VI. THE GROWTH OF A SMALL BOY'S LINGUISTIC INTERESTS

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In most of the experimental schools the world over an honest effort is being made not to impose upon their pupils any information that does not lie within the field of the children's own phychological needs. We have found out time and again that a real interest in the subject studied assures the best progress in studies. In practical pedagogy, two conclusions have been drawn from this law: one, that it is best to interest children in their schoolwork, by enlivening the teaching, by bringing in devices that turn studies into games, by making the school room atmosphere attractive, by holding out rewards and prizes, by arousing competition, etc; and the other—that studies ought to be chosen from among the interests natural to a given age.

It is this last trend that has a direct bearing upon the subject-matter of my present paper, or rather that my paper has a direct bearing upon. For, if in making up the school curriculum, or a particular grade's course of study, we are to be guided by the children's natural interests, we must be fairly certain what these interests are and how they develop.

I do not pretend to answer this question or any part of it. But I hope that by studying the growth of my son's linguistic interests I may be privileged to shed a little light on the subject.

As in my previous papers I shall refer to the little boy as A. The ages under consideration are those between two and a half years and a little over eight years.

The term "linguistic interests" will be used in this paper to denote all spontaneous treatment of language in a consciously reflective, analytic way, and also all conscious experimentation with language. My son's linguistic interests will fall therefore into four groups:

1. Exploratory.
2. Experimental.
3. Humorous and playful.
4. Literary.

The kind of linguistic interest which I have called exploratory consists in noticing and gathering facts about a language. A child approaches this state when he begins his "what is this" questions, whichever way he may ask them. However, this is no more than an approach, for, though in this way he increases his vocabulary, this is only one of the intertwining motives which

prompt him to ask the question. He is learning to know the outer world and to classify the things he is getting familiar with. he learns both the name and the idea at the same time, and the process is not purely a linguistic one, nor is the linguistic part of it due to a conscious, reflective interest in language. But when a child asks the meaning of a word, he is dealing with the outer world from the other end: what interests him, is the word, and just what idea corresponds to it. This is almost entirely a conscious linguistic interest, this is curiosity as to a word as such. All children ask the meaning of some of the words which they hear but do not understand. Among A's questions of this kind two are worth mentioning.

At the age of two-and-a-half he asked suddenly, in the midst of his play. "What are delishes?" The word he had in mind was "delicious," and he evidently took it for the plural of some noun, as shown by the form of his question. The fact that he put his verb in the plural shows clearly his mastery of some grammatical forms at that age.

The other question pertaining to the meaning of a word was asked at the age of five years and one month. This was in July 1919, i. e. shortly after the war. He was shooting imaginary Germans, and I told him that he ought to shoot cruel giants, ferocious animals, etc., and that Germans are people, ordinary people, like we are, good people. This was not the first time that I interceded thus on behalf of the Germans but this time he thought about it a while, and then asked. "If they are good people, why are they called Germans?" Here the word was connected in his mind with the idea of something bad, of an evil which ought to be exterminated, and it was difficult to divest the word of the meaning associated with it. The association carried by words are stronger even in the minds of adults—witness the success of demagogical tricks consisting in swaying the sympathy of their audience toward or against a group of facts by using a popular or unpopular designation for it.

The difficulty A. had with the meaning of wards led sometimes to anecdotal situations. Thus, at the age of two years five months, his vocabulary of insults was limited to "bad boy." His anger was at that time rather easily aroused, and he resorted to this expression very often, calling "bad boy" anybody and anything that happened to incur his displeasure. But this paucity of terms of insult was evidently a handicap to him, and he adapted two new words as insults, words, the real meaning of which he did not understand, needless to say. The first of these—Jew—applied by him in anger to our roomer, who happened to

be a Jew (and probably it was from our discussions with him that the child heard this new word), caused a bitter reproach from the young man, who imagined that A. had heard this word used by us with the same connotation. But a few minutes later the little boy, provoked by further teasing, shrieked at him at the top of his angry voice. "Faculty member you." This convinced the young man that A.'s use of the two expressions was due to the baby's own initiative.

