

Amy and her father are transferring pieces of a jigsaw from a board on to a nearby chair. The last topic was on another matter. F re-opens the activity by picking up a piece of the jigsaw.

# Interaction and the development of mind

(2.2)

A: N:o:t ((also shakes her head and makes to take the piece from F's hand))

**A.J. WOOTTON**

F: No: you're going to put them on there are you ((F lets A take the piece from his hand in the course of this turn))



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This study identifies key mechanisms through which a young child operates with external knowledge in her immediate social context. Central to this is the child's capacity to draw on discourse-based understandings which have become evident in prior interaction. These understandings are shown to inform and shape various aspects of the child's behaviour, notably request selection, the emergence of new request forms and various kinds of child distress, and they form the 'context' to which the child's actions come to be increasingly sensitive. In contrast to studies which analyse development under different headings, such as language, emotions and cognition, Tony Wootton links these aspects in his examination of the state of understanding which exists at any given moment in interaction. The result is a distinctive social constructivist approach to children's development.

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*Interaction and the development of mind* A. J. Wootton

## Preface

Several years ago, after publishing one or two small-scale studies relating to children's requests, I sat down to think through the relationship between these studies and the spectrum of research carried out on children. The approach I had been taking was a minority interest, one which placed its methodological emphasis on the rigorous analysis of small numbers of sequences. Here, 'rigour' meant identifying the details within these exchanges which documented the understandings of the participants involved. It seemed fairly clear that by proceeding in this way one could tap into forms of interactional organization which seemed quite powerful, but the question arose as to how these findings meshed in with the large amount of other knowledge about young children's behaviour which had been generated by alternative and more conventional modes of research. This was the issue I sat down to address.

I found this task very difficult. Much of this other research was heavily quantitative, and thus generated through the application of various kinds of pre-specified taxonomy to the flow of what took place in children's interaction. These taxonomies usually came with some evidence of high reliability, in the technical sense, but there was little compelling basis for selecting one taxonomy rather than another. And, more importantly, in spite of pioneering work by people such as Carter (1975, 1978), there was little systematic attention paid to finding ways of figuring out the significance which these different forms of speech act had for the children themselves. Rather reluctantly, therefore, when confronted by categories like 'imperatives' I found myself reaching back into the main corpus of recorded data which I had available in order to learn more about the ways in which the child studied employed these devices.

In the weeks that followed various systematic patternings began to emerge, especially as regards 'imperatives'; and other lines of analysis also

suggested themselves, ones which come to form core themes of this book. In the course of this, however, it also became clear that the contours of these findings had important implications for various issues in developmental research. One of these was the matter of how the child first accessed contextual knowledge, how contextual awareness was built into the ways in which her conduct was organized. Another related to the question of how the child comes to have knowledge of the 'internal' states of other people, how knowledge of other minds first enters into her everyday behaviour. A third concerned the relative parts played by agreement and disagreement in development: if my observations were correct then rather than the conflict emphasized within the Piagetian tradition it was agreement that played the more pivotal role. And, at the same time, important links began to emerge between aspects of the child's behaviour which were normally given discrete treatment in the research literature, aspects such as the emotional and the cognitive.

This is not the place to anticipate all these more general themes, but what has emerged from my 'case study' is a general developmental statement that is in its own way distinctive. It is a statement about how one child enters the world of culture, and the central processes involved here turn out to be those through which her conduct comes to be connected to publicly established understandings which have emerged in interaction. I argue that it is these understandings which play a pivotal role both as regards her grasp of the culture which surrounds her and as regards the ways in which she employs the language which is at her disposal. It is they, rather than internal psychological representations or external cultural scripts, which come to matter for the child in the on-line management of her conduct; and I suggest that it is they which lie at the heart of a variety of more specific developmental accomplishments which children normally attain in the months after their second birthday.

This book is rather different, therefore, from that which I first sat down to write. Furthermore, input from other people has further served to alter its shape. In particular, I thank Maureen Cox, Derek Edwards and Michael Forrester for their pertinent and helpful comments on earlier drafts.

