

Speaking

The Sociolinguistic

With

Skills of Children

Style



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Speaking With Style

The Sociolinguistic Skills of Children

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Speaking With Style

For
my children, Kara and Scott
and
my parents, Margery and Milton Slosberg

Preface

The research reported in this book falls somewhere between the disciplines of psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics, examining the interface of linguistic and social knowledge in early development. My principal teachers at Stanford, Charles Ferguson and Eve Clark, convinced me early on that language can not be fully understood without consideration of the social and psychological contexts in which it is acquired and used. A number of scholars who share this view, most notably Jean Berko Gleason, Susan Ervin-Tripp, Elizabeth Bates, Elinor Ochs, and Jacqueline Sachs, have inspired my work, through both conversations and their own research.

The initial aim of this book was to document the acquisition of register knowledge, the **linguistic** ability to modify one's speech in subtle yet systematic ways to 'fit' a variety of often complex social situations. However, it is now clear to me that the findings of this study are at least as relevant for scholars concerned with the development of **social cognition** as for linguists. I have therefore aimed, especially in chapter 3, to provide a framework that will make clear the value of this work in that regard. Also, because of the interdisciplinary nature of my research, and because I have a growing sense that sociolinguistic impairment may prove to be a particularly useful detector of learning disabilities, I have tried to make the information in this book accessible to a wide audience, including teachers, speech therapists, and parents, as well as students of child language.

This project has received support from several institutions whom I would like to gratefully acknowledge. The National Science Foundation provided financial support during the initial

data collection and analysis, while the Spencer Foundation made possible much of the writing. In addition, the Max-Planck-Institut-für-Psycholinguistik in Nijmegen provided office space, a stimulating environment, and the use of their wonderful library at different points during the preparation of the manuscript.

I am also indebted to numerous individuals who have contributed in various ways to this project, most notably: the children who participated in this study and their families; my former research assistants, Mary Catherine O'Connor and Sharon Veach; and a few special colleagues and friends, Marlene Arns, Susan Foster, Heather Holmback, but especially John Hawkins and James Gee, without whose support and encouragement this long journey never would have met its end.

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Introduction

The more we study speech in natural settings, the more we find systematic variation within every speaker, reflecting who he is addressing, where he is, what the social event may be, the topic of discussion, and the social relations he communicates by speaking. The regularities in these features of speech make them as amenable to analysis as the abstracted rules called grammars. Competence in speaking includes the ability to use appropriate speech for the circumstance and when deviating from the normal to convey what is intended. It would be an incompetent speaker who used babytalk to everyone or randomly interspersed sentences in babytalk or in a second language regardless of circumstance. It would be equally incompetent to use formal style in all situations and to all addressees in a society allowing for a broader range of variation.

(Ervin-Tripp 1973a: 268)

In acquiring full *communicative competence*, children must learn to speak not only grammatically, but also appropriately (Hymes 1972). At some time during acquisition they must learn a variety of sociolinguistic and social interactional rules which govern appropriate language use. Though the language addressed to 2-year-olds may be highly specialized, by the time children reach age 4 or 5, they have experienced diverse speech settings: they go to the doctor, to preschool, to birthday parties, to the grocery store. They participate in a variety of speech situations, with people who differ in age, sex, status and familiarity, and whose speech will therefore vary in a number of systematic ways.

Are young children aware of these sociolinguistic and social

interactional differences? What do they know about the appropriateness of linguistic forms used to indicate particular situations and particular roles and relationships?

Unfortunately, there has been relatively little investigation of these questions. Until the last decade or so, most research on children's language was of a psycholinguistic nature, centred on one or more aspects of phonological, morphosyntactic, or semantic development. This focus was in large part due to the concept of linguistic competence proposed by Chomsky (1959, 1965) which provided the major impetus for studies of first language acquisition.

The notion of competence and language acquisition

In Chomsky's view, a speaker's linguistic *competence* is the purely grammatical knowledge of an ideal speaker-hearer that allows him to produce the infinitely large set of sentences that constitutes his language. This knowledge is seen largely as an innate biological function of mind, and the importance of child language research is therefore to document the emergence of innately determined grammatical structures in order to test the linguistic theory about the nature of competence. A major distinction is drawn between competence and *performance*, i.e. language behaviour, with the latter said to be determined by 'non-linguistic' factors such as physiological and psychological factors (e.g. fatigue) impacting actual production, as well as speakers' attitudes and beliefs about the world, and the social conventions of the speech community of which one is a member. With this framework, child language research in the 1960s was devoted almost exclusively to studies of grammar, testing, for example, whether a transformational model could account for the acquisition of question forms, of passives, or of various other syntactic structures. Toward the end of the 1960s, as many of these accounts proved unsatisfactory, there was a semantic revolution of sorts both in child language study, and in linguistic theory more generally (Fillmore 1968; Lakoff 1970; McCawley 1971). Researchers in acquisition came to realize that it was impossible to evaluate children's knowledge without examining the *context* in which they use their early language and the kinds of semantic relations they encode (Bloom 1970). Common to the syntax-focused work of the 1960s and the semantic-based work of the 1970s was a search for *universals* in the acquisition of *structure*,

assuming an innate basis to language (be it purely linguistic as in the first case, or more generally cognitive, as in the second), which would result in all normal children passing through the same stages in the acquisition of competence in the same order.