This use of strange, unknown words as insults reminds us of the same tendency among adult primitive minds. Thus, among the words of insult of the Polish peasant are "omentra"—from "geometr," surveyor, and "suffragan," which properly means a bishop's assistant. These were to the Polish peasants strange words, with a suggestion of a threat in their mysterious sounds, and they became insults. See Sienkiewicz, "Charcoal Sketches."

At the age of three years five months A. began to show a spontaneous interest in word-study. He would be greatly amused by the similarity of some words and would point out to me homonyms and homophones. Sometimes these words were such only in his pronuciation, as in the following: "This is my belly, and Belly Hogan is called Belly," meaning of course, "Billy." A few days later he said: "I am a carpenter, mama." "All right," I answered, used to his personifications. "You know why mama?" 'No, tell me, dear." "Carpenter, because I clean rugs, carpets, see?" He was then playing with a Bissell sweeper.

At about the same time he began to divide words into syllables, as a game invented by himself. And a few times, at that age, he made attempts to analyze words phonetically. "Mamma, listen, a-ple," or "pppapa; ppp-a-pa." But these were crude attempts, and when I tried to give him sounds, he could not put them together, nor could he analyze words given him by me.

But it was early in his sixth year that, in connection with reading lessons, he became very interested in phonic exercises. They were perhaps suggested to him by the method I used—Brownie Phonograms.* I am afraid I used my parental authority rather arbitrarily in often checking his ardor, because I would get tired of his constant calling my attention to these exercises of his. They were especially annoying to me if they took place during the reading lesson, and he would keep me waiting while he mumbled to himself, pronouncing a word or a phonogram in different ways, dividing them, repeating separate sounds, looking

*San Francisco State Normal School. Self-instruction Series, No. 61 Brownie Phonograms, book 1, by Corrinne H. Johnstone, California State Printing Office, 1915.

up the same phonogram or word on previous pages and pursuing other similar investigations. These often seemed mysterious to me and sometimes devoid of all meaning, because he could not explain them until he found what he looked for. Thus, at five and a half, three months after his first reading lesson, he once interrupted himself in his reading and exclaimed after a moment's silence: "Look," covering up the initials, "now it is 'he,' and with the **s** it is 'she.' " And then he proceeded to discuss with himself, in a half audible undertone, the sounds composing 'he' and 'she,' and the role of each letter, until he finally discovered that in 'he' the **h** is pronounced and stands for a separate sound, while in 'she' it is only a part of the symbol. He then turned to me with a resume of his contemplations, winding up thus: "But we don't hear the **h** in **sh**, listen, shshshshsh....."

While learning to read, he became interested in spelling, and this, strange to say, added to my difficulties. I tried to teach him without naming letters, by giving him phonograms, class words and sight words. But he insisted, and won. By his inquiries he learned the alphabet and persistently memorized it in the conventional order, as soon as he discovered its existence, at the age of five years five months, i. e. three months after his first reading lesson.

As I said, even before this time he became interested in spelling aloud—naming letters which composed a given word. I used, in addition to the book, perception cards, each representing a phonogram or a word. He would place two cards side by side and would compare letter by letter the two words. Or he would place a card in front of him and would pick out from among his blocks those which had the letters printed on the cards, would arrange them in the same order, and would triumphantly read the word from his blocks. Thus, four months after his first lesson he reproduced with his blocks, from a piece of paper on which I had printed for him, the following: "Dear papa, I love you," as a surprise for his father and me. It must have been a slow and laborious process for the little fellow, alone in his room.

At the age of five years eight months, i. e. six months after his first reading lesson, he was playing with his letter blocks, trying to build words, and from time to time asking me for suggestions, as to what words he could make out of given letters. Often the letters at his disposal were all consonants, and after I had rejected for this reason two or three groups of letters offered by him, I told him, in answer to his persistent "why," that every word must have at least one vowel, that there were

six vowels—a, e, i, o, u ,y, that vowels can be easily pronounced all alone, and that other letters express sounds which are very difficult to pronounce without the help of a vowel.

