

Michael Lewis
Leonard A. Rosenblum
EDITORS

**INTERACTION, CONVERSATION,
AND THE
DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGE**

THE
ORIGINS
OF
BEHAVIOR
SERIES



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Interaction, Conversation, and the Development of Language

Edited by

Michael Lewis

Educational Testing Service

and

Leonard A. Rosenblum

State University of New York
Downstate Medical Center

A Wiley-Interscience Publication

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Michael Lewis and
Leonard A. Rosenblum, Editors

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Volume 5

Interaction, Conversation, and
the Development of Language

Michael Lewis and
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Series Preface

*"The childhood shows the man,
as morning shows the day."*

Milton, *Paradise Regained*

None can doubt that the study of man begins in the study of childhood. Few would contend that the newborn lacks the challenge of his evolutionary heritage. This series addresses itself to the task of bringing together, on a continuing basis, that confluence of theory and data on ontogeny and phylogeny which will serve to illustrate *The Origins of Behavior*.

Whether our social, human, and professional concerns lie in the psychological disorders of childhood or adulthood or merely in the presumptively normal range of expression in development in different cultures, varied environments, or diverse family constellations, we can never hope to discern order and regularity from the mass of uncertain observation and groundless speculation if we fail to nurture the scientific study of development. Fortunately, the last two decades have seen an enormous burgeoning of effort toward this end, both at the human and nonhuman level. However, despite this growth of effort and interest, no single means of pooling our growing knowledge on development in children and animals and communicating that fusion of material to the broad scientific community now exists. This series seeks to fill the gap. It is our intention to have each volume deal with a specific theme that is either of social or of theoretical relevance to developmental issues. In keeping with the integrated perspective that we consider to be vital, and to provide a meaningful context within which these issues may be considered, each volume in the series will contain a broad range of material and will seek to encompass theoretical and sound empirical studies of the behavior of human infants as well as pertinent aspects of animal behavior with a particular emphasis on the primates. It is our view, furthermore, that not only is it necessary to focus our interest on both human infants and animals, but that the levels of analysis which will explicate the processes of development that are our concern must ultimately involve the study of behavior at all levels of discourse. Thus studies of developmental significance may be found in genetic, physiological, morphological, dyadic, and societal levels and an

increased interdigitation of these separate disciplines is among the major goals of this series.

In light of the diversity of topics to be considered, the breadth of material to be covered, and the variety of orientations that will be included in these discourses on the origins of human behavior, we expect this series to serve the needs of the broad social science community, not merely of those interested in behavioral development alone. Just as the series itself will draw upon the knowledge and research of psychologists, ethologists, sociologists, psychiatrists, pediatricians, obstetricians, and devoted scientists and clinicians in a number of related disciplines, it is our hope that the material in this series will provide both stimulation and guidance to all among us who are concerned with man, his past, his present, and his future.

Michael Lewis
Leonard A. Rosenblum
Editors

June 1973

Preface

This volume, the fifth in the series *The Origins of Behavior*, represents the first comprehensive effort to consider the early development of language from the viewpoint of its social genesis. The role of early conversational interaction, in both its verbal and its nonverbal aspects, in initiating and structuring the emerging language potential of the infant must be considered if we are to appreciate the complexity of language acquisition. The structure of this volume reflects the early language capacity of infants and the ontogenetic and phylogenetic precursors of the complex elements of the communication process. Finally, the volume presents a series of theoretical models which provide a basis for relating the elaboration of early communicative acts into subsequent formal language skills.

The chapters in this volume derive from papers presented and discussed at a conference on communication and language held under the auspices and with the support of the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey. The chapters reflect a broad range of interests, linked together by their underlying theme—the social genesis of language and its relationship to social acts. The volume represents an effort toward the integration of speech and social acts into a theory of communication.

