

Introduction to Gestalt Language Processing

There are two ways in which children learn and process language: Analytic Language Processing and Gestalt Language Processing (GLP). The first step to appropriately supporting a child's language development is identifying what type of language processor they are.

Analytical learners learn language in a typical sequential way and learn one word at a time whereas Gestalt language acquisition describes when children learn language in longer chunks, known as gestalts. Many autistic children are gestalt language processors; while all children go through a stage of repeating others (echolalia) when developing language, Analytic Language Processors quickly move on to using single words to communicate and use these flexibly. They then go on to combining these words. For Gestalt Language Processors, many of whom are autistic, the echolalia can continue for longer and they get "stuck" in a stage of having either single words or phrases that refer to a very specific experience. Those words or phrases only refer to that specific item, or experience and are not used flexibly. The Natural Language Acquisition Process (Marge Blanc)* describes how Gestalt Language Processors may go on to modify these gestalts, and may in time develop referential language like the Analytic Language Processors

Gestalt language processes often take words, whole phrases, sentences or conversations heard in real life or through TV or stories for example and use them in specific contexts or to express feelings that might be difficult to convey through analytic/referential language. For example, a child who repeats a line from a favourite movie or song might be using that phrase to express an emotion. Another example is a child who may say 'how are you?' when they are hurt or unwell. This is likely to be because they have heard this phrase used previously in this context. These chunks of language can be said in and out of context.

Gestalts can be reproduced with the exact same features such as the rhythm or intonation or gestures as were originally observed. Some gestalt language processors use single words to label items or to respond to questions or prompts but are unable to combine these single words with other words to expand this into functional or expressive language. For example, 'bird' a child says this every time they see a bird, an animal or hear a bird song and cannot build upon this.

There are 6 stages in gestalt language development, as described by Marge Blanc. Some children will communicate using a mixture of these stages, whereas others will only use one almost all the time.

Stage 1 – Delayed Echolalia

Children will script whole phrases, single words or strings of words. These scripts usually come from people, media or books.

Stage 2 – Mix and Match stage – partial or trimmed chunks of words

At this stage children will shorten longer chunks of words into smaller chunks. For example 'Let's go outside, time to play' may become 'Let's play' and 'time to go outside'.

Stage 3 – single words

Children might use single words from phrases/scripts. This is when children can understand the meaning of the word on its own. For example: 'Let's go outside' might become 'outside'.

Stages 4-6 – new original phrases and beginning grammar

Children can now put together singular words to make their own phrases and sentences. For example, 'I want to go and play outside'.

*Blanc, M. Blackwell, A. & Elias, P (2023) "Using the natural language acquisition protocol to support Gestalt Language Development" Perspectives of the ASHA Special Interest Groups.