From that time on he was interested in vowels for a considerable period—several weeks intensely, several months on the whole. He was forever during this time, busy picking out vowels in different words, comparing different pronunciations of the same vowel letter, etc. Some three weeks after his initation into the world of vowels he asked me: "Why is i a vowel? It is not one but two sounds: a and i." He had discovered the dipthong. A few hours later he remarked. "Y has three sounds. w, a, and i."

All these contemplations, discoveries, discussions, and investigations, when carried on during the readingg lesson, interferred with the reading exercises. Nor was he interested in mere practice reading; it evidently required too much effort and was an imposed task. Seeing this, I finally discontinued the reading lesson. Each of these lessons, given to him about five times a week, lasted from five to twenty minutes. He covered seventy-four pages in the Brownie Phonograms and sixty-seven pages in the Wheeler Primer.

But the interruption of lessons did not really interrupt his progress in reading. Every day I found his Primer in another place. One day, while playing with his toys, he suddenly exclaimed. "Like it, my baby chickens: I cannot like it, if I cannot swim:" Then calling my attention, he repeated the quotation, and explained. "I read it this morning in the reader, see, the hen thought her children were chickens, but they were ducks, she did not want them to swim." He had not read this piece with me, and I saw from his quotation and the subsequent explanation, that he amused himself by reading new pages, that he read correctly and intelligently, and that some little passages stuck in his mind.

However, he wanted to read with me again, and, after two month's interruption, we resumed our lessons. He liked them now, and read with pleasure and interest. Evidently, he had mastered the mechanical side of reading enough not to consider it a drudgery. But he continued to digress into phonetics and to observe spelling. Two months after our lessons were resumed, he had finished his Wheeler Primer, read through an advanced primer, and covered sixty-one pages in a First Reader (Free and Treadwell.)

Thus, his progress in reading has been rapid. On the strength of his reading ability he was placed in the second grade, when he entered school at the age of six years and three months, and

the following yyear was "skipped" to the fourth grade, after one month's stay in the third grade.

And yet, he did not become a reader of books until he was seven-and-a-half, i. e. more than two years after his first reading lesson. Occasionally, he would read before this time a story or a little book, but he depended, for his literary needs, almost entirely on our reading aloud to him. At the age of seven-and-a half he began to prefer reading to himself, and soon became a passionate reader of books.

His. experiments with the typewriter also led to some exploratory activities of a linguistic nature. But I shall dwell upon them here only long enough to mention that some of his adventures with the typewriter I have related in one of my previous articles. (1).

Let us now pass to the second group of interests, which I have called experimental.

The experimental interest in language consists, as the term implies, in wishing to use the elements of articulate speech in different ways, to experiment with it. In a way, composition belongs here. From one point of view, composition is not a linguistic achievement, in as much as it is concerned with ideas with the subject-matter, with the contents of its written or oral product. But it also concerns itself with the tools at its command, the language. A. several times gave evidence that he was interested in the form of his compositions, in their linguistic, or literary side. Thus, at the age of five years three months, he would brng me his drawings and dictate to me his description of them, or what he called, "stories," of his own invention. In dictating, he would repeat each sentence several times, slowly, with expression and with evident pleasure, then he would ask me to read it to him; after the little composition was finished, he would have me read it to him again. Often, while dictating, he would correct an expression, sometimes he would make corrections after the whole little composition was finished. Then he would take the notebook to his father, would show him the picture, and would ask him to read aloud the composition. Then he would inflict his literary masterppiece on any other person who might have then been accessible for that purpose. His whole attitude showed, that his drawing and the contents of the composition were of secondary importance. It was its form, the choice of words and their arrangement that mattered.

Rhyming is another experiment he tried with language. At the age of four he found two rhyming words and called my attention to them. As usually in such cases, we began to play a

game based on his discovery—this time, the game of rhyming. For several months he would ask me to play it with him now and then, and we would take turns in finding rhymes. He also sometimes made up what he called "verses." The first more or less successful verse was:

"Work and be through.
That is the way the people do."