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## Overview of arguments and procedures

Several strands of social theory have long insisted on the existence of social facts. These are normally thought of as features of social organization which shape the actions of individuals whilst, at the same time, being in some sense independent of those individuals. Within my home discipline, sociology, the most famous articulation of such a position is in the writings of Durkheim (1901/1938). For him the representations of the ‘collective conscience’, the stuff of law, customs and such like, are separable from individual representations, those which are person specific, even though both co-exist within particular human practices. The business of sociology was to be the analysis of collective representations, and, by implication, the study of childhood becomes an occasion for examining how these representations are acquired by the child; he writes, for example, that education is ‘a continuous effort to impose on the child ways of seeing, feeling and acting at which he would not have arrived spontaneously’ (1938:6, cited in Lukes 1973:12).

If we accept that human thought and action are informed by the existence of some such shared social component the question then arises as to how the young child gains access to it. Within sociology this has often been glossed as a process in which the child’s actions are shaped by the norms of the society, as though the child is exposed to various regulative rules which serve to guide her production of appropriate conduct, and which act as yardsticks against which her actions are evaluated by her parents. This kind of imagery, partially articulated in the above quotation from Durkheim, has an obvious plausibility when considering certain aspects of the child’s experience. For example, when she goes to school there are certain rules about participation and involvement in activities to which she is required to adapt. But in such cases, where people are placed in the position of adapting to pre-existing rules, it has in fact proven a

tricky matter to identify the precise manner in which this adaptation takes place. Following such rules appears to involve the learner in mastering and deploying various further forms of knowledge in order to follow the rule; and it involves mastering the various modes of interactional involvement through which some form of recognition of the existence of such rules can be made. Deciding on how to handle such complications remains a problematic matter for sociology.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, I think we can by-pass these matters as there are a number of reasons why this kind of ‘normative imposition’ imagery is clearly inappropriate for the age group of primary concern in this book, children between about one and three years old, that is children in the initial and primordial stages of becoming social beings.

The reasons in question here are both negative and positive. On the negative side is the relative absence of overt instruction *which is framed in terms of explicit rules*. If we take untoward misbehaviour of the child as an example we find that the child is often reprimanded, or told not to do things, but these injunctions and the like are rarely stated in the form of an explicit rule – instead, parents say things like ‘Don’t do that, you’ll hurt him’ or ‘Give it back’ or ‘If you do that again I’m going to get angry’ or just ‘No’. Such statements, of course, simply identify some current, or projected, act as untoward: they do not explicitly set out a guideline/rule which acts as a precept for a more general set of circumstances in which the child may find herself in the future. A more concrete example of this, and one which I discuss further in both chapter 2 and chapter 6, concerns the young child’s use of the word ‘please’ in requests. On those rare occasions in which the parent chooses to address the child’s omission of this word from a request, the parents I have studied can act as though a rule has been broken, but they never explicitly state the circumstances in which, in future, the child should use ‘please’. They address the omission by saying things like ‘What do you say?’, and when the child comes up with ‘please’ they take that in itself to be a successful outcome. In short, the point I am making is this: parents do not, on the whole, actually treat the induction of their young child into the social world as though it were like an induc-

<sup>1</sup> The question of how rules are followed is addressed most thoroughly in a conceptual fashion in the analytic tradition within philosophy which has emerged from the later work of Wittgenstein (1953). Somewhat parallel considerations emerged in sociology through the conceptual critique of the work of Parsons by his student Garfinkel, and through Garfinkel’s empirical explorations of these matters (brought together in Garfinkel 1967; see Heritage 1984 for a good historical overview of such matters). Much recent social theory (e.g. Giddens 1976; Turner 1994) can be read, in part, as an attempt to come to grips with the considerations raised within these earlier bodies of work.

tion into a formal organization, where their job is to tell the child what the rules are.<sup>2</sup>

