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Developmental Sociolinguistics : Child Language in a Social Setting

The appearance of the relatively new interdisciplinary field of developmental sociolinguistics is described in this article as emerging from the development of the areas of psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics. With an emphasis on child-language acquisition, coupled with a growing awareness of the interaction between society and language, researchers are now asking questions about how children learn to use language in socially appropriate ways. Developmental parameters are beginning to be delineated in various studies, showing some of the constraints on the social language-systems which various children in the United States develop. Primary-language socialization and cultural variation are briefly discussed, as well as the development of sociolinguistic awareness.

Another significant aspect of developmental sociolinguistics is also described: that of the acquisition of a repertoire of registers by children. Preschool children's register-acquisitions seem most constrained by their home and peer domains, while school-age children move into the important educational domain which contains registers such as the Language Instruction Register and the Mathematics Instruction Register. The role of teachers, who play an important, but often poorly understood, role in the acquisition of these registers, is also briefly explored.

Finally, further research on adult social language use and further theoretical development in sociolinguistics are called for, so that the area of developmental sociolinguistics may develop in more than a descriptive direction.

In the United States, the area of linguistics has been undergoing a series of transformations (pun intended) which are largely manifested by an input from other disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology. The Chomskian "ideal" speaker-listener who is the source of the intuitively based data for testing assumptions about grammaticality has been giving way to data collected from individuals in experimental situations and in actual speech situations in which observations are made. Obviously, it is far more time-consuming to collect a group of subjects and observe their verbal behavior or to put them through experimental procedures than it is for the linguist, in a sense, to consult himself or

herself as one who “taps into the pool” of universal and language specific grammatical competence. It also suggests a necessity for widened resources for the research.

So why a major movement in the interdisciplinary direction? Psychology is probably the easiest involvement to explain. Noam Chomsky himself foresees linguistics becoming a branch of cognitive psychology in which language is studied as one manifestation of the mind.¹ Also, the formal patterns of language lend themselves to a search for universals, a search which psychologists are also engaged in vis-à-vis “universals” of human behavior. Language is one of the characteristics of the human organism. Hence, sooner or later, it would be studied along with other characteristics. In addition, the developmental tradition is strong, in some branches of psychology, particularly in child and adolescent psychology. Consequently, much of the interdisciplinary push has come from the study of child-*language* development, a combination of linguistics and developmental psychology. There are many more combinations in this area, giving rise to what we now call *psycholinguistics*. This branch commonly includes the study of bilingualism, multilingualism, word meanings, and so on. The area of semantics has also received impetus from psycholinguists who engage in the study of meaning within psychology.

Certainly, it is healthy to have this interdisciplinary input arise from both linguists and psychologists probing mutual areas of interest—linguists for what they can elucidate about behaviour, and psychologists for what they can elucidate about language. But, perhaps above all, language is social in nature. It is through language that we do most of our social communicating, and language communicating is always in a social matrix. For example, situational analysis specifies a speaker/writer, listener/reader (in a role relationship), a time, a topic, and a place. These all influence language behavior and take on a “meaning” in and of themselves. This area of study devoted to the interface and interaction between language and society is now called *sociolinguistics*. It is a relatively new interdisciplinary field (about ten to fifteen years old in America) which did not grow out of transformational-generative theory nearly as directly as it grew out of more an anthropological and ethnographic tradition. The early anthropological linguistic work of Franz Boas, Leonard Bloomfield, and Edward Sapir gave such an interdisciplinary movement a pattern and tradition. Gumperz’ work on the Rhajputs of Khalipur² is an early classic

¹ See Noam Chomsky, *Language and Mind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1972).

² John J. Gumperz, “Dialect Differences and Social Stratification in a North Indian Village,” *American Anthropologist*, LX (1958), 668–681.

in the field which used ethnographic techniques to study the language behavior as well as other forms of behavior of various castes which still existed in a small North Indian village. There have also been even earlier indications of the social influence on language in continental dialect studies which demonstrated that some dialect boundaries were correlated to political and economic boundaries and to the degree of centrality of the government in a country, all social variables.