At the age of five years one month. This was a sudden inspiration, and it made him very happy. He had been, of course, improvising little songs and poems since babyhood, talking and singing to his toys. But this was his first conscious attempt recorded. One month after thi first verse he was very pleased with the following little lines.

"Way up
The cup
Goes."

Since then he had little spells of verse-making, at rather long intervals. At the age of eight years and two months he he was quite busy making up songs and verses and writing them down. But this verse-making was in most cases clearly an intellectual occupation, a linguistic interest, and not a form of artistic self-expression, or poetry proper. Side by side with this verse-making hecontinued, though less and less frequently, to sing and talk to himself, and these little improvisations belong more to the realm of poetry than to linguistic interests. As he grew older, the two kinds of rhythmical compositions began to overlap more and more. For instance, at the age of seven years and eleven months, watching a storm, he spontaneously composed the following:

"It is raining all around,
It hits the houses, it hits the ground.
The lightning flashes, the thunder booms,
The rain from the sky doth pour."

The first two lines came as a surprise to himself, probably in unconscious imitation of Stevenson's poem, the last two lines were composed consciously, in an effort to complete the verse.

In a previous paper (3) I discussed before this body A.'s attempts at creating thought-symbols, and I then ascribed this activity to his experimental interest in language. Since then, between the ages of six and eight, he was at one time busy inventing a finger alphabet which probably was to replace his first sign language which I reported then and which continued to tempt him in spite of our objections and even direct prohibition. The finger alphabet, though brought to completion,

was never used however. He also has, invented, at the age of eight years and two months, what he called a "secret skylanguage," which consisted of regular English, with "sky" before each word and sometimes in the middle of longer words. But he did not use it much and never acquired any fluency in it. He continued off and on his Modified English, which consisted in a playful substitution of a sound of his choice for the initial sound of each word. At the age of eight years two months the sound he used most frequently for this purpose was **sl**, as for instance, instead of "Mamma, give me some water, please," he would say: "Slama, slive sle slome slater, slease." Of course, the Modified English had been greatly discouraged by us from its inception. when A. was three years and four months old, but in spite of that it recurred at frequent intervals, proving to be quite irrepressible. He is not altogether free from attempts at such "fun" even now, at the age of twelve.

Among other products of his linguistic creativeness, codes for typewriting and for writing deserve to be mentioned. These began to appear at the age of eight, probably inspired by Poe's "The Gold Bug." He has been quite fascinated by code-making and code-using, has invented a number of different codes up to now, and has been using different underlying principles for different codes. Almost every one of his codes he used diligently for some time, some of them in correspondence with his cousin and his boy-friends.

Perhaps all his linguistic creativeness should have been considered as belonging to the group of Humorous and Playful Linguistic Interests, of which I shall now give other examples.

Since babyhood A. showed a lively sense of humor. With reard to his linguistic interests his humor asserted itself in puns, charades, conundrums, and jokes of his own invention, as well as his appreciation of those heard from others. Here are some of his own.

At the age of six years and one month he said, when I gave him a drink of water: "Is there ink in it?" "Ink, why?" "Well there is 'ink' in 'drink,' isn't there." At about the same time he asked: "How do you spell 'how?" "h-o-w." "And how do you spell 'word?' "W-o-r-d." "Then how would you spell 'Howard?" Or—at the age of six-and-a-half: "Do you say 'her' or 'she?" "That depends, in what connection." "O, no," triumphantly, "you say both: 'Hershey.' " One more, for better illustration. When A. was eight years three months old, his father asked him to bring some machine-oil, while trying to take the squeak out of some casters. A. brought the oil and innocently asked: "What

kind of oil did you say it was'?' "Why, just machine-oil," answered his father, to which A. with sparkling eyes: Isn't it castor-oil, since you use it for casters?"

And now, let us discuss the last group, his literary interest in language. This group comprises the attitude toward the printed word, the development of the taste for reading, and the expression of opinions about literary works, which opinions may be called literary criticisms.

