Children and Language

Readings in early language & socialization

Edited by
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Introduction

Although the study of the acquisition of a first language has been split
by a controversy between the *innatists* and the *behaviourists*, neither
group has given enough consideration to the relationship between
language development and all the other developments of the child—
social, cognitive, perceptual. This collection of readings links the
development of language to the broader societal and functional aspects
of language actually being used. Theories about language acquisition
have almost always ignored the actual context and use of language.

At times the controversy between the innatists (Chomsky, Lenneberg,
McNeill, Menyuk) and the behaviourists (Bloomfield, Skinner, Sapon,
Jenkins and Palermo) has produced more heat than light, as each side
believes it has a missionary role in converting the other. The innatists
seek to limit the influence of the social context in the acquisition of
language by stressing the innate mechanisms which

> describe the child's acquisition of language as a kind of theory
> construction. *The child discovers the theory of his language with only
> small amounts of data from that language.*
>
> (Chomsky 1968, p. 66, my italics)

Notice the use of the phrase 'theory of his language' by Chomsky.
He is not saying that the child acquires the means of *using* his language.
He is concerned, as are most of the innatists, with describing the
potential knowledge of language of children—the child's competence,
particularly that aspect of competence dealing with syntax. The be-
haviourists, on the other hand, have been concerned with the role
played by the environment and experience in the process of acquisition.
But much of their work has been concentrated on differentials between

the language of children of different social classes or children brought up in institutions, and so on.

The very early linguistic and social and cultural environments have clearly marked effects on both the acquisition process and on what is actually acquired. This can be seen especially in section 3 of this book. It is time now for a different approach—an examination of the roles and functions of children's language in society; for with development in language ability goes increased language use which leads to an increased awareness of the world and the child's society and his place in it. It is impossible yet to say which development triggers off another, but what must be clear is that any development in language is not simply a consequence of linguistic factors only, but involves perception, cognition, social environment and others. The over-all aim of this collection of readings is to bring together, from a wide spread of disciplines, articles which give body, social and personal context to the study of child language.

The Sections

The readings in this collection have been selected on the basis of how much information they give of the societal and functional aspects of language in use. The first section contains three readings each of which in its own way, attempts to relate the requirements of a theoretical approach to language acquisition to the necessity of realizing just how much of the actual linguistic situation has been left out of previous theoretical discussions. The development of the functions of language in use in society is the concern of the rest of the collection. As I see it, the book pivots around Halliday's article *Relevant Models of Language*. This makes it abundantly clear that children have a much greater range of uses of language than adults, who tend to think of language as primarily a medium for carrying messages; children on the other hand use it to learn and understand the world, society, about themselves, they use it to play with and so on. This second section is devoted to the ways in which the child attaches meaning to such concepts as 'self', 'nonself', to other people, behaviour, physical events and so on, using language the whole time as a mediating and expressive medium.

The third section discusses how the developing language of the child allows him to discuss what he perceives. This 'talking about' is essential in any thinking or learning process as it enables the child to make links and comparisons between what he has already learned and the new material. It is only when the new is thoroughly related and made part

of the old by internal or external discussion, that it can be used as a springboard to the next new information. Clearly language is critical in all this.

Section 4 covers the area of how language is used to give meaning to behaviour and the experiences the child has of the world. The role of language here is one perhaps mainly of a medium of discussion and comparison again. Concepts such as 'small', 'big', 'somebody else's property', 'good manners' can be easily coded in language which can then be used for discussion and reference.

Section 5 deals with the influence of background on linguistic and other developmental processes particularly from the point of view of the disadvantaged child. This is an area of increasing concern as so-called linguistically deprived children have many problems when at school. A major part of the section is given to Basil Bernstein's article in which he discusses the problems of differing linguistic developmental schemata.

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The Social Contexts of Language

The general thesis linking this book is that the acquisition and development of language involves a much wider perspective of developments in the child. If this thesis is held, then it means that one ought not to consider language acquisition merely in terms of language. The three readings in this section put the case for and against the social context. I have perhaps declared my bias by including two readings which stress that the whole context of the child's situation should be considered, to one, by McNeill, which does not see any particular usefulness accruing from including the context. The article by Campbell and Wales and the later one by Bloom approach the question of context from different points of view. Each of the readings has arisen out of certain drawbacks that the authors have found in previous research and are endeavouring to put right in their own. Campbell and Wales concern themselves especially with the widening of Chomsky's 'competence'. This, briefly, is not the rather restricted competence in the Chomskian sense but the 'ability to produce or understand utterances which are not so much grammatical but, more important, *appropriate to the context in which they are made*' (Reading 1, p. 7). The authors suggest that the acquisition of this communicative competence, much more than any other kind, is dependent upon the whole communicative environment.

