

A Session Abstract

Conference Welcome:

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Plenary Session: The transformation of children's knowledge of language units during beginning and initial literacy

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During literacy development, children acquire new knowledge about language (usually called “metalinguistic awareness”). In particular, they learn to transform oral language, which they usually master as a tool of social communication, into an object of inspection and inquiry (in epistemological terms).

A literate adult speaker can segment the flow of speech into units at various levels. Some of these units are of linguistic interest. Which units are available before and during beginning literacy (ages three to five)? Which units are acquired during initial literacy, when formal instruction usually begins (ages six to seven)? Do these units evolve?

Children’s written productions will be used to focus on three main units:

a) The word as a conceptual unit and the word as a graphic unit. The theoretical status of this unit is controversial but its psychological status is very strong. In AWS (alphabetical writing systems), the “word” unit has peculiar relevance. (A string of letters separated from other strings by empty spaces is considered to be a single word.)

b) The syllable is a strong psycholinguistic unit (“The shortest bits of speech that people recognize ‘automatically’ are syllables” – P.Daniels, 2006). However, the syllable is not marked as such in AWS. Linguistic interest in this unit is growing.

c) The phoneme is without doubt the most important of the theoretical units. AWS are often regarded as a mapping of phonemes into letters. However, many inconsistencies are evident in the so-called “deep orthographies” (English, for instance) as well as in “shallow orthographies” (Spanish, for instance). Spontaneous awareness of phonemes seems out of reach (or at least very problematic) before literacy in an alphabetical writing system is acquired.

These three units will be inspected through the interpretation of data. The dominant view in English-speaking countries is a unidirectional path depicted as: oral --> written path (i.e., the units must be recognized orally in order to be applied to the written material). The current presentation will emphasize the need to consider an interactive oral <---> written path, while also taking into account a possible written --> oral path. In doing so, a

sharp dichotomy between reading and writing will be considered as an obstacle to our understanding of literacy development as conceptual development.