



## The complex art of learning to hold a conversation in English



**Janet Holmes**

**WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE**

**O**UR two-year-old grandson, Finn, is growing up bilingual. To the astonishment of those in his childcare centre, he reliably goes to find his shoes when his German-speaking mother says: "Wo sind deine schuhe?"

He knows how to conduct a conversation, even if what he says is not always totally comprehensible to adults. He takes his turn, and the intonation and phrasing are perfect – the precise words will follow eventually.

He can jump, skip and dance, and even negotiate a children's mountain bike track, but with bilingual input he is behind his monolingual age-mate Amy in terms of linguistic output.

She is producing complex utterances such as "Anke tell Finn nein", asking Finn's mother to proscribe his behaviour. Watching children learning how to mean is constantly fascinating.

I wrote in a previous column about the ups and downs of mastering the grammar of a language, and many readers responded with comments indicating interest.

One feature which is evident in the behaviour of all children, no matter what their social, ethnic or linguistic background, is the acquisition of powerful grammatical rules that enable them to form plurals for new nouns, and past tenses for verbs they have never met before.

So, for example, the researcher shows the child a soft toy and says "here is a wug". Then she adds another identical toy and says "what I have I got now?" "Two wugs" is the usual response. If children are told that "Jo pons every day", they can dependably tell us that "Jo poned every day last week".

They have learned the system. One correspondent reported that his daughter said they should go to the beach soonly. This indicates that she has identified a slightly less reliable rule for adverb formation.

Adding -ly to adjectives to make an adverb is a useful, but unfortunately not

totally consistent, rule of thumb.

Sad-sadly, calm-calmly, fortunate-fortunately all work well. But not all adjectives cope with the -ly suffix: eg fast, soon, big. And not all adverbs have a useful -ly suffix to indicate their grammatical status.

So "thus" is already an adverb and doesn't need an extra -ly, though several respectable writers have used the term.

Our correspondent's daughter is thusly in good company with her use of "soonly".

Finn can hold a conversation even though his utterances are not always comprehensible to mere adults. He can tell a story with the help of gestures, and repeat it if his dim grandparents don't seem to follow the first time.

**T**HIS learning starts at an early age when parents talk to their infants and assign a turn to them. Any smile or frown is interpreted as a contribution to the "conversation". Children quickly learn how to keep adults engaged in such interactions. Another complex feature of conversation is backchannelling. This is the audible feedback we give to indicate we are still listening to what people are saying – noises such as "mm, mmhmm, yes, yeah, right, OK".

In English, we typically position these backchannels precisely at clause boundaries. In other languages and cultures, the positioning and frequency are different.

There are far fewer such audible backchannels in the conversations we recorded between older Maori conversationalists for our Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English, for example.

A recent analysis of workplace talk revealed that the precise positioning of backchannels differs between Maori and Pakeha interactions.

In a recent research paper on this topic, it was claimed that backchannel responses may be among the last conversational skills



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acquired by children. I found this surprising since the research on adult-child interaction had led me to believe that children learn how to backchannel early.

It seems counter-intuitive since we have all experienced or observed the nodding and smiling exchanges between parents and infants when it appears the infant is responding appropriately to the parent's utterances.

But in fact it seems that back-channelling is a very precise skill. And using backchannels appropriately for your

particular socio-cultural group is evidently a skill acquired relatively late.

Learning a language clearly involves a lot more than just acquiring sounds, grammar and vocabulary if you want to talk to people without raising eyebrows.

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## GOT A QUESTION?

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