Currently sociolinguistics as a field is rapidly expanding. It includes questions about language planning (found absolutely necessary in countries such as Yugoslavia and India, to name only two), the ethnography of communication within and among speech communities, studies of language maintenance and change, analysis of speech acts and conversations, the study of attitudes toward language behavior, and so on. One can find work in the literature ranging from analysis of natural-language situations for populations as large as those of China and India to analysis of several "bits" of a conversation between two people.³ The common assumption is that there are social influences on this "macro" and "micro" language behavior.

Another area which is now appearing is the one I call *developmental sociolinguistics*. By that I mean essentially the study of the development of the ability to use language in socially "appropriate" ways. Children develop this ability just as they develop the ability to speak the so-called basic and then the more complex patterns of their native language. Simply a command of the grammar of the language is not enough, as those of us who have studied a foreign language at the university and then tried to use it in the society itself well know. We tend to speak a textbook variety often not heard at all in speech. Also, social rules for speech are not taught. For example, my ability to *tutoyer* in French is extremely shaky, not because I do not know the forms very well but because I do not know the "rules" which specify the use of the *tu* form since I am not in French society enough to learn them.

Children are immersed in a society, and they too must develop social sets of rules dealing with who says what to whom when. Probably some of the more amusing and embarrassing things that children say are prompted by lack of awareness of these social linguistic constraints or by an imperfect

³ See John J. Gumperz and Eleanor Herasimchuk, "The Conversational Analysis of Social Meaning: A Study of Classroom Interaction," in *Monograph Series on Language and Linguistics*, Sociolinguistics: Current Trends and Prospects, No. 25 (1972), ed. Roger W. Shuy, pp. 99-134; and Emanuel X. Schegloff, "Sequencing in Conversational Openings," in *Directions in Sociolinguistics*, ed. John J. Gumperz and Dell Hymes (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), pp. 346-380.

understanding of them. The entire picture can be more complicated in bilingual or multilingual societies in which the child must learn to use different languages under different circumstances. Part of the problem there may be the relative lack of access on the part of the child to a participation in the wider society which would facilitate the learning of these other required languages. For example, in the United States many Puerto Rican children living in New York City are exposed to English first and foremost through the formal school system. They listen to Spanish-language radio, shop in stores where Spanish is spoken, and speak Spanish at church and in the street, as well as in the home. So, for them, the school system is the primary contact, but it is not always a happy one. Often, hostility and misunderstanding prevail in their classrooms. Cultural clash between child and teacher is widely documented.⁴ In short, the school is perceived as a hostile place by many Puerto Rican children; but it is also their main entry into a wider, English-speaking society. So the opportunities for development of a wider social language competence are attenuated by friction and hostility.

Much the same picture is also found with many groups of American Indian children.⁵ For example, many Oklahoma Cherokees see the learning of English, and especially of literacy in English, as a way of ensuring the demise of the Cherokee culture.⁶ Since social participation in the wider society is not sought and not reinforced in many situations, social linguistic skills in English are not able to develop in the same way as for children who more intimately participate in that society.

These examples serve to illustrate an important principle in developmental sociolinguistics: development of social language use systems is highly dependent on the social matrix the child is in. There must be exposure to the selection restrictions of various situations. The concept of behavioral domain is often used as a construct within the matrix.⁷ A young child is generally conceived of as being exposed primarily to two domains: those of home and of playground (essentially encompassing

⁴ See, for example, Estelle Fuchs, *Teachers Talk: Views from Inside City Schools* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1969); and Courtney B. Cazden, Vera John, and Dell Hymes, *Functions of Language in the Classroom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1972).

⁵ See Cazden, John, and Hymes, pp. 331-394.

⁶ See Morris Halle, "On a Parallel between Conventions of Versification and Orthography; and on Literacy among the Cherokee," in *Language by Ear and by Eye*, ed. James F. Kavanagh and Ignatius G. Mattingly (Cambridge, Mass: M.I.T. Press, 1972), pp. 149-154.