1 ROBIN CAMPBELL and ROGER WALES
The Study of Language Acquisition

1. The first attempt we know of to record the linguistic development of a child was that of the German biologist Tiedemann (1787) and his interest was in initiating the collection of normative data on the development of children. The greatest stimulus to the serious and careful study of the acquisition of language by children stems from Darwin's theory of evolution, which suggested the continuity of man with other animals. Darwin himself contributed a pioneer study ·(1877), as did Taine (1877). But it was in the superb, detailed study of the German physiologist Preyer (1882), who made detailed daily notes throughout the first three years of his son's development, that the study of child language found its true founding father. With Sully (1895) and Shinn (1893) following closely on Preyer, a substantial tradition of careful descriptive work was established, easily traceable from the early decades of this century in the journal *Pedagogical Seminary*, through the massive work of the Sterns (1924, 1928) and Leopold (1939–49), up to the exciting recent attempts to refine the descriptive process by appropriating the tools developed by the generative grammarians (e.g. Brown and Fraser 1963). This tradition was largely unaffected by the behaviourist movement in psychology.

It seems appropriate to begin this chapter by referring to the historical origins of the study, because there is currently a tendency to forget that the scientific study of child language has an important and thoroughly respectable heritage of observation and theoretical discussion. Recognition of the existence of this tradition and its influence may not only save us from the mere reworking of old questions but may also lead us to adopt a more moderate and informed position with respect to a number of contemporary claims and controversies. For example, the contemporary practice of vilifying behaviourism for its misleading and inept attempts to

explain language acquisition seems largely irrelevant. The impor-
tant issue is how to go beyond the achievements of Leopold and
the Sterns, scholars who owed nothing to behaviourism.

Let us therefore allow Sully to describe the kinds of questions
and issues which continue to determine the range and nature of
our interest in child language:

To the evolutionary biologist the child exhibits man in his
kinship to the lower sentient world. This same evolutionary
point of view enables the psychologist to connect the unfolding
of an infant's mind with something which has gone before, with
the mental history of the race (1895:8). If, reflects the psycholo-
gist, he can only get at this baby's consciousness so as to under-
stand what is passing there, he will be in an infinitely better
position to find his way through the intricacies of the adult
consciousness. It may be, as we shall see by and by, that the
baby's mind is not so perfectly simple, so absolutely primitive
as it at first looks (1875:7). In this genetic tracing back of the
complexities of man's mental life to their primitive elements
in the child's consciousness, questions of peculiar interest arise.
A problem, which though having a venerable antiquity is still
full of meaning, concerns the precise relation of the higher
forms of intelligence and of sentiment to the elementary facts
of the individual's life experience. Are we to regard all our
ideas as woven by the mind out of its experiences, as Locke
thought, or have we certain 'innate ideas' from the first. Locke
thought he could settle this point by observing children. Today
when the philosophic interest is laid not on the date of the
appearance of the innate intuition, but on its originality and
spontaneity, this method of interrogating the child's mind may
seem less promising. Yet if of less philosophical importance
than was once supposed, it is of great psychological importance
(1895:7–8). The awakening of this keen and varied interest
in childhood has led, and is destined to lead still more, to the
observation of infantile ways. Pretty anecdotes of children
which tickle the emotions may or may not add to our insight
into the peculiar mechanism of children's minds (1895:10).
The observation which is to further understanding, which is to
be acceptable to science, must be scientific. That is to say, it

must be at once guided by foreknowledge, specially directed to what is essential in a phenomenon and its surroundings or conditions, and perfectly exact. If anybody supposes this to be easy, he should first try his hand at the work, and then compare what he has seen with what Darwin or Preyer has been able to discover (1895:11).

Thus from the first the study of language acquisition was set in the context of the investigation of the child's total development. Further, the original interest arose out of serious questions about the nature of man and his behaviour: there was more at stake than mere description. Nevertheless, priority was given to the careful description of what the child was doing. This was followed by attempts to elucidate what sort of thing language acquisition was, and only then by speculation about the explanations of these phenomena. We will now use these aims as a platform from which to discuss contemporary issues.

In the pursuit of these aims Leopold (1948) and those before him took the communicative act as their basic psychological unit. Description was a matter of accurately recording not only the form of a child's utterances, but also the context in which they were made and the meanings (so far as they could be determined) of the constituent 'words'. Perhaps because of this, but more probably because they did not have such clear ideas about syntax as we have today, these early workers tended to terminate their accounts at about the beginning of the third year of the child's life, by which time most children have begun to produce utterances of two or three distinct words.

The principal focus of more recent research, however, has been the period stretching from the beginning of such syntactically structured speech. This reorientation is due almost completely to Chomsky's work in syntactic theory. The main aim of this chapter will be to argue that an extremely important guiding principle of the early work has been sacrificed in this reorientation and to suggest some ways in which it might be restored to its former methodological prominence. Limited space prevents us from giving a detailed review of empirical work on language acquisition, but many excellent reviews are available elsewhere: cf. Richter (1927), Leopold (1948), McNeill (1966, 1969), Ervin-Tripp

(1966). Details of much recent work can also be found in the following collections of articles: Bellugi and Brown (1964), Smith and Miller (1966), Slobin (1970), Reed (1970), Hayes (1970).

