

and increasingly capable of producing all the sounds of their language (Goad, 2017; Kelly & others, 2018). By their third birthday they can produce all the vowel sounds and most of the consonant sounds (Menn & Stoel-Gammon, 2009). They recognize the sounds before they can produce them, as in the noun “Merry-go-round.”

By the time children move beyond two-word utterances, they demonstrate a knowledge of morphology rules (Snyder, 2017). **Morphology** refers to the units of meaning involved in word formation. Children begin using the plural and possessive forms of nouns (such as *dogs* and *dog's*). They put appropriate endings on verbs (such as *-s* when the subject is third-person singular and *-ed* for the past tense). They use prepositions (such as *in* and *on*), articles (such as *a* and *the*), and various forms of the verb *to be* (such as “*I was going to the store*”). Some of the best evidence for changes in children’s use of morphological rules occurs in their overgeneralization of the rules, as when a preschool child says “*foots*” instead of “*feet*,” or “*goed*” instead of “*went*.”

In a classic experiment that was designed to study children’s knowledge of morphological rules, such as how to make a plural, Jean Berko (1958) presented preschool and first-grade children with cards such as the one shown in Figure 10. The children were asked to look at the card while the experimenter read aloud the words on the card. Then the children were asked to supply the missing word. This might sound easy, but Berko was interested in the children’s ability to apply the appropriate morphological rule—in this case, to say “*wugs*” with the *z* sound that indicates the plural.

Although the children’s answers were not perfect, they were much better than chance. What makes Berko’s study impressive is that most of the words were made up for the experiment. Thus, the children could not base their responses on remembering past instances of hearing the words. That they could make the plurals or past tenses of words they had never heard before was proof that they knew the morphological rules.

Changes in Syntax and Semantics

Preschool children also learn and apply rules of **syntax**, which involves the way words are combined to form acceptable phrases and sentences (Clark, 2017; Tieu & others, 2018). They show a growing mastery of complex rules for how words should be ordered. Consider *wh*-questions, such as “Where is Daddy going?” or “What is that boy doing?” To ask these questions properly, the child must know two important differences between *wh*-questions and affirmative statements (for instance, “Daddy is going to work” and “That boy is waiting for the school bus”). First, a *wh*-word must be added at the beginning of the sentence. Second, the auxiliary verb must be inverted—that is, exchanged with the subject of the sentence. Young children learn quite early where to put the *wh*-word, but they take much longer to learn the auxiliary-inversion rule. Thus, preschool children might ask, “Where Daddy is going?” and “What that boy is doing?”

Gains in **semantics**, the aspect of language that refers to the meaning of words and sentences, also characterize early childhood. Vocabulary development is dramatic (Thornton, 2017). Some experts have concluded that between 18 months and 6 years, young children learn an average of about one new word every waking hour (Gelman & Kalish, 2006)! By the time they enter first grade, it is estimated that children know about 14,000 words (Clark, 1993).

morphology Units of meaning involved in word formation.

syntax The ways words are combined to form acceptable phrases and sentences.

semantics The meaning of words and sentences.

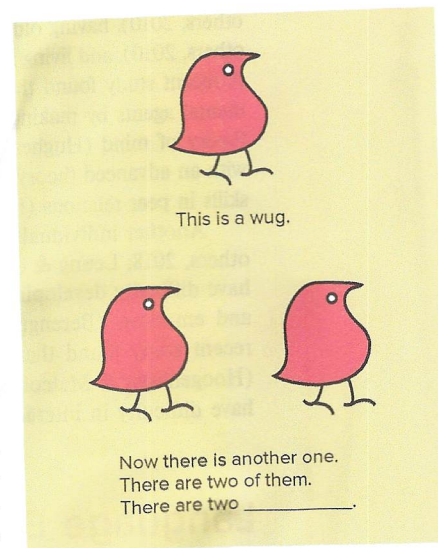


Figure 10 Stimuli in Berko’s Study of Young Children’s Understanding of Morphological Rules.

In Jean Berko’s (1958) study, young children were presented with cards such as this one with a “wug” on it. Then the children were asked to supply the missing word; in supplying the missing word, they also had to say it correctly. “Wugs” is the correct response here.

Source: Gleason, Jean Berko, “The Child’s Learning of English Morphology,” *Word*, Vol. 14, 1958, p. 154. Copyright ©1958 by Jean Berko Gleason. All rights reserved. Used with permission.