

Semantic-Pragmatic Impairments

The Psychology of Language Disorders in Children: 6PS032

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Semantic-pragmatic impairments

Learning Objectives:

1. Understand definitions of pragmatics
2. Be familiar with main features of normal development
3. Be able to analyse examples of semantic-pragmatic deficits
4. Evaluate problems of studying semantic-pragmatic impairments

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■ Recommended Readings:

Bishop, D.V.M. (1997). *Uncommon understanding: Development and disorders of language comprehension in children*. Hove: Psychology Press. Chapters 7 & 8.

Bishop, D.V.M. (2000). Pragmatic language impairment: A correlate of SLI, a distinct subgroup, or part of the autistic continuum? In D.V.M. Bishop & L. Leonard (Eds.) *Speech and language impairments in children: Causes, characteristics, intervention and outcome*. Hove: Psychology Press, pp. 99-113.

Leonard, L. (2000). *Children with specific language impairments*. Cambridge: MIT Press. Chapter 3.

Bishop, D.V.M., & Adams, C. (1989). Conversational characteristics of children with semantic-pragmatic disorder. II: What features lead to a judgement of inappropriacy? *British Journal of Disorders of Communication*, 24, 241-263

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■ Pragmatics = the appropriate use of language in different contexts (Bishop & Mogford, 1993)

Examples:

- speech acts (is an utterance a threat, a joke, a promise?)
- register / code switching
- initiating and terminating communication
- turn-taking
- providing sufficient information to make one's communication intelligible
- appropriate prosody to clarify communicative intent
- local & global coherence
- topic maintenance and shift

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■ Definitions

- “**Semantic-pragmatic deficit syndrome**” coined by Rapin & Allen (1983, 1987, as quoted in Rapin & Allen, 1998) as one of six subtypes of **language disorder** in preschool children
- Similar to “**semantic-pragmatic disorder**” (SPD) by Bishop & Rosenblum (1987): (see my classification lecture)
 - Sub-group of children with SLI who have particular difficulties with the pragmatic use of language
 - Produce fluent, complex speech with clear articulation (Bishop, 1989)

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■ Core deficits of SPD (Rapin & Allen)

- Deficits in comprehension
- Deficits in formulation of discourse
- Atypical choices of words
- Inordinate use of scripts
- “seeming lack of need for a conversational partner in their often verbose output”

(Rapin & Allen, 1998, p. 82)

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■ Status of semantic-pragmatic disorder (SPD)

- NOT mentioned in DSM-IV and ICD10
- SPD = sub-category of developmental **language disorders** (Bishop & Rosenblum, 1987; Bishop, 1989, 2000; Rapin & Allen, 1998)
- SPD = subtype of **autism** (e.g., Boucher, 1998)
- “theoretically significant **overlap**” between autism and SLI? (Kjelgaard & Tager-Flusberg, 2001)
- SPD as a **separate** clinical category (Botting, 1998)
- **NO clear boundaries** between SPD and autistic disorder, and SPD & SLI (Bishop, 2000, p. 111)
- Also see: pragmatic deficits as secondary **consequences** of SLI (see Leonard, 2000, pp. 77)

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■ Normal development

- nonverbal “speech acts” produced from 10 months of age
- production of simple indirect commands: from 3 - 4 years
- clear sensitivity to correlation between speech style and power/prestige by age 4:
 - >> Example: simplify output when speaking to younger children
- play verbal games with peers, e.g, 3 yr.-olds deliberately say something ‘silly’ or inappropriate for fun

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■ Normal development – *cont’d* -

- use of cohesive devices when telling (or writing) a story is mastered fairly late:
 - 8-yr-olds tend to use “the” and pronouns in situations where it is not clear to listener what is being referred to
- (Mogford & Bishop, 1993)

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■ Examples I:

Semantic-pragmatic deficits in children with SLI

Leonard (2002):

- Mixed evidence re. how often they **initiate a conversation** with an adult
- More likely to initiate conversation with a younger child, or with a child that also has SLI
- Difficulty when trying to enter a conversation among a group of children: might just wait, or use nonverbal means
- In classroom setting, SLI child is more likely to initiate conversation with teacher than with peers (unlike normally developing children)

Also see **Bishop, 2000**, pp. 101

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■ Examples II: Study by Adams & Bishop (1989)

- Semi-structured situation using photographs to generate conversations of 5 -10 minutes between child and researcher
- Conversation analysed regarding:
 - exchange structure
 - turn-taking
 - repairs
 - cohesion
- **Groups:**
 - 14 children with SPD and 52 other SLI children: 8 - 12 yrs
 - 67 normally developing children: aged 4 - 6, and 8 -12 yrs.