Since babyhood A. has been read to a great deal, and has always liked reading immesnsely, asking for it insistently. The first stories and verses were not read, but told to him. On his third birthday I for the first time read to him a story ("Henny Penny"). Other stories followed. Of course, he would ask to repeat the same story many times, whether told or read. Up to the age of three and a half to four years he preferred to be told stories, but later would much rather have them read to him; from the age of eight he began to read himself, as I pointed out above.

His early reading was entirely directed by us, i. e. we selected books for him, and he had no access to any other books. He read childrens books of high literary merit, and appreciated them immensely. He also liked to re-read a book not only a second time, but many times. Some books he read five, six times, a few even more than that, and Swiss Family Robinson he has read as many as fifteen times. However, I cannot boast of having formed his tastes to conform entirely to my own, for now, at the age of twelve, he wants to read almost exclusively books of adventure, detective stories, or else humorous works, including the newspaper comic strip. However, his favorite author is Mark Twain, which after all is not a bad choice. He calls Mark Twain "the greatest author in the world," and the best writer of all countries and all ages. A close sompetitor for A.'s appreciation is Jules Verne.

From all these observations the following conclusions can be drawn.

1. The question often comes up, how can we teach children the things they will need in their adult life, and yet be guided by ther present natural nterests? Do the subjects of the school curriculum comes within the scope of their natural interest? It seems from the growth of A.'s liguistic interest, that phonics, grammar, rules for punctuation, spelling, reading were within his natural interests. Children are driven to observation, investigation, questioning, experimentation, etc., by an inborn intellectual curiosity which they all posess in a higher or lower degree. This

curiosity is directed toward their envronment. If their environment is similar to the one they are expected to live and work in as adults, their interests in childhood will be in a large measure those that will prepare them for their future activity.

2. The little boy A. had intense and spontaneous intellectual interests of the same nature as those disclosed in my studies of the development of his arithmetical knowledge (1), (4), (5) and in the growth of his geographical concepts. (6)

3. In satisfying an intellectual need, he developed every time his own methods and applied them persistently. Examples. getting acquainted with halves and quarters (1), studying decimals (4) and (5), the use of the sign language (3), examining maps,—all these compared to his phonic exercises and other investigations related above.

4. A distinct ability for analysis is revealed in his pursuance of all these investigations.

5. A.'s attttude toward his early reading lessons is perhaps characteristic of him. If my observations are correct, he is a thinker and an observer, he is possessed in a high degree of a genuine, strong and intense intellectual curiosity, he has good ability for reasoning and originality of thought and invention. But he lacks perseverance for achieving an imposed—even self-imposed —task, if he is not fired by an interest in the performance itself. Can perseverance be cultivated? If so, how?

6. On the whole, A.'s interest in language seems to be intellectual, not artistic. He has composed quite a few stories, verses, plays, and even written the major part of a novel—a long story of adventure. But in all his writing he seems to display a preeminently intellectual attitude—his imagination is that of a scientist or an inventor, not that of an artist. Since the age of seven or eight he began to show increasing dislike for poetry. He is given to spending long hours in drawing, but produces geographical maps, plans of real or imaginary cities, subways and parks, models of machines, trains, automobiles, etc., of his own invention, plans of houses. His constructions with blocks or in the sand pile were of the same nature.

Previous Articles on Boy A.'s Mental Development.

1. Pedagogical Seminary. Vol XXVII, pp. 71-90, 1920. "Numbers. Time and Space in the First Five Years of a Child's Life.

2. "A Child's Deviations from Truth," read before the Olahoma Academy of Science, February 12, 1921.

3. Proceedings of the Olahoma Academy of Science, 1910-1920, Vol. 1, July 15, 1921, p. 70. "Linguistic Creativeness of a Child."

4. Proceedings of the Oklahoma Academy of Science, Vol. II, Oct. 1, 1922, pp. 101-105. "Self-taught arithmetic from the age of five to seven and a half." (Abstract, the full article listed under 5.)

5. Pedagogical Seminary, Vol. XXX, 1923, pp. 51-68. "Self-taught arithmetic from the age of five to the age of eight.

6. Proceedings of the Oklahoma Academy of Science. Vol. III, Oct. 1, 1923, pp. 146-151. "The Magnetism of the Man."