Oral language (i.e., talking and listening) skills and young offenders

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In today’s presentation

- Oral language competence and why it matters
- Our research on young offenders
- So what?
  - Processing young people through the legal system
  - Rehabilitation
  - Early intervention
  - Restorative Justice Conferencing
Oral language?
Oral language competence?

- Listening and talking skills
- Auditory processing and comprehension
- Expressive language skills – semantics (vocabulary), syntax (grammar), pragmatics
- Socially and culturally determined rules and practices
- Developmental correlates
- Vulnerability to developmental threats: maltreatment, deprivation etc
Surface and hidden meanings

- Similes
- Metaphor
- Idiom
- Jokes
- Sarcasm
Why does oral language competence matter?

- The means by which we negotiate the business of everyday life – in personal, social, educational, commercial, professional contexts
- The basis for the transition to literacy in early childhood
- The basis for the development of a repertoire of culturally appropriate social skills.
- Transmission of culture
- A tool of self-regulation; planning & organisation of behaviour
Communicative competence

- Rules of turn-taking
- Conversational rights – asymmetrical in some situations e.g., an investigative interview
- Perspective taking
- Conversational repair
- Monologic Vs. Co-constructed narratives
- Direct Vs. Indirect Speech Acts
- Deep Vs Surface meanings: understanding and use
- Social Cognition
Language problems, social marginalisation and mental health

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Social Phobia
- Substance misuse
- Conduct Disorder
- Difficulties benefiting from verbally mediated psychological therapies (e.g. CBT)
- Mis-labelling of behaviours associated with disordered language
Language as a tool of Social Belonging: Social Cognition

- Social Inferencing
- Theory of Mind
- Empathy
- Working memory
- Therapeutic / Healing nature of relationships
The transition to literacy

- Promotes
  - academic achievement,
  - school attachment and retention,
  - positive self esteem
- An important **Protective Factor**
- *Learning to Read Vs Reading to Learn*
- The Matthew Effect

NB Radio National *Ockham’s Razor* Sunday Jan 24 2010:  
The Matthew Effect

Matthew Effects in Reading

With foundational skills

Without foundational skills

Achievement

Grade

K 1 2 3
The “typical” young offender

- Is male
- Leaves school sometime around Year 8 - 9; history of truancy, poor school attachment
- History of learning and **conduct** disorder
- High risk for substance abuse
- Associates with similar peers
- Chaotic family structure; involvement with Child Protection agencies
- 2\(^{nd}\) generation risk factors
- Higher rates of all-cause mortality
- Polymorbidity
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Implications for language development?
Our research on young offenders

- Draws on existing evidence re comorbidity b/w learning and behaviour problems in high-risk boys.
  - Learning problems as a surrogate marker.
- Based on the notion that oral language competence has been overlooked in high-risk youth – often in favour of behavioural interventions
- Positioning oral language competence as an equity issue with respect to the protective role played by academic achievement
The aims of our research

- To explore / describe oral language competence in this high risk group
- To examine association between oral language impairment and type of offending (property Vs violent)
- To examine the association between language competence and social skill
- To consider ways in which marginalised youth might be further disadvantaged.
Three Studies (a fourth recently completed)

Study 3:

- N = 50 male Youth Offenders, 50 non-offending male controls from same SES government high schools
- Completing Community Based Orders
- Aged 13 – 19
- Youth offenders significantly older than controls
- Exclusion Criteria
- Metropolitan Melbourne and Regional Victoria
- Ethics Approvals
Measures of

- Comprehension of figurative / abstract language
- Narrative discourse (story telling) production
- Information processing
- Sentence repetition
- Social skill – across three conditions
- Nonverbal IQ
Narrative Discourse

- Telling a story in order to share information / experiences with a listener with varying degrees of prior knowledge / naiveté
- Requires a delicate interplay between language, cognitive, and memory skills
- Developmentally +++ sensitive
- The skill that is tapped in an investigative interview – whether as a suspect, a victim, or a witness
Study No. 3 cont.

- N = 50 young male offenders and 50 controls
- Loddon-Mallee region of Victoria
- Offenders
  - mean age of 15.8 yrs* (SD = 1.2)
  - mean years of schooling = 7.6 yrs (SD = 2.0)
    (n=26 had already left school)
  - K-BIT matrices subtest mean = 85.8 (SD = 18.3)
- Controls
  - mean age of 14.9 (SD = 1.1)
  - mean years of schooling = 7.8 yrs (SD = 1.0)
  - K-BIT matrices subtest mean = 90.1 (SD = 14.8)
Years of schooling and early identification of language / literacy problems

- 23/50 Youth Offenders reported having received some form of early intervention (e.g. Reading Recovery)

**BUT**

- 32/50 completed only up to **Year 8**
Language Impairment in the offender group

- 52% of offenders classified as Language Impaired
- Language Impaired subgroup did NOT differ significantly from non-LI offenders on age or nonverbal IQ
- LI subgroup said significantly less on the narrative discourse task
- Language and social skills were NOT significantly correlated in the Youth Offender group, but were in the control group
- Questions re possible links between interpersonal violence and LI were unanswered
  ⇒ current study (2009 – 10)
LI Vs Non-LI offenders cont.

- 13/26 LI young offenders reported having had literacy difficulties in the early school years (Vs 5/24 in non-LI subgroup);

- 16/26 LI young offenders reported having received some form of early intervention (Vs 7/24 in non-LI subgroup)

- Drug use histories of the two groups were similar, except for possibly higher recent cannabis use in non-LI subgroup
Key Findings

Significant differences* on measures of

- Understanding ambiguous sentences
- Understanding figurative (non-literal) language
- Narrative discourse – simple story telling – overall poorer scores; particular problems with certain story elements
- Speed of comprehension, sentence repetition
- Social Skill across all three conditions

*No significant difference on measure of non-verbal IQ

*These differences were statistically significant AND occurred in the context of the young offenders being significantly older than controls
So what?

- >50% of young offenders can be classified as ‘language impaired’; specific features in the LI subgroup
- Need to consider underlying language skills of problem-boys
- “Problem boys” are likely to display communication behaviours that wrongly suggest rudeness / lack of motivation, e.g. ‘yep, nup, dunno, maybe’ – but these may simply be the best available responses
- Early intervention is about altering the life-trajectories of high-risk young people – greater emphasis needs to be placed on oral language competence as a modifiable variable
- Low IQ does not account for these problems
Limitations

- Cross-sectional, so no causal inferences can be drawn
- Convenience sampling
- Self-selection into control group introduces a prosocial bias
- Limited range of language measures
- Exclusion criteria mean that we are probably under-estimating the extent of the problems.
- Relationship b/w type of offending and LI remains unclear.
Early findings from our current study on custodial youth offenders

- Malmsbury YTC
- \( N = 100 \)
- 61% Language Impaired
- Links emerging between
  - Pattern of offending and LI – esp at extremes
  - Early risk profiles and LI, e.g., experience of Out of Home Care Placement
- No clear role of IQ in “accounting for” LI
Language problems are invisible
What does all of this mean for

- Early intervention with high-risk boys?
- **Forensic interviewing of youth offenders?**
- Counselling of young offenders?
- Restorative Justice conferencing?
- Mental Health across the lifespan?
  - Mastery
  - Optimism / Hope
- Delivery of literacy and social skill interventions within the (Youth) Justice system?
Recent evidence (2010) from the UK (Bryan et al)

SLP interventions with non-custodial young offenders can be successful in improving oral language skills.
Publications


