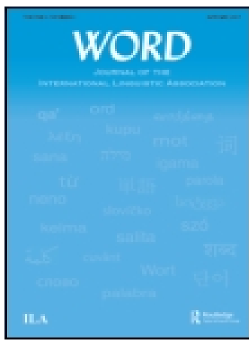

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NORMAN K. DENZIN

Interaction and Language Acquisition in Early Childhood*

This article stresses the need for an approach to language acquisition in early childhood that is not embedded in a transformationalist model. It presents a view of language, self, and other that is consistent with the symbolic interactionist, pragmatist tradition in sociology. It describes a stage- and level-like model of language acquisition, and it deals with the infant and the young child as active participants in their own linguistic experiences. It compares the acquisition of language in early childhood to the ways in which members of a preliterate culture transmit language to their members. Finally, it offers a socializing model of the linguistic act, based on the work of George Herbert Mead.

1. Introduction. Mounting evidence suggests that the young infant, under the age of one year, acts in a social and socializing fashion toward its caretakers. As Rheingold observes, the infant begins life as a potentially social organism (he can see, hear, smell, taste, feel heat, cold and pain).[1] Equipped with these abilities the infant behaves in a social fashion toward others. These behaviors, in turn, evoke socializing behaviors from the caretaker. He acts in ways that produce social responses from others. By the age of two months he can follow others with his eyes. His smiles and cries are rewarded and bring attention from caretakers. The socializing behaviors of the infant produce profound economic, political, and social psychological alterations in the world of the caretaker. The infant alters the identities of the parents, leading them to view themselves as "caretakers."

* This is the revised version of a paper presented at the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association in San Francisco on August 25, 1975.

[1] Harriet F. Rheingold, "The Social and Socializing Infant," in *Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research*, ed. David Goslin (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969), pp. 779–790. See also L. Joseph Stone, Henrietta T. Smith, and Lois B. Murphy (eds.), especially the readings in chapter 3 of their *The Competent Infant: Research and Commentary* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), where the capabilities of infants are reviewed. Of course, any impairment in the visual, auditory, or hearing abilities of the infant will impede the development of socializing skills at this age.

In Rheingold's words, "he teaches them what he needs to have them do for him. He makes them behave in a nurturing fashion."[2] Put another way, the infant acts in ways which teach the caretakers how to teach themselves to do for him what they think he needs to have them do for him. His actions are socially interpreted by the caretakers as indicative of social needs and desires. His actions, as Markey observed, evoke social and socializing responses and attitudes from the caretakers.[3] In a similar sense the caretakers socialize the infant. They provide him or her with a universe of discourse which expands, modulates, and builds his social and socializing skills. As his physical skills are elaborated and as he becomes more physically mobile, the child becomes less and less dependent on his caretakers. At this point, his acquisition and use of language become critical as he becomes physically independent of the caretakers and more dependent upon social and linguistic guidance and experience.

Language and its acquisition is central to the socializing process. All available evidence suggests that the average American child who is not visually, auditorily, or vocally impaired has by the age of four mastered the rudimentary elements of the English language.[4] The processes that move the socializing, yet minimally linguistically responsive, infant from the status of an ill-understood member of his language community into the position of a "relatively" competent speaker and interactant have been debated. Most prominent in this argument has been the position of the transformational grammarians—or psychologinguists. Noam Chomsky in particular has hypothesized that perhaps deep and innately biological and cognitive processes shape this process of language acquisition.[5] These structures *do not* give the child a grammatical system. They are seen as providing an innate means for processing information and for forming internal cognitive and linguistic systems. When applied to the speech that the child hears, they permit him to construct a grammar of his native language.[6]

[2] Rheingold, p. 783.

[3] John F. Markey, *The Symbolic Process and Its Integration in Children* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1928), p. 43.

[4] See Michael M. Lewis, *Language, Thought and Personality in Infancy and Childhood* (London: George G. Harrap, 1963), pp. 15–84; David McNeill, "The Development of Language," in *The Genesis of Language: A Psycholinguistic Approach*, ed. George A. Miller and F. Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1966), pp. 15–84; and Dan. I. Slobin, *Psycholinguistics* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1971).

[5] See Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* (The Hague: Mouton, 1957); rev. of *Verbal Behavior*, by B. F. Skinner, *Language*, XXXV (1959), 26–58; *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory* (The Hague: Mouton, 1964); *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1965); and *Language and Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968).

[6] See Slobin, p. 56.

2. Purpose. In this article I wish to review the issues which surround the language acquisition process. In line with recent research in comparative anthropology, historical linguistics, and child development, I shall propose a model of language acquisition and early childhood socialization which rests neither on biological determinism, on a deep-structural position, or on a strict developmental-chronological age phase model.[7] Rather, the model shall be consistent with a social linguistic position that extends back to Boas, Sapir, the pragmatic social psychologist George Herbert Mead, and the school of sociological thought known as symbolic interactionism.[8]

Three major issues will be discussed. First, a brief critique of the transformational grammar position will be offered. Second, a view of the social and socializing relationship between the child and the caretaker will be offered. In this respect a model of the social act, which is itself embedded in a universe of linguistic discourse, will be presented. Third, a view of language acquisition which rests on historical and comparative data drawn from preliterate societies and cultures shall be discussed. It will be suggested that the interactive exchanges that make up the child's early world of language acquisition are much like the linguistic interactions that underlie the process by which a member of a pre-literate society would acquire his or her language. In this respect, I believe that many current theories of language acquisition rest on a written-literate conception of language. A more rounded view would consider how a child learns a verbal, as well as a written, language. The place of paralinguistic languages in this process must also be considered.

3. The transformational model of language acquisition. In Chomsky's review of Skinner's *Verbal Behavior*, he forcefully argued that a traditional and strict-stimulus-reinforcement model of language acquisition could not account for how a child arrives at an understanding of the notions of

[7] See Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, V (1962–63), 304–326 and 332–345; Jean Piaget, *The Language and Thought of the Child*, trans. Marjorie Gabain (New York: World Publishing, 1955); Piaget, "Autobiography," in *History of Psychology in Autobiography*, IV ed. E. G. Boring, (Worcester, Mass.: Clark Univ. Press, 1952), 237–256; Piaget, *Structuralism*, trans. Chaninah Maschler (New York: Basic Books, 1970), pp. 87–89; Norman K. Denzin, "The Logic of Naturalistic Inquiry," *Social Forces*, L (Dec., 1971), 163–180; Denzin, "The Genesis of Self in Early Childhood," XIII (Summer, 1972), 291–314; and Denzin, "Play, Games and Interaction: The Contexts of Childhood Socialization," *Sociological Quarterly*, XVI (Autumn, 1975), 458–478.

[8] See Markey, pp. 43–44; George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1934), pp. 1–41; and Alfred R. Lindesmith, Anselm L. Strauss, and Norman K. Denzin, *Social Psychology*, 4th ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), pp. 335–391.

grammar which make perfect linguistic utterances possible.[9] A probabilistic, left-right model of linguistic reinforcement cannot account for the emergence of new utterances; nor does it explain the fact that many chains of words have no intrinsic, left-right order. As Lashly notes, "Depending on what is said, a given word can be followed by a variety of other words."[10] Lashly, anticipating Chomsky, suggested that perhaps there is an underlying schema of order that is responsible for the serial ordering of words. Thus