⁷ See, for example, Joshua Fishman, *The Sociology of Language* (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1972), pp. 43-46.

emerging peer relationships). Obviously, the home is a dominating behavioral domain for a young child. Beginning role relationships emerge there with attendant signals as to which behavior—verbal and physical—is appropriate. It is often made very clear to children what they “can” or “cannot” say. In her study of black children in Rosepoint, Louisiana, Ward notes that children are not expected to say much at all to adults in the home domain.⁸ They are literally meant to be seen and not heard—and they are expected to follow the adult’s conversational direction. In middle-class culture in the United States, on the other hand, a child may be encouraged to lead the conversations with an adult, as well as to talk a great deal with adults.⁹

Unfortunately, we know relatively little about this process of language socialization in the two primary domains for a child. However, it seems clear that the first lessons on who says what to whom when take place in those domains and that the child begins to develop an emerging pattern of social “appropriateness” and facility with language.

There is also another developmental thread which is little researched but of importance in understanding the whole process of sociolinguistic development. I call it the development of sociolinguistic awareness. At a certain point, children can respond linguistically in a limited but appropriate way, but they will not be able to articulate anything about their choice of certain forms over others. They do not have what Cazden calls *metalinguistic awareness*.¹⁰ Then later on children become more able to articulate about their choice.¹¹ I am presently finding from some data which I collected with school-age children that the awareness is possibly greater and may develop sooner in children who come from cultures which are not dominant in the United States. In other words, in a cultural-contact situation, individuals from subordinate cultures must be more aware of what the socially more powerful want, expect, and often demand in terms of behavior, including verbal behavior. I found lower class, Appalachian children¹² and black ghetto children saying things like

⁸ Ward, p. 45.

⁹ Ward, pp. 44–47.

¹⁰ Courtney B. Cazden, *Child Language and Education* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), pp. 86–90.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Appalachia is a geographical area in the Eastern United States which includes those states that have the Appalachian mountain range in them. The people there are largely white, poor, and relatively uneducated. As a consequence of a marginal economic base, many have migrated to urban centers such as Columbus and Cleveland, Ohio; Detroit, Michigan; and Chicago, Illinois. There they tend to live in certain residential areas, as do poor blacks in the urban North. In short, both groups, white and black, are presently ghettoized.

"You shouldn't say that to that teacher. That's not nice," while the middle-class children of the same age did not respond that way. Thus, the pattern of emerging metalinguistic awareness may be highly socially based, with input from cultures in contact.

There is another important factor in children's language development: that of increasing register repertoires and the ability to use those registers in the socially accepted manner.¹³ Briefly, a register is seen as a variety of speech which is set apart from other varieties by the social circumstances of its use.¹⁴ In other words, if a social situation changes, the speaker may change his register, which will be reflected in differences in phonology (including intonation), syntax, lexicon, and possibly paralinguistic features. In some speech communities, there will not be extremely noticeable differences among registers; more features will be shared among them than there will be different linguistic features associated with each one. Certainly, this is the case among the register repertoires of many native American-English speakers in the United States. On the other hand, it is not at all unusual to find register repertoires including several or more languages,¹⁵ which is the case with speech communities in many parts of the world. Given a certain role relationship, topic, time, and place, a speaker may use English in one instance and Hindi, for example, in another, as is common in governmental circles in New Delhi, India.

Whatever specific linguistic dimensions given registers have, they are conceptualized to be governed by the intersection of field, mode, and style of discourse in specific ways. *Field of discourse* refers to the area of operation of the language activity; it may consist of technical areas, such as biology or mathematics, or it may be a domestic area. It would seem that the fields of discourse may be largely determined by the social situations comprising the various behavioral domains in a speech community. Scientists behave in certain "scientific", technical ways when they are in their work domain, while they may behave in quite different ways (non-technical, could we say?) when they are in their roles as father or mother in the family domain. Spanking or baby talk are generally not considered appropriate scientific behavior.

Mode of discourse has been used to refer to the medium of the language activity. Is it spoken or written? These are probably the two grossest

¹³ This whole area is now being more widely researched as a part of developmental socio- and psycholinguistics.

¹⁴ See Johanna S. DeStefano, "Some Parameters of Register in Adult and Child Speech," *ITL*, XVIII (1972), 32.