There are also positive reasons for treating the imagery of the normative imposition model as misleading for the study of very young children. One of the main things we have learned from various studies of children of this age is that they have a phenomenal capacity to detect orderliness in the information with which they are presented. The absence of overt rule-like instruction with regard to such things as the properties of objects, the referential relationships of words to things, the rules of grammar and moral concerns does not normally appear to hinder the emergence of an impressive order of competence in all such spheres. With regard to language itself, Lock (1980) captures the key features here in his excellent book title, **The Guided Reinvention of Language**. In acquiring a language there is every suggestion that the child is, in effect, reinventing it, rather than, for example, simply copying it; and similar processes seem to be at work with regard to other aspects of knowledge acquisition, even though they might now often be expressed in the less anthropomorphic language of connectionism rather than through more metaphorical terms such as ‘invention’ (Plunkett and Sinha 1992). While it is true that the parent can exercise various forms of guidance in this process, a matter to which I shall return, there is a predominant sense that the child is making developmental headway by actively assembling various orders of sense in the world to which she is being exposed. And, in these respects, culture is as much a candidate for ‘reinvention’ as is language.

If we leave aside the ‘normative imposition’ model of cultural acquisition, and if our inclinations lead us towards a more constructivist, child-centred position, we are still left with the question of *how* the child accesses her local culture at this early stage of her life, how she becomes acculturated. After all, one of the hallmarks of social and cultural facts, as Durkheim reminded us, is their shared, intersubjective nature. How is it possible for the child to build for herself an understanding of the world which is commensurate with that of her parents? Imagine for a moment that you are a child aged 18 months. By then you may just be putting together two-word sentences; you have a capacity to draw attention to, and make requests regarding, objects and actions in your immediate environment; you will have a fairly secure grasp of the functions of various every-

<sup>2</sup> The observations in this paragraph are more fully elaborated in Wootton 1986; for a useful, and consistent, Wittgensteinian account of issues touched on here see Pitkin (1972: chapter 3).

day objects; you have a capacity to engage in simple games such as peek-a-boo;<sup>3</sup> you can understand much of what is said to you if it is phrased in simple ways and if it relates to matters in your immediate environment. In what sense, though, do you share a culture with your parent, and what are the mechanisms through which this takes place, and in what respects does change take place in subsequent months, at this time of rapid human development?

In the following chapters I develop a distinctive kind of account of the processes which are involved in this initial acculturation. Whereas the accounts of others who have most directly addressed this issue emphasize the child's early capacity to grasp and store the general social patterns which she can detect in her social environment, my account lays emphasis on what takes place in the local sequence of action in which the child is engaged. I shall argue that it is through taking account of what has taken place within the local sequence that her actions come to be shaped by the local culture which surrounds her; that she comes to be social by acting strategically so as to take account of what has happened in any given encounter. It is in the detailed management of encounters that the seeds of social being are laid. Before giving serious explication of my own position, however, I shall first enlarge on what I see as the main counterposition. Those whom I shall treat as working within this latter framework have seen the child as becoming social through building up a store of social and cultural knowledge which is of potential relevance in a variety of specific situations. This knowledge is, therefore, trans-situational in its potential application, and, consequently, I shall loosely refer to this counterposition as 'the trans-situational position'.

### The trans-situational position

Under this heading I am, in fact, grouping a range of rather different perspectives and research traditions which relate to children aged between about 18 and 36 months. To my mind, however, they have certain features in common which it is useful to highlight. One person whose views encapsulate core features of this position is the American philosopher G. H. Mead, a figure who has exercised a major influence on certain branches of

<sup>3</sup> An interesting and detailed account of the kinds of participation which young children can have in one type of game at around 12 months of age can be found in Bruner and Sherwood (1976).

sociology, and some on child language study. Writing about our thoughts when about to carry out a certain action he suggests that they call up:

memory images of the responses of those about us, the memory images of those responses of others which were in answer to like actions. Thus the child can think about his conduct as good or bad only as he reacts to his own acts in the remembered words of his parents. (1913/1964:146)