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■ Examples II: Adams & Bishop (1989): Results

- Exchange structure:
 - **SPD** children were *not* more verbose (in contrast to Rapin, 1987)
 - **SPD** children produced more initiations than age-matched controls; no such difference for SLI children
- Turn-taking problems such as gaps, overlaps, interruptions:
 - Very infrequent, no group differences
- Repairs:
 - Infrequent
 - Adult requests for clarification made most frequently to **SPD** children than to other groups

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■ Examples II: Adams & Bishop (1989): More Results

- Use of cohesive devices:
 - **SDP** children n.d. compared to age-matched controls
 - Less frequently used by SLI children than age-matched controls

Further analysis: Bishop & Adams (1989):

SPD children (8-12 yrs.) produced **more inappropriate utterances** compared to younger language-matched children (4-5 yrs.), and other SLI children:

→ see examples on next slide

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■ Examples II: Bishop & Adams (1989)

- Several sources of **inappropriateness**:
 - Semantic or syntactic errors, e.g., *meaning of 'because' / 'and' confused*: "we went on a bus because Lee was sick out of the window"
 - Providing too much or too little information, e.g.:
 - A: when do you have parties at school?
 - C: we still have a one in the infant and junior
 - A: mm
 - C: do my own cake
 - A: is that for your birthday?
 - Unusual content/style, e.g., *topic shift, socially inappropriate remarks*: A: where might he go? [talking about picture of sick boy]; C: down to the ___ / you know I told them about Blue Peter

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■ Examples III

- Recent study by Bishop found NO positive correlations between semantic and pragmatic difficulties:
 - semantic deficits common in all language-impaired children, not just children with SLI
 - Children with poor grammar/phonology may also have a genuine (not secondary) pragmatic problem
- >> notion of "semantic-pragmatic disorder" is questionable!
>> new term of "pragmatic language impairment" preferable

(Bishop, 2000)

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■ Problems

- Criteria for defining "semantic-pragmatic disorder" are not clear
- Pragmatic problems are difficult to measure as they are rare and/or hard to elicit
- Unresolved debate about co-occurrence of autistic features and pragmatic impairments
- Need to be aware that behavioural symptoms may arise for different reasons, e.g.,
 - pragmatic deficits: caused by morpho-syntactic deficits or autistic disorder?
 - social impairment, restricted interests: caused by autistic disorder, or consequence of SLI/SPD?

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■ Test Questions

- Give a summary of the milestones of normal pragmatic development.
- Is 'semantic-pragmatic disorder' a milder form of autism?
- Describe the core deficits of semantic-pragmatic disorder and give examples.
- Develop a list of criteria to measure inappropriate utterances.

■ Further References

- Adams, C., & Bishop, D.V.M. (1989). Conversational characteristics of children with semantic-pragmatic disorder. I: Exchange structure, turntaking, repairs and cohesion. *British Journal of Disorders of Communication*, 24, 211-239.

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Further References – cont'd

- Bishop, D.V.M. (1989). Autism, Asperger's Syndrome and semantic-pragmatic disorder: where are the boundaries? *British Journal of Disorders of Communication*, 24, 107-121.
- Bishop, D.V.M., & Rosenblum, L. (1987). Classification of childhood language disorders. In W. Yule & M. Rutter (Eds.) *Language development and disorders. Clinics in Developmental Medicine*, No. 101/102. London: Mac Keith Press.
- Botting, N. (1998). Semantic-pragmatic disorder (SPD) as a distinct diagnostic entity: making sense of the boundaries. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 33 (1), 87-90.

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■ Further References - cont'd

- Boucher, J. (1998). SPD as a distinct diagnostic entity: logical considerations and directions for future research. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 33 (1), 71-108.
- Kjelgaard, M.M., & Tager-Flusberg, H. (2001). An investigation of language impairment in autism: Implications for genetic subgroups. *Language and Cognitive Processes*, 16(2/3), 287-308.
- Rapin, I. (Ed.) (1996). *Preschool children with inadequate communication*. London: Mac Keith.
- Rapin, I., & Allen, D. (1998). The semantic-pragmatic deficit disorder: classification issues. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 33 (1), 82-90.