Contrary to what one might expect, our knowledge of language acquisition has not been greatly advanced by the recent spate of empirical work. Furthermore, it is our belief that no real theoretical understanding of the acquisition of syntax will be obtained unless, paradoxical as this may seem, the methodological distinction between *competence* and *performance* drawn by Chomsky (the man who, more than any other, has shown the shallowness, indeed the irrelevance, of almost all behaviourist accounts of language acquisition) is drastically revised. We will now indicate how and why we think this distinction should be revised.

2. In the first half of Fodor and Garrett (1966) there is an excellent discussion of the distinction between competence and performance, in the course of which the authors distinguish one clear sense of the distinction which they, like us, regard as 'eminently honourable'. This is the sense in which competence in any sphere is identified with capacity or ability, as opposed to actual performance, which may only imperfectly reflect underlying capacity. This sense of the distinction has been honoured by psychologists in the past (e.g. Lashley, Hull, and many psychologists concerned with education) and likewise by certain social psychologists concerned with the study of attitude and opinion, etc. (e.g. Lazarsfeld). It applies in the construction of so-called 'performance' models of language users; that is to say, 'performance' models are in fact models of competence (in this weak sense of competence). However, when Chomsky talks of competence he is usually referring to a far 'stronger' notion, although it is not clear exactly what is meant by this stronger notion. We shall try to clarify the stronger notion in what follows.

The diverse capacities of human beings are subject to a variety of limitations, and some of these limitations may be described as 'non-essential'. For instance, our arithmetical capacity is limited by the amount of information we can store and manipulate at any one time; our capacity to walk is limited by the amount of time we can go without food or rest. In both these cases, the limiting factors are very general, applying, in the case of the former, to all

mental activities and, in the case of the latter, to all physical activities. Hence we may, if we so choose, omit these limiting factors from our theoretical account of arithmetical or locomotive abilities: they are non-essential (i.e. non-specific) to these abilities. Similarly, by omitting any account of the role of memory or the various low-level sensori-motor capacities involved in the perception and production of speech, we can considerably simplify our characterization of linguistic abilities, and thereby arrive at the stronger notion of linguistic competence.

We have distinguished two senses of the term 'linguistic competence', the 'weaker' and the 'stronger'. We shall refer to these as *competence*$_1$ and *competence*$_2$ respectively. So far our discussion has been relatively uncontroversial, and it would be generally agreed that the clarification of the notion of 'competence' has far-reaching consequences for the psychological investigation of language and for the study of language acquisition in particular (cf. Moravcsik 1967, 1969). But we must now distinguish a third sense of 'competence'.

Although generative grammarians, in particular Chomsky, claim that their work is an attempt to characterize the nature of competence$_2$ (that is, the nature of those human abilities that are specific to language), their main effort has in fact been directed towards a more restricted sort of competence, which we will call *competence*$_3$, from which by far the most important linguistic ability has been omitted—the ability to produce or understand utterances which are not so much grammatical but, more important, *appropriate to the context in which they are made* (on this point, the crux of this chapter, see also Schlesinger 1971). By 'context' we mean both the situational and the verbal context of utterances. It is interesting to note that in at least one place Chomsky allows that part of this ability belongs properly to linguistic competence: 'an essential property of language is that it provides the means for . . . reacting appropriately in an indefinite range of new situations' (1965: 6). In passing, it is also worth remarking that the gloomy, negativistic and questionable conclusions of Fodor and Garrett (1966) on the nature of the relationship between grammar and 'performance' models lose their relevance once it is realized how crucial this notion of contextual appropriateness is to the use of language, since neither the type of grammar motivating

the empirical studies they discuss, nor the studies themselves, incorporate contextual information.

Of those linguistic abilities explicitly accounted for by recent transformational work, it is the ability to produce and understand indefinitely many novel sentences that has received the greatest attention. Chomsky frequently refers to this ability and for him at least it is this productivity and creativity implicit in the normal use of language that most needs explaining. Chomsky's many remarks on this point are well grounded, and he has quite properly criticized twentieth-century 'structural' linguistics and behaviourist psychology for ignoring this important aspect of language use. But one can go too far in the opposite direction. Much of what we say and write is constrained, in important ways, by the particular circumstances in which we are speaking or writing. Recent work on language acquisition and use has tended to neglect this fact.

Before continuing, we should emphasize that it is not our intention to question the productivity or creativity of language use: what we are insisting upon is the limited nature of the productivity to be explained. Nor do we wish to take issue with the validity of choosing, as a methodological decision, to limit the study of language to the level of context-less sentences. It should be recognized, however, that although a limitation of this kind may serve linguistic ends, its inevitable effect upon the psychology of language is as stultifying as that of the much-abused behaviourist approaches. The history of psychology shows that there is a very great danger of leaping from one extreme position to another when in fact the correct view of the phenomena lies somewhere in between. (A good recent example might be the incremental v. all-or-none learning controversy: cf. Simon 1968). We are therefore arguing that an adequate psychology of language must take account not only of the creative aspects of language use but also of the important role played by contextual factors.

At this point it is worth while referring to a related issue which has been grossly oversimplified in recent psycholinguistic literature. It is only too easy to infer from a casual reading of Chomsky's devastating review (1959) of Skinner or Bever, Fodor and Weksel's (1965) critique of Braine that not only have traditional learning theories very little to say on the subject of language