Within this kind of perspective, social knowledge becomes transmitted to the child's memory store, thus becoming implanted in the child. This knowledge is then used at later dates as a resource which is taken into account in deciding on lines of action. The knowledge potentially has trans-situational application – it can be of relevance to a variety of particular occasions – but clearly it is not of relevance to all situations. So, the child will also have recognition procedures to make the requisite identifications, to decide on matters such as what are 'like actions'. These will enable her to discriminate types of situation for which different orders of knowledge are pertinent. Within this perspective what we need to investigate is how the transmission and transfer of knowledge takes place and how that knowledge becomes internalized within the child's mind.

This kind of imagery has an obvious plausibility in that it is clear that human beings do amass a large store of knowledge which can come to have a bearing on the ways in which we deal with other people. Furthermore, various research findings on children are broadly consistent with, and illustrative of, this way of thinking about these matters. Let me cite some examples.

First, recent work on memory processes at around the age of two shows that by this time the child is capable of storing quite complex patterns (Bauer and Thal 1990; Nelson 1993). These memories can focus around particular events, or types of event, which have taken place in the past, or they can revolve around standard patterns of activity of which the child is aware. This knowledge, sometimes referred to as 'script' knowledge, thus potentially shapes the child's thinking and actions along lines consistent with the social milieus in which she is being brought up. Also consistent with these points is the fact that at around the age of two the child engages in forms of pretence which can involve her in reproducing patterns of action (e.g. shopkeeping) which are loosely modelled on patterns of activity with which she is familiar. This further documents the existence of such script knowledge in the child's mind.

Second, some work on children's early requesting suggests precise ways in which knowledge relevant to making requests comes to be transmitted

to the child. In their account of requesting after the age of about 18 months, which is heavily influenced by speech act analysis, Bruner, Roy and Ratner (1982:106–10) note that the reasons used by parents to reject certain requests often amount to ‘lessons’ for the child in how to go about requesting. For example, when a parent rejects a request by saying ‘You’re able to get that yourself’, the child is being instructed to take into account, more generally, a precept like ‘do not ask for objects that you are able to obtain on your own’. They argue that in this way parents convey information relating to a number of such precepts. The clear implication is that such ‘lessons’ provide the child with a stock of knowledge, a trans-situational knowledge base, which subsequently serves to guide her conduct. It is through the construction of this base that the child’s behaviour comes to be shaped into patterns which are more congruent with those of the adult.

Third, social linguistic studies of language use by children show that the child’s selection of particular sentence constructions is sometimes correlated with the category of person to whom she is speaking (Becker 1982; Gordon and Ervin-Tripp 1984). For example, when making requests of a younger child, imperatives are more likely to be selected than when speaking to the father. This suggests not only that the child is capable of taking her recipient into account, but that she is taking such knowledge into account consistently across a range of specific occasions. In organizing her actions with regard to the specific identities of those with whom she is interacting, it can then be claimed that the child is thereby taking into account trans-situational knowledge concerning the type of person with which she is dealing.

Although these various strands of research are diverse, and uneven with regard to how far the claims they make receive empirical support, they nevertheless further articulate the imagery which I identified in the earlier quotation from Mead. First, the child derives knowledge from her immediate environment. Second, this knowledge is stored so as to become available in the long term. Third, this knowledge is drawn on in a variety of specific occasions, thus it has a trans-situational application. Fourth, and by implication, changes in these respects are a function of changes in the knowledge store. Interestingly, such research is often strong on establishing the existence of a knowledge store, but much weaker on how exactly the child draws elements into it, and how exactly it informs any particular act. Nevertheless, its imagery remains potent and I will be coming back to these lines of argument at various times within this book, particularly to the script theorists and the social linguistic findings. In general, although I

am sympathetic to various critiques of this orientation,<sup>4</sup> I shall not want to claim that these bodies of research are ill founded, nor to exclude the possibility that the child has some kind of access to the type of knowledge in question. However, I shall argue that an account of shared understandings which focuses on the child's grasp of sequential knowledge offers a more compelling vision of how the child first accesses and makes use of social knowledge. I shall now give a preliminary synopsis of this account.

