

## Oral language competence and risk in early life: Lessons learned from young offenders

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June 18, 2013  
Broadening Restorative  
Perspectives  
Melbourne

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## Acknowledgements

- Funding bodies –
  - Australian Research Council
  - Criminology Research Council
- Professor Martine Powell, Deakin University
- Research Assistants
  - Margaret Kent
  - Rita Cauchi
- Department of Human Services
- The young people themselves

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## In this presentation



- Oral language competence - what it is and why it is important in its own right and for the transition to literacy
- Vulnerable young people: A developmental perspective on the risk pathway to offending (and by definition, to educational disengagement)
- Language competence and the social gradient
- Research on the language skills of young offenders
- **Implications for youth justice administration - restorative conferencing**

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## ORAL LANGUAGE ?

Everyday talking  
(expressive) and listening  
(receptive /  
comprehension) skills


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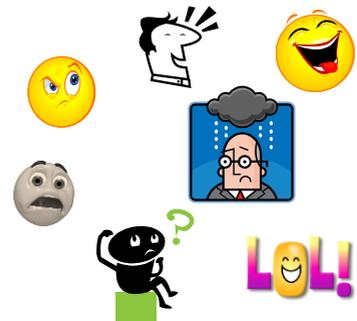
## Oral language competence

- The means by which we negotiate the business of everyday life
- One of the strongest clues as to "who we are" – it is both socially determined *and* deterministic
- Reflects a wide range of developmental factors / experiences, esp early secure attachment and degree of language enrichment in the early years
- Closely tied to social cognition
- With development, becomes increasingly sophisticated and subtle with respect to social, cultural, and contextual aspects of communication
- Requires comprehension and use of linguistic devices such as metaphor, sarcasm, analogy, figures of speech – in which literal meaning says little about intended meaning
- Closely tied to and underpins the transition to literacy

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## Surface and hidden meanings

- ▶ *Similes*
- ▶ *Metaphor*
- ▶ *Idiom*
- ▶ *Jokes*
- ▶ *Sarcasm*
- ▶ *Analogy*
- ▶ *Irony*


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### What's going on here?



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### Language is used to.....

- |                                    |                                     |                                       |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tell      | <input type="checkbox"/> Agree      | <input type="checkbox"/> Suggest      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ask       | <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree   | <input type="checkbox"/> Inquire      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Inform    | <input type="checkbox"/> Sympathise | <input type="checkbox"/> Persuade     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Instruct  | <input type="checkbox"/> Advise     | <input type="checkbox"/> Cajole       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Narrate   | <input type="checkbox"/> Clarify    | <input type="checkbox"/> Imply        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Request   | <input type="checkbox"/> Comment    | <input type="checkbox"/> Admonish     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Influence | <input type="checkbox"/> Apologise  | <input type="checkbox"/> Concur       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Argue     | <input type="checkbox"/> Suggest    | <input type="checkbox"/> Complain     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Praise    | <input type="checkbox"/> Imply      | <input type="checkbox"/> Refute       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Criticise | <input type="checkbox"/> Counsel    | <input type="checkbox"/> Question     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Object    | <input type="checkbox"/> Direct     | <input type="checkbox"/> Amuse        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Confer    | <input type="checkbox"/> Entertain  | <input type="checkbox"/> ...and so on |

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- Talking to peers
- Talking to teachers
- Talking to elderly relatives
- Talking to shop-keepers
- Talking to the boss
- Talking to police
- Talking to a help-desk
- Taking part in a debate
- Barracking at a football match
- Answering questions in court

Why are these not all the same?

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### Why is oral language competence like the air that we breathe?



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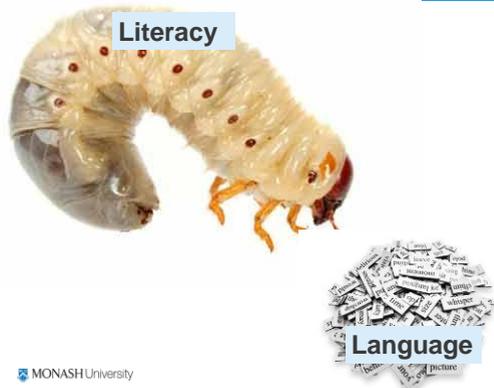
### The transition to literacy....



