



**The Dominion Post**  
**13-Jan-2010**  
**Page: 5**  
**Opinion**  
**By: Janet Holmes**  
**Region: Wellington**  
**Circulation: 91500**  
**Type: Metro**  
**Size: 278.83 sq.cms**  
**Frequency: MTWTF--**

## Teaching young children how to 'breaked' those language rules



**I**SOBEL has just started school and is consequently bubbling over with new vocabulary. "Some days" she told her mother "we go to dissembly". Out of the mouths of babes!

Linguists estimate that by the time they start school most children have a vocabulary of about 5000 words, an astonishing feat considering how long it takes me to learn just 10 new German words. But in addition to lots of words, these five-year-olds have also acquired the complete sound system and most of the grammar of their mother tongue (or tongues if they are lucky).

Linguistic research indicates that in all languages in all countries, children generally begin by using words that make use of front consonant sounds (b,p,m,d,t) and back vowel sounds (ah). Hence papa, mama, baba and dada are frequently occurring early words in many languages, and, naturally, parents claim these words for themselves – who else would their child want to address or talk about, for goodness sake.

Children gradually acquire more complex sounds, g, k,s,z, r, l with the two English sounds spelled "th" as in thick and then among the very last acquired. These are astonishingly rare in world languages, and are often replaced with "t" and "f" or "d" and "v" when people are learning English (dat, somefink, over).

When children start to acquire grammatical rules, the evidence that they are learning a system rather than just copying their parents and friends becomes clear very quickly.

At first they learn words as complete forms, so they produce utterances such as *Robbie jumped on the bed, I ran home and Daddy swam in the pool*. Then, as a result of hearing heaps of regular verbs (walked, talked, watched, looked, listened, wished, hoped), they learn the powerful rule that to make something past tense you add an -ed and they produce *I finished my book*, but also *I runned home, Daddy swimmmed in the pool* and *oh dear I breaked it*. Those irregular verbs (run, swim, break), often first learned as individual forms, get regularised under the influence of the powerful new rule they have acquired. The results sound cute, but are also evidence of a powerful underlying language acquisition device that enables the child to formulate the rule.

**I**N A less rule-governed area, children are also fascinated when they encounter idioms such as *good as gold, you drive me up the wall, I'm feeling a bit under the weather* and *he was sick as a dog*.

I remember my amusement when I overheard this conversation between my two sons. David aged 6 asserted "it's as easy as cake".

"Ha" said his older brother "you mean it's a piece of pie". They clearly knew the meaning of their idioms – they just had the precise food items confused!

Children are constantly creative, whether knowingly or not. At age five, David surveyed his room after a visit from his friend Lily and pronounced "what a wreckery!" It was hard to think of a more apt word to

describe the chaos they jointly created. And his older friend Neil told me on another day "it was just flukery that I got that right". Useful words to add to our vocabulary.

My grandchild is lucky enough to be learning two languages since he has a German-speaking mum and an English-speaking dad. Hence my struggle to improve my German.

At 20 months, alongside papa and mama, he points to a range of large birds with big beaks (takaka, kea, kaka, herons, and paradise ducks) and loudly and clearly proclaims duck, with a pronunciation which, his mother considers sounds remarkably like the German word for "roof" (Dach), but we all know what he really means of course. The benefits of being bilingual are incontrovertible and I envy him his natural learning environment. Being a little slower to start chattering intelligibly in both languages in the first couple of years will be amply repaid in later years when he is able to chatter to both his grandmothers in their mother tongues.

But let me give the last word to Isobel who told her grandmother that in the kitchen, she is the *insistent*, a neologism which accurately captures her role according to her parents.

**Janet Holmes teaches sociolinguistics at Victoria University.**

Send your questions about language to [words@dompost.co.nz](mailto:words@dompost.co.nz)