### The sequential position

Instead of seeing the young child's actions as shaped and constrained by an emerging, general knowledge store, I shall argue that the critical knowledge on which she is drawing is intimately linked with the particular sequence of action in which she is engaged. In the course of participating in sequences of action the child develops a capacity to take into account what I shall call *understandings* which have arisen either from events earlier in the same sequence of talk or from ones occurring in a sequence in the relatively recent past. These understandings are quite simple phenomena, perhaps so simple from an adult point of view as barely to merit detailed attention. Here is an instance: the parent agrees to lift the child out of her high-chair, but then other talk ensues which delays this; on the completion of this talk the child then tells the parent to lift her out through the use of an imperative, **Lift out dad**. What I hope to demonstrate, among other things, is that by choosing to use an imperative the child takes account of the earlier agreement as to the appropriateness of this course of action, that in various ways her conduct is sensitive to the existence of such understandings. I shall argue that, by the age of two, the child is routinely engaged in lines of action which attend to understandings of this kind, and that such an attentiveness shapes many features of the child's behaviour at this age. In general, these understandings appear to have three important properties: they are local, public and moral.

<sup>4</sup> A recent book which collects together various critical themes is Chaiklin and Lave (1993). For example, Lave, addressing the appropriateness of terms like *transmission*, *transfer* and *internalization* as apt descriptors for the circulation of knowledge in society, suggests that they face 'the difficulty that they imply *uniformity* of knowledge. They do not acknowledge the fundamental imprint of interested parties, multiple activities, and different goals and circumstances, on what constitutes "knowing" on a given occasion or across a multitude of interrelated events. These terms imply that humans engage first and foremost in the reproduction of given knowledge rather than in the production of knowledgeability as a flexible process of engagement with the world' (pp. 12–13).

First, they are *local* in that their nature and force are only intelligible in the light of specific events which have taken place in the recent past. By this I mean that the child, at the end of her second year of life, seems to tailor aspects of her conduct to specific events which have recently taken place. The more direct evidence pertaining to this claim is presented mainly in chapters 3 and 4, and relates principally to the child's request behaviour. There I show that the type of linguistic design which the child uses to make her request is sensitive to the kind of understanding which has been specifically established earlier in the sequence of interaction in question, and that the child also recognizes, implicitly, the existence of such local understandings in other ways. In these respects there are various tensions with the kinds of script based accounts which I have mentioned above. According to my account what is required of the child at this age is the flexibility to operate on the basis of relevant local understandings, whereas script based ideas would suggest that competent forms of involvement on the part of the child are a function of the 'fit' between trans-situational script knowledge and the particulars of the given occasion. These tensions, and limitations attached to script based accounts in these respects, are brought out at various points within chapters 2, 3 and 4.

Second, these understandings are *public* in that they are informed by what has overtly taken place in the talk. In many of the sequences examined in chapters 3 and 4, for example, we find evidence of the parent agreeing with the child as to the feasibility of some course of action, and the child's subsequent actions appear to be fitted to the nature of these agreements. Contrary to this one might have supposed that the child's actions might be guided by private, idiosyncratic or inaccessible understandings as to how sequences of action might unfold; but this does not appear to be so. There is certainly evidence of child behaviour which parents find bizarre on the recordings which are analysed, but one of the most interesting findings, reported in chapter 4, is that in such cases there is also good evidence to suppose that the child, in acting as she does, is displaying close attention to overt agreements which have earlier been established. This attentiveness on the part of the child to what has been overtly agreed is a crucial feature because, more normally, it is in this way that her understandings can be recognized as having an order of compatibility with those of the parent; it is through these means that the child comes to articulate an awareness of shared understandings. One of the child's achievements, therefore, is coming to recognize, at around the age of two, that such public events as agreement have a special salience for the subsequent design of her conduct.