- Is not biologically 'natural' – requires specific and prolonged instruction;
- Builds directly on psycholinguistic competencies acquired before school entry;
- Snowling & Hulme (2011) *Literacy is parasitic on language*
- Promotes
  - ✓ academic achievement,
  - ✓ school attachment and retention,
  - ✓ positive self esteem
- An important **Protective Factor**
- **Learning to Read Vs Reading to Learn;**
- **The Matthew Effect....**

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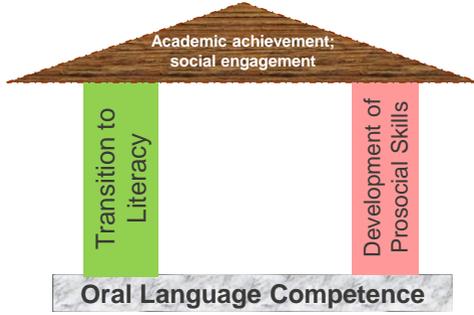
Literacy



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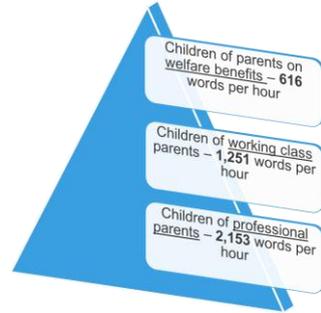
Language

Oral language competence as a solid foundation in early life



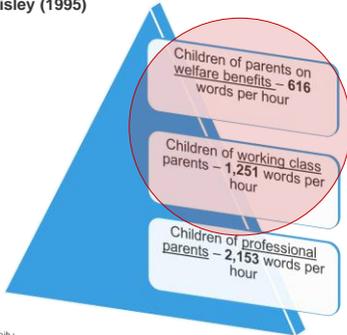
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Hart & Risley (1995)



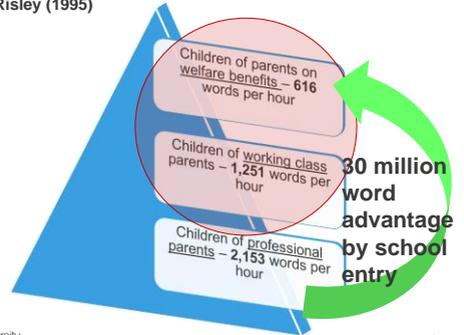
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Language exposure and SES - Hart & Risley (1995)



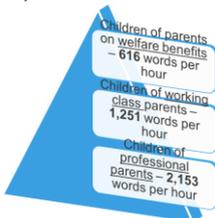
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Language exposure and SES - Hart & Risley (1995)



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Language exposure and SES - Hart & Risley (1995)



Longitudinal follow-up at ages 9&10 showed strong links b/w language exposure at age 3 and academic outcomes

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WHAT DOES ALL OF THIS HAVE TO DO WITH HIGH-RISK YOUNG PEOPLE AND RESTORATIVE CONFERENCING?

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## The pathway to offending

- Male:Female ratio of 5:1 (Higher in custodial settings)
- Over-representation of
  - Single-parent households – absent fathers
  - Dysfunctional communication / parenting
  - Parental mental health problems
  - Involvement with child protection services
  - History of behaviour / conduct disturbance
  - Low educational attachment / attainment
  - School exclusion
  - Developmental disability (diagnosed or not)
  - Low SES
  - Intergenerational un/under-employment in parents
  - Early initiation into substance use / abuse
  - Early death



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## Implications for language development?

