex sentences difficult?

- Depend on assessing what is **shared knowledge**
 - **Old** before **New**



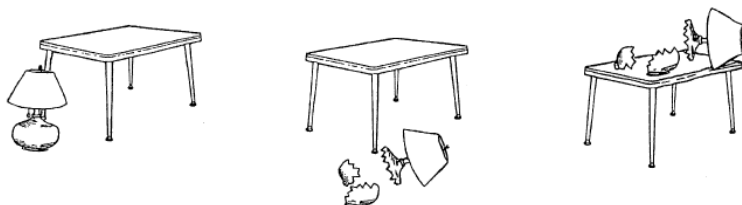
Why are complex sentences difficult?

- Depend on adopting other people's perspectives



The Research

- Greater exposure to complex (multiclausal) sentences at **3yrs** of age leads to better understanding and greater use at **4yrs** of age
- Measured for both parental input, and input in preschool context (in USA)
 - e.g. He went to the shops and bought some milk



The lamp broke because it
fell off the table

What do Caregivers say to their 3-4 year olds??

Well when we got back to the car after our walk, your shoes were so dirty that we took them off before you go in the car

Well when we've put hot water in there to make hot tea we must keep it in the middle of the table, because if it falls on the floor I'll be very very upset

Because if it was going past Mummy's house before Mummy had left her house to go to the platform, then either Mummy's running very very late and she would've missed the train anyway, or the train's going past too early



Daddy went to work just before... just after you got out of bed

The Reality: catering for children from highly verbal to language-impaired ???

- *“Children with Specific Language Impairment can be helped by speaking in very short sentences”*



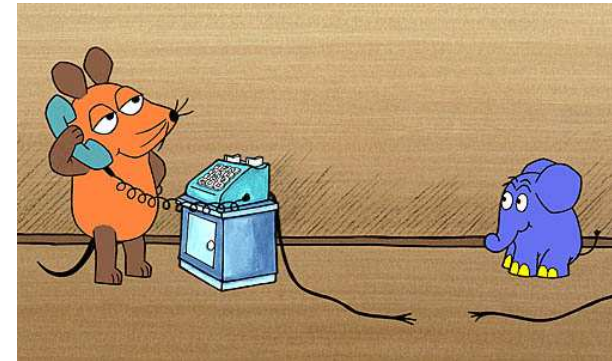
- *“It’s really important to keep what you say to a minimum and make sure you’re only saying the things that are really important for the child... Sometimes we tend to use a lot of unnecessary language which can then be very confusing for the child”*
- *“Give them one instruction, get them to complete that, then give a second instruction...don’t put all the instructions together”*

How you can help typically developing children

- **Use complex sentences** – the more children hear, the more they understand (book reading is great!)
- **Check children's understanding** - if necessary try reordering the sentence to match the order of events
- **Talk about how you and others feel and think** – children who hear lots of 'mental state' talk seem to be better at using and understanding mental state terms

How you can help

- **Gesture** supports understanding, so if you tend to gesture, carry on! (McNeil et al., 2000; Theakston et al., 2014)



- Some suggestive evidence that for 2-3yr olds, **role play** contexts promote complex language, by 4yrs **re-telling stories** works well (Klein et al., 2010).

Thank you for listening.

Any questions?

Find out more via our series of articles in **Nursery World** magazine, available at:

<http://www.lucid.ac.uk/resources/for-practitioners/>

LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION & LANGUAGE

A formal occasion

On entering Reception, children are exposed to the world of 'formal' language. In the third part of our series on communication, *Dr Anna Theobald* explains what it is and how to support it.

So much changes for children when they take their first step through the door of Reception in four years of age – their routine, their learning environment, even their clothes... and the style of language that they are exposed to.

While home and play nursery take mainly informal or 'conversational' language, in Reception children will hear much more formal speech – the kind of language that they will need for academic success. Reception class teachers need to be aware of the difference between these two styles, and the extent to which formal speech is used, and what may struggle with the shift in language.

Nurses and playworkers also need to recognise their key role in easing the transition by providing children with opportunities to experience and develop their language skills, in particular the formal, or 'academic', style of speaking.

The three main characteristics that distinguish these two styles of language are their vocabulary, sentence structure and wider discourse (that is, how sentences are linked), and how we look at each.

DIFFERENT KINDS OF WORDS

Compared to conversational language, the vocabulary of formal language is more detailed and specific. To succeed, children need to know lots of different words and the semantic subtle differences in meaning between them. For example, in conversation, we might say 'Let's go to the shop', but this leaves many options open – will we walk, scroll, drive, or cycle to go there? Being precise about meaning can help children to convey their messages more effectively.

Similarly, compare 'Did you win that?' (as Dad asks his child from nursery) or 'Did you pass out?' (when speaking).

Reception children as you talk to them and allow them to see your hand gestures can help them to understand complex sentences.



Reception children as you talk to them and allow them to see your hand gestures can help them to understand complex sentences.

the child is picking up some crayons from the box. Here, the word 'that' means different things according to where and how it is used. Children need to learn when words mean in enough detail so they can get the right meaning in the right context.

Formal language can also contain expressions that don't mean quite what they say. Five-year-olds might say 'I'm up!' or 'I've got my legs and hold your arms!' if the meaning has had to do with their experience of drawing lines or crossing the road. As children get older, knowing how to use words and their messages can help them to understand more complex, non-literal language such as metaphors (for example, 'Our cat is a tiger').

Evidence shows that children begin to learn a more formal vocabulary when they hear lots of different

Nurses need to recognise their key role in easing the transition



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