Since that time, however, a growing number of researchers in sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics have become dissatisfied with a monolithic, idealized notion of competence. When linguists like Labov (1966) and Halliday (1970) began to pay greater attention to intra-language variation, their proposals required a broadening of Chomsky's view of what needed to be accounted for in language acquisition. Campbell and Wales (1970), for example, proposed that competence should be extended to include the native speaker's capacity to produce or understand utterances appropriate to the verbal and situational context. This expanded notion of competence, then, subsumed part of what previous notions allocated to the domain of performance: knowledge of the ways in which social conventions and the speaker's attitudes and beliefs about the world systematically impact language structure. The change of emphasis in linguistic theory was paralleled by a shift in focus in studies of acquisition. Since children acquiring language must obviously learn more than grammatical rules and vocabulary alone, other aspects of their *communicative competence* are worthy of attention:

We have then to account for the fact that a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences, not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner. In short, a child becomes able to accomplish a repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events, and to evaluate their accomplishment by others.

(Hymes 1972: 277)

Although rules for appropriate language use may vary from culture to culture, they are usually sensitive across languages to many of the same factors, including the context and topic of discourse, and the sex, age, and status of the people speaking. In most languages, for instance, adults speak in one way to young children, in another to older children, and in yet another to fellow adults (Fernald 1984; Ferguson 1977; Andersen 1975); doctors address their patients in one way and consulting physicians or

friends in another (Shuy 1976); students 'change their style' when they leave a peer group in the corridor to join an academic discussion in the classroom (De Stefano 1972a, 1972b; Houston 1969a, 1970); native speakers consistently modify their speech when addressing foreigners (Ferguson 1975); and men and women exhibit manners of speech which may differ to a greater or lesser degree, dependent in part on their roles in society (Thorne, Kramer and Henley 1983; Thorne and Henley 1975; Keenan 1974; Lakoff 1973).

These stylistic differences, which are referred to as *register variation* (see Chapter 2), are often very subtle. Indeed, when a foreigner has attained near-native ability in a second language, it is often along the dimension of appropriateness that his speech reveals his incomplete knowledge: 'The choice of items from the wrong register, and the mixing of items from different registers, are among the most frequent mistakes made by non-native speakers of a language' (Halliday *et al.* 1970: 150). For example, such a speaker may use a colloquial expression in too formal a situation, or a female non-native speaker may use a form considered especially 'masculine' in a given culture. Thus, there are a large number of social skills in communication that children must acquire before they can be said to have mastered the use of their native language.

Lakoff (1973) and others (see Piaget 1970, on the egocentric nature of children's language) have suggested that children aged 4 or 5 are unaware of many rules of socio-cultural appropriateness, but that by age 10 or so they can use differentiated 'styles', or *registers* of speech. But a number of other studies have indicated that this is an underestimate of the child's abilities – that instead children learn to make *some* context-sensitive stylistic adjustments in their speech at a much earlier age (Ervin-Tripp and Gordon 1986; Sachs and Devin 1976; Andersen and Johnson 1973; Shatz and Gelman 1973). These studies, however, either have been quite limited in focus or have looked at only a few children. They leave unanswered many questions of exactly *how* and *when* during acquisition children learn to use their language appropriately.

The present study

The study which I will present in this book examines young children's knowledge of the sociolinguistic rules that govern

appropriate language use, exploring (i) the repertoire of registers (i.e., situationally determined language varieties) that young children possess; (ii) the linguistic devices that they use to mark distinct registers; and (iii) the way their skill in using these registers develops. This research differs from other studies of the development of sociolinguistic skills in the range of linguistic markers and social dimensions that are explored. It does so by employing a research methodology which I have called 'controlled improvisation' which allows the investigator to elicit a very rich corpus of data, comparable across children, in a time- and energy-efficient manner. This method will be discussed in Chapter 4. First, however, I will turn in the next chapter to a brief survey of the sociolinguistic studies of register variation in adult populations, followed in Chapter 3 by a selected overview of recent research in 'developmental sociolinguistics'. Chapters, 5, 6, and 7 explore different linguistic devices used by young children to mark distinct registers, looking first at 'Discourse structure and content', then at 'Variation in utterance form and function', and finally at the 'Phonological, lexical, and morphological markings of register'. Chapter 8 provides a brief summary and conclusions about the relevance of these findings, not only to a general theory of language acquisition, but also to theories of social and cognitive development.