¹⁵ See, for example, S. K. Verma, "Towards a Linguistic Analysis of Registral Features," *Acta Linguistica Academicæ Scientiarum Hungaricæ*, XIX (1969), 293-303.

distinctions that we make in a literate society, although they may not turn out to be as revealing as other modes. In an oral society, such as that of ghetto blacks, however, distinctions might be made between spontaneous or extemporaneous speech and partly memorized, more ritualized speech in which certain verbal formulas would play a large role and in which there may be relatively little audience feedback. Undoubtedly, other finer distinctions can be made between or within modes.

Finally, *style of discourse* has been used to refer to the role relationships between speaker and listener or writer and reader, generally along an informality-formality continuum. Along this continuum, style can vary from most intimate, informal discourse with a high shared context and a low lexical load to highly formal, ritualized, formulaic writing with very little shared context depending on the relative position of the participants in the situation.

When various styles, modes, and fields of discourse intersect, it is postulated that specific registers are the outcome. Furthermore, all variables are influenced by the social situation that the participants are in—in other words, by the extradiscourse features.

Within a speech community, registers probably cluster within the behavioral domains discussed briefly above and also those which adults participate in, such as employment and church. An individual adult's register repertoire would reflect his or her experiences in the various domains but would not necessarily reflect the entire repertoire available to that community. This is the case because it is behaviorally and socially difficult for one adult to be exposed long enough to the entire repertoire in order to learn it all. The adult's repertoire seems to be constrained by a variety of factors, such as socioeconomic status, sex, age, occupation, educational level, and special interests. An individual's repertoire probably includes clusters of registers in certain domains in which that person is deeply involved and fewer registers in those areas of less personal involvement. For example, a woman at home who takes care of small children will, for at least a time, have a different cluster of registers in the family domain than will her husband, whose occupation is demanding of his time and energy and largely determines his status.

I find it necessary to discuss adults' register repertoire characteristics in order to establish a sort of "adult competence" base line against which to describe children's acquisition of registers—a study which falls within the province of developmental sociolinguistics. It is obvious that children do increase their register repertoire, probably in direct relationship to experience in widened and new domains. First, registers arise from the home- and peer-group domains mentioned above, some of which may

actually be discarded and certainly modified with increasing age and experience. In these early experienced behavioral domains, children learn forms appropriate to speech with adults in their family structure, whether it be nuclear or extended. Very simply, certain kinship terms are learned, as well as the rules for "proper" application—or there may be a "whine" register used with adults in the family but not with outsiders.¹⁶

For many children over the world now, school comes as the ingress to their next important behavioral domain—the educational domain. School can represent quite a real discontinuity with past experience for a child;¹⁷ witness the five-year-old who cries for a week when she first enters kindergarten. Different social situations exist; different behavior is expected, often centering around ability to perform in some sort of test situation, usually verbal. Also expected is "sitting quiet" behavior, so that the knowledge of when to be silent is part of the registers in the educational domain.

The teacher is usually the individual most responsible in a child's educational experience for introduction to and the subsequent learning of the appropriate registers. In many school situations, in the United States at least, peer influence is not significant in the early grades. Major responsibility accrues to the adult who is probably not consciously aware of this function of the teaching role, especially in monolingual communities.

Such lack of consciousness can create problems for register acquisition in the educational domain, if only in the sense that the teacher, unaware that, say, her lexical choice reflects a register to which the children may have just been exposed, will use specific lexical items in her speech that the children may not understand. Barnes raises this question when he discusses the use of lexicon specific to what he calls the Mathematics Instruction Register. He feels that much of the lexicon of mathematics is unknown to many students who correspondingly suffer from lack of understanding. They have some trouble with mathematics, then, because they do not understand the lexicon that the teacher uses to communicate mathematical concepts.¹⁸

A similar problem has been reported with teachers' lexical use in what I call the Language Instruction Register.¹⁹ This register is the one utilized

¹⁶ See Jean Berko Gleason, "Code Switching in Children's Language" (Paper presented at the Linguistic Institute, Buffalo, N.Y., 1971).

¹⁷ See Susan Ervin-Tripp, "Social Dialects in Developmental Sociolinguistics," in *Sociolinguistics* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1971), p. 43.

¹⁸ Douglas Barnes, "Language in the Secondary Classroom," in *Language, the Learner, and the School* (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 46–52.