- Male:Female ratio of 5:1 (Higher in custodial settings)
- Over-representation of
  - Single-parent households – absent fathers
  - Dysfunctional communication / parenting
  - Parental mental health problems
  - Involvement with child protection services
  - **History of behaviour / conduct disturbance**
  - Low educational attachment / attainment
  - School exclusion
  - Developmental disability (diagnosed or not)
  - Low SES
  - Intergenerational un/under-employment in parents
  - Early initiation into substance use / abuse



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## Research on the language skills of young offenders

- Has been growing internationally in the last 10-15 years, with activity in the UK, USA and Australia and growing interest in NZ, Canada and the Netherlands
- Moves beyond well-established evidence from forensic and social psychology that young offenders have poor academic achievement and social skill deficits – because poor oral language skills may be an explanatory factor for both
- Identifies some 50 - 60% of young offenders as having clinically significant, yet previously unidentified language impairments on standardised language measures, e.g. the CELF4

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## Our most recent research study (Snow & Powell, 2011)

- Built on three earlier studies of community based samples
- n=100 young males completing custodial sentences
- All relevant ethics approvals
- Mean age = 19.03;
- Mean Yrs education = 9.8



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## Data on

- ▶ Comprehension of figurative / abstract language
- ▶ Narrative discourse (story telling) production
- ▶ Language comprehension and expression (vocabulary use and comprehension, formulating sentences, recalling sentences etc)
- ▶ Nonverbal IQ
- ▶ Mental Health
- ▶ Offending type and severity
- ▶ History of Out-of-Home Care Placement
- ▶ Developmental History

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## What we found

- Around **50%** of young offenders have a clinically significant language impairment on formal testing – using a conservative cut-off
- Deficits existed across the spectrum of language skills – expressive and receptive, narrative language, using and understanding figurative language etc
- Language problems were not accounted for by low IQ or mental health problems
- **The majority of those with a LI had been identified as needing special services in the early school years, many received Reading Recovery, but early school departure was the norm**

....cont

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## What we found....cont

- Rates of LI were even higher in those who had been in Out of Home Care placement
- **Overwhelming majority left school around Yrs 8-10**
- **Marketable employment skills were virtually absent**
- **While in an earlier Community sample, the relationship between LI and offending pattern was unclear, in the Custodial sample, there was a significant association between presence of a LI and violent offending**

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## Violent Offending and LI

- History of violence present in 87% of cases
- Quantified using CLCI
- Two subgroups created based on severity median split on CLCI Scales 1 & 2
  - 'High' Offending n = 26
  - 'Not-High' Offending n = 74

*These subgroups differed on years of education but not on nonverbal IQ*

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Measure	High Offending Scores on CLCI Scales 1&2 (n=26)		Not High offending Scores on CLCI Scales 1&2 (n=74)		t	p*	d
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
TLC-E Subtest 1 Ambiguous Sentences Standardised Score	4.2	1.9	4.8	2.5	1.1	.14	.27
TLC-E Subtest 2 Listening Comprehension Standardised Score	4.9	2.6	5.2	2.5	.48	.31	.12
TLC-E Subtest 4 Figurative Language Standardised Score	4.2	2.1	5.6	2.8	2.3	.01	.56
CELF4 Recalling Sentences	4.7	2.9	5.4	3.2	.97	.16	.23
CELF4 Formulating Sentences	3.8	3.3	5.6	3.4	2.3	.012	.53
CELF4 Word Classes (Receptive)	4.0	2.6	6.3	3.1	3.3	.00	.80
CELF4 Word Definitions	5.0	3.8	6.5	4.0	1.5	.055	.38
CELF4 Core Language Score	63.7	19.9	74.1	19.1	2.4	.01	.53

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## Limitations

- Non-random sample
- Cross-sectional
- No participants from ATSI backgrounds
- Scale and scope of language testing
- Limited data on Child Protection involvement
- Reliance on self-report for biographical data
- Males only

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## What's happening here?



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## Narrative Skill

- The ability to share our experiences with others via a story-telling template that has temporal and logical order
- Draws heavily on features of cognitive development
- Requires vocabulary, syntax development
- Critical for social relationships
- Particular difficulties evident in young offender samples
- **Special forensic significance**
  - Police interviews
  - Answering questions in court/briefing solicitor
  - Restorative conferencing

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## Implications?

- **Early intervention** for “high-risk boys”, esp where behaviour disturbance + learning difficulties are present
- **Forensic Interviewing** / Coping with a police interview; understanding the court process, bail conditions, formal cautions etc
- **Interventions for young offenders once they are in the system**
  - Counselling (“talk therapies”)
  - Specific programs – anger management, sex offender treatment
  - Literacy programmes
- **Restorative Justice Conferencing**

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## A task for you.....

