

Table 6.3 Nelson's (1973) semantic categories for early word meaning, as defined and adapted by Benedict (1979:192-3)

1. *Specific nominals*: words that refer to only one exemplar of a category, but are not necessarily limited to proper names, e.g. 'Daddy', 'Cuppy' (name of pet).
2. *General nominals*: words which refer to all members of a category. It includes inanimate and animate objects, and pronouns like 'this', 'that', 'he'.
3. *Action words*: words that elicit specific actions from the child or that accompany actions of the child. It includes social-action games, e.g. 'peekaboo' and 'what does doggie say?'; event words, e.g. 'eat'; locatives, e.g. 'where's —?'; general actions, e.g. 'give'; and action inhibitors, e.g. 'no', 'don't touch'.
4. *Modifiers*: words that refer to properties or qualities of things or events. It includes attributes, e.g. 'big'; states, e.g. 'allgone'; 'hot'; locatives, e.g. 'there'; possessives, e.g. 'mine'.
5. *Personal-social*: words that express affective states and social relationships. It includes assertions, e.g. 'yes', 'no', 'want'; and social-expressive actions, e.g. 'bye-bye', 'hi', 'nice-nite'.

In the very important monograph entitled *Structure and strategy in learning to talk*, Katherine Nelson (1973) developed a more semantically oriented taxonomy to replace the earlier syntactic ones. Table 6.3 provides Nelson's taxonomy, as modified by Benedict (1979), who was a student of Nelson's. Benedict's adaptation was done to make the categories more compatible for analyzing comprehension.

Nelson followed 18 children longitudinally, starting when they were around 1 year. Below I give the three arbitrary age groups she divided her subjects into:

Group	(Age)	No. of children
I	1;2-1;3	7
II	1;0-1;1	5
III	0;10-0;11	6

She asked the parents of each child to keep a parental diary of their word productions. In addition, she visited each child once a month. We saw above that Benedict altered this methodology by visiting every two weeks, and also by studying comprehension vocabulary. Nelson followed her children until they had acquired their 50th word in production.

Nelson analyzed the words acquired by her 18 children according to the categories in Table 6.3. Table 6.4 gives a summary of her major findings. First, for all children, general nominals were the largest class of words, with 51 percent of the children's words falling into this category. This confirms Stern's earlier claim of a substance stage at the onset of vocabulary development. She also found that the acquisition of the nominals changed

Table 6.7 A composite of the most frequent words to occur across selected semantic categories, taken from Nelson (1973). Percentages are for the number of subjects who acquired a word in its first 50 words in production

Category	% of subjects with word production
Specific nominals <sup>a</sup>	'daddy', 'mommy' (at least one proper name) 100
General nominals	
Human <sup>a</sup>	'baby' 63
Non-human <sup>b</sup>	
food/drink	'juice' 67, 'milk', 'cookie' 56
	'water' 44, 'toast' 39, 'apple', 'cake' 28
	'dog' 89, 'cat' 78, 'duck' 44, 'horse' 28
animals	'shoes' 61, 'hat' 28
clothes	'ball' 72, 'blocks' 39
toys	'car' 72, 'boat', 'truck' 33
vehicles	'clock' 39, 'light' 33
furniture	'bottle' 44, 'key' 33, 'book' 28
other	
Action words <sup>a</sup>	'up' 50, 'sit', 'see' 38
	'eat', 'down', 'go' 25
Modifiers <sup>a</sup>	'hot' 75, 'allgone', 'more' 38
	'dirty', 'cold', 'here', 'there' 25
Personal-social words <sup>a</sup>	'hi' 88, 'bye(bye)' 63, 'no', 'yes(yeah)' 50
	'please', 'thank-you' 38

<sup>a</sup> These are taken from Appendix A where Nelson gives the first 50 words for eight children.

<sup>b</sup> These are taken from Table 8 where Nelson gives data for all 18 children.

Information like that in Table 6.7 is the first step in trying to determine the nature of word meaning in young children. Besides knowing the specific words children acquire, we need to look carefully at their contexts of usage. This is, of course, no easy task. Most of the work in this area comes from diaries, and from the more recent studies which combine parental diaries with naturalistic language sampling – even then our data are often incomplete. Some generalizable findings, however, have emerged.

As cited above, the earliest uses of words appear to be cases of underextensions. Shortly after, however, there is evidence that the child's use of the word becomes generalized, not only to new appropriate instances, but to inappropriate ones. For example, Braunwald (1978), in her diary of her daughter Laura, provides the following data on the production of 'ball':

- (6.1) 1;0(9) picture of a ball in a book  
 1;0(9)–1;4 (i) a ball  
 (ii) round objects, e.g. grapefruit, orange, seedpod, door-bell buzzer  
 (iii) request for the first and second servings of liquid in a cup