¹⁹ See Johanna S. DeStefano, "A Sociolinguistic Investigation of the Productive

when instructing about language and literacy acquisition and has some forms very specific to it, such as full realization of final consonant clusters not realized elsewhere in educated speech. For example, in American English we usually say *mas*, with a slightly prolonged final *-s*, for *masks*. When the situation calls for the Language Instruction Register, however, you will hear teachers say *masks*—pronouncing the full consonant cluster. We can show the lexical problem vis-à-vis the following example. Think a moment about the lexical items used by teachers in the teaching of reading: *sound*, *letter*, *word*, *sentence*, and so on. These are all terms that children have heard in their literacy lessons; they are part of the Language Instruction Register. Downing found that some first-year British primary school-children's concepts of *word* and *sound* did not match the teacher's.²⁰ In other words, when the teacher used *word* in a reading and writing lesson, the children had a different understanding of what the word *word* meant. Their feature-set did not match the adult feature-set defining that lexical item. Such ignorance on the part of teachers vis-à-vis their young students' comprehension of the lexicon can lead to serious instructional problems based on the erroneous assumption that "everyone understands".

Syntax is also affected. For example, when children learn to read, they must learn forms which are not prevalent in speech, such as poetic inversions (e.g., *Came the dawn*) and passive-sentence constructions which appear with much greater frequency in written English.

Despite lack of teacher awareness about their own register switching, its dimensions, and the forms involved, children are expected to learn "the language of instruction," which contains a repertoire of registers. The Language Instruction Register and the Mathematics Instruction Register are but two of them.

The entire acquisition process can also be affected by the variety of a language or the different language a child speaks. For example, in large Northern cities in the United States, we have groups of lower-class blacks who speak a vernacular often called Black English.²¹ Many of these children realize forms in their speech which do not particularly correspond to forms in the Language Instruction Register. For example, many black ghetto children will say *mas* with *no* prolonged final *-s*. I also found, in my research with black lower-class children in Oakland, California, that

Acquisition of a School Language Instruction Register by Black Children" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford Univ., 1970), pp. 10-15.

²⁰ John Downing, "Children's Concepts of Language in Learning to Read," *Educational Research*, XII (1970), 106-116.

²¹ See Johanna S. DeStefano, *Language, Society and Education: A Profile of Black English* (Worthington, O.: Charles A. Jones Publishing, 1973) for a discussion of this variety.

they did not produce *masks* even by the age of 11.²² However, they controlled some other features in the Language Instruction Register by the age of 6 or so. It seemed, then, that these black vernacular-speaking children did tend to acquire the Language Instruction Register as they grew older, but that they differentially controlled certain features within the register. Some features showed significantly lower levels of acquisition.

Still another factor complicates questions about register acquisition and repertoire enlargement and must be taken into account in any research into this area of developmental sociolinguistics: there is a difference between receptive and productive control in a given register. For example, an individual may understand the forms used in a register but may not be able to produce them or to produce the essential set with any skill. This is not an unusual phenomenon. It characterized my child sample in Oakland, and it has been reported elsewhere in the literature.²³ In linguistic studies there are many documented examples of people comprehending a foreign language without being able to produce it, or while producing it only haltingly. This is probably a common phenomenon among people who learn a second language in school primarily in order to read it. These two types of control cannot be mapped on to each other in a simple way because they represent somewhat different types of abilities and they require different sorts of experiences for learning. Control over production undoubtedly has a large practice component. The child produces to some extent in order to learn how to produce. Receptive control may come largely from experience in listening to the forms of a given register in its appropriate context without the necessity of speaking or writing them.

I conclude with comments about developmental sociolinguistics. Being able to map children's development is in large part dependent on being able to describe what is "adult" social language use. That will necessarily be an extremely complex process because of the variety of social variables important to a given speech situation. Beginnings have been made both in sociolinguistics and in developmental sociolinguistics, but theory needs to be extended and modified to give explanation to the data. We make the assumption that language behavior is rule governed. Yet how do we write a social rule? Many questions await the researcher, but such research is fulfilling as we continue to learn more and more about the central and crucial social characteristics of language and how it functions.

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²² DeStefano, "A Sociolinguistic Investigation," pp. 73–76.

²³ See Ervin-Tripp, pp. 47–48.