The study of register variation

Every human being is a bundle of institutionalized roles. He has to play many parts, and unless he knows his lines as well as his role he is no use in the play.

(Firth, quoted in Verma 1969: 293)

The notion of 'register'

Doctors from Atlanta speak differently from doctors from Brooklyn; they come from different regions of the United States. Salespeople at Saks in New York speak differently from salespeople at Gimbels in that same city; they come from different socio-economic classes (Labov 1966). The speech of grandparents varies in a number of systematic ways from the speech of their grandchildren; they are from different generations. The area of linguistics which traditionally has been concerned with such differences is called dialectology: regional and 'temporal' dialects have long been a topic of study for linguists (Bloomfield 1933); social dialects have also been of long-standing interest (Labov 1972(a); Bernstein 1960; Sweet 1928).

There is, however, another dimension along which one can arrange language varieties. While dialects vary in relation to characteristics of *users* (i.e. where they are from, their social class), there are other varieties within any language which are distinguished by the circumstances of their *use*. The use of the term 'register' to describe this form of variation was introduced by Reid (1956) who first analysed the phenomenon in the context of bilingualism. (Other terms – most notably 'speech style', 'variety', and 'code' – have also been used, but 'register' seems preferable to

them, largely because, unlike the others, it has not already been applied with other meanings to such fields as literature, dialectology, etc.¹) Reid pointed out that in many bilingual or multilingual communities, given languages serve discrete functions. Language *x*, for example, may be used in the classroom, in the newspaper, in government, etc., while language *y* is used in the market-place or at home. Ferguson (1959) observed an analogous situation (which he labelled 'diglossia') in a number of monolingual communities, where, instead of languages varying with function, speakers simply use different forms of the same language – e.g., classical Arabic in the classroom and colloquial Arabic in the student lounge.

Although the registers of a given language may not differ from one another as greatly as classical Arabic does from colloquial Arabic, they are linguistically distinct varieties of speech. Each register displays a systematic language patterning used in a specific type of situation; each represents a well-established convention within a language community. As Verma points out: '[Registers] cut across dialect varieties and may be used for specific purposes by all the speakers/writers of a language' (Verma 1969: 294).

Registers, then, are far from being marginal aspects of a language; rather, they determine how language is used in varying situations. The range of registers which exists in a community covers the total range of our language activity (Halliday *et al.* 1964: 89).

Though registers are shared by a number of speakers, speakers differ as to whether their control of these registers is active or only passive. Most of us recognize and respond to many registers that we never use, an example being the language of sermons. The range of registers controlled by a given individual, and his degree of control over each, presumably reflect that individual's language experience. The registers people have in their active repertoires, then, are probably only a subset of those available, a subset governed by factors like sex, age, occupation, and education.

The parameters of register

Registers can be categorized along a small number of specific dimensions. There are several models of categorization in the sociolinguistic literature (e.g., Halliday *et al.* 1964; Chiu 1973; Ure and Ellis 1972; Besnier 1986a, 1986b), most of which contain

three to five general dimensions. (For a more detailed account of many of the earlier models, see Ellis and Ure 1969.) The present discussion will be limited to classification by three main dimensions: *mode*, *field*, and *manner*. Each of these three dimensions or parameters relates to certain properties of a particular discourse and its participants.

(a) *Mode of discourse* refers to the medium of the language activity (see Figure 2.1). The basic distinction in mode is one between written and spoken language (primarily a matter of formality), but there are finer distinctions both within and across these two modes². Within the spoken mode, there are differences, for example, between a sports commentary on the radio (a non-spontaneous monologue) and a discussion with a neighbour about who will win the world series (a spontaneous dialogue) and, across the two modes, the radio sports commentary mentioned above may appear in a somewhat altered form in the local newspaper the next day.

(b) The second parameter, *field of discourse*, refers to what is going on, the topic being talked about, and the speakers' aims in carrying on their activity (see Figure 2.2). The main distinction here is one between technical and non-technical language, but again, there are many differences: is the topic politics, religion, or medicine? Is the speaker's purpose to provide information, to persuade, to insult, or to impart good will?

(c) The last parameter is the *manner of discourse*. It is very similar to what Halliday *et al.* (1964) referred to as *style* and subsumes much of what Ellis and Ure (1969) included under *formality* and *role*. Manner of discourse refers to the personal relationships among the participants in the discourse, and their particular social functions, i.e., their social attitudes and their social roles (see Figure 2.3). Thus, for example, manner of discourse would differentiate between the registers of an employer explaining a problem to an employee, and the employee doing the explaining to the boss.

It is important to remember that a given register represents an *interaction* among aspects of these three parameters; that is, different components of the three parameters operate simultaneously in any particular speech situation.³ To illustrate, a university mathematics professor will usually address his class in a lecturing *mode* (+ spontaneous, - feedback), on a technical *field*