- Pick up your phylodactophone and position it periplantarly along the hyperspondile aspect of your tripondilate.

## Quickly!!

- When you have done this, change places with the person three seats to your left, get your green pen out and be ready to write down a list of numbers.

- Questions??

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## Language skills and restorative conferencing (1)

- Young people with developmental disabilities are over-represented in YJ statistics
- Most developmental disabilities have negative implications for communication skills
- **Our research shows 50% have a LI in the absence of identified developmental disability**
- **RJ conferencing is an inherently verbal, conversational process, taxing both auditory processing and verbal expression skills**

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## Language skills and restorative conferencing (2)

- Ability to attend to and process language in a novel register (“code”)
- Ability to construct a narrative to account for one’s own side of “the story”
- Ability to understand non-literal language – idiom, metaphor, analogy, etc
- Ability to access and use vocabulary to express shades of meaning, including for emotional states
- Ability to appear genuine and authentic as a function of what is said
- Ability to process and identify emotions (one’s own and those of others) – alexithymia?

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## Alexithymia

- Lack of words for emotions
- Typically associated with autism spectrum disorders
- May also occur in children who have experienced emotional neglect and/or been victims/witnesses to trauma
- Easily missed / misinterpreted by clinicians, teachers etc

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## Restorative Justice and Reoffending Project - Qld (Hayes, McGee et al., 2011)

Qualitative study examining how young people understand restorative justice interventions and how this understanding may relate to change(s) in future offending behaviour. Offender-focused observational data were gathered for **68 young offenders** attending **48 youth justice conferences**. In-depth interview data were gathered for **50 young offenders** attending these conferences. Interviews occurred approximately one week following a conference. Observations were made of young offenders’ behaviour during the conference, focusing on their verbal and nonverbal behaviour. Interviews explored how young offenders felt about various aspects of the conferences.

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## Some examples of responses: 005a

**Interviewer:** *Alright. What did it feel like, actually walking into a room with that many people?*

005a: *I don't really know. Just looked in, saw them.*

-----

**Interviewer:** *So you can't really remember what she said but you know you felt upset by it. Okay. Did (you) want your mum to attend?*

005a: *Yeah.*

**Interviewer:** *Yeah. Did you agree with what your mum said? Do you remember?*

005a: *Yeah.*

**Interviewer:** *You agreed with it? Sounds like it was hard to hear.*

005a: *Yeah.*

**Interviewer:** *Because it upset you?*

•005a *Yeah.*

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(continued)

**Interviewer:** *But you agreed with it.*

005a: *Uhuh*

**Interviewer:** *So did you ever see that the victim react to what your mum was saying? Or...*

005a: *No.*

**Interviewer:** *Who were you looking at when your mum was talking?*

005a: *I was talking at my feet at that time.*

**Interviewer:** *At your feet. So when you look at your feet how are you normally feeling?*

005a: *Well I was upset so I was looking at my feet and sort of just trying to not cry.*

**Interviewer:** *That's very honest. Thank you... I know that it is hard to talk about that stuff. Isn't it?*

005a: *Not for me it isn't.*

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## Case 005b

**Interviewer:** *How did you feel about you having to meet him [the victim]?*

005b: *I don't know really.*

...

**Interviewer:** *Okay. And at the beginning [of the conference], how were you feeling?*

005b: *Normal.*

**Interviewer:** *Didn't feel anything?*

005b: *No.*

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## The observer's view:

*My general observation with the story telling phase was that she [the conference convenor] had to suggest or assist these young people in telling their story. These three young male offenders appeared rather inarticulate. Lots of one word or one sentence answers and at times, found it difficult to formulate an answer to questions about intent, about circumstance, about feelings, what was going through their mind at the time. A lot of answers were "I don't know", "I wasn't thinking", etc and Robyn [conference convenor] would suggest possible responses to which the young people would agree.*

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## Language Problems are invisible

Hayes, H., et al. (2011). Explaining continuity and change in offending behaviour after a restorative justice conference. *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 23(2): 127-143.



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