The participants in the conference were Drs. Elizabeth Bates, Lois Bloom, Courtney Cazden, Louise Cherry, Susan Ervin-Tripp, Roy Freedle, Catherine Garvey, Rochel Gelman, Timothy Gill, Joseph Jaffe, Michael Lewis, Peter Marler, Martin Richards, Leonard Rosenblum, Duane Rumbaugh, Louis Sander, Irving Sigel, and Daniel Stern.

Michael Lewis
Leonard A. Rosenblum

Princeton, New Jersey
Brooklyn, New York
November 1976

Interaction, Conversation, and the Development of Language

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Introduction

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The studies reported in this volume are concerned with the social and biological origins of language. Our primary focus is on the development of one aspect of language—conversation. Conversation is one of many early-acquired skills whose development is mediated largely through early social experience, particularly that between mother and infant. Considering conversational language as a skill enables us both to measure current capacities and performance and, more importantly, to focus attention on the shifting array of other skills within which language is embedded.

A CASE STUDY—CONVERSATIONAL DYSFUNCTION

The brief description of a child's interaction with its teacher that follows will be considered within the general framework of the child's attainment of conversational skill. The dysfunctional aspects of the child's speech behavior will be seen as one part of a series of social interaction difficulties. As such, this example provides a concrete setting within which to demonstrate many of the general themes developed in this volume.

C., a physically normal 5-year-old girl, sits quietly at a table waiting for her nursery school teacher to begin her lesson. She watches as the teacher moves toward her but says nothing when her teacher greets her. "What would you like to do this morning?" the teacher asks. No reply. "Would you like to look at this picture book?" C. no longer is looking at either the teacher or the picture book the teacher has in her hand. In response to a second request for directed attention (looking at the book), the child turns toward the teacher—still not toward the picture book itself. Asked the question a second time, C. finally says, "Yes" (still not looking at the book before her). The teacher opens the book and turns to a picture of an autumn scene,

leaves of many colors. The request "Show me the red leaves" is finally responded to correctly as the child points to the object in the book.

Trying to engage the child still further, the teacher asks, "Do I have any red on my blouse?" Without looking at the blouse C. answers, "Yes." (In fact, there is red on the blouse.) "Touch the red part" requires that the child turn toward the teacher and look at her blouse. After some hesitation C. finally complies with the request. To the final question, "Do you have red on your shirt?" the child answers (without looking), "Marvin's birthday." (Today is her 4-year-old brother's birthday.)

It appears that the lack of language ability in this child, in terms of both comprehension and production, is embedded in an array of social-interactive dysfunctions. In fact, C. was placed in this nursery school setting because she was found to be seriously neglected by her mother. Inquiries, comments, and replies are curtailed and for the most part absent. Perhaps the architectural support for verbal exchange that lies in more general forms of social focus and attention has failed to develop because of her background of neglect. The child asks little of the teacher, neither information nor affective support, and shows signs of not comprehending the format of question-answer interaction. She fails to show signs of knowing either (1) that questions require answers or (2) how her behavior should be organized to answer correctly (i.e., to direct her attention toward the relevant aspects of her environment which can supply the answer). When forcefully directed and shaped to produce a response, as in the final question above, she produces an answer but it is irrelevant to the question.

It would seem that for this child something of the essential nature and structure of language as a social instrument, one of exchange and interaction, has failed to develop. In view of her particular history of neglect, it is no wonder why speech, particularly speech having exchange function, remains underdeveloped. Why use interactive speech if its historical function in social interaction is obscure?

Experimental research on early social development in nonhuman primates provides further support for the view that the ontogeny of communication requires consideration of the social history of the individual. If infant monkeys, for example, are removed from their mothers shortly after birth, and then raised for most of the first year without interactive experience, a breakdown in the entire constellation of social and communicative abilities emerges. When the socially deprived infants are rather young, their response to the playful overtures of a peer is usually one of fear and withdrawal. Apparently these "paracommunications" that precede play initiations and signal that the initiator's rapid approach is not aggressive or threatening are either unattended to or misinterpreted by the deprived infant. Indeed, work by Alpert and Rosenblum (1974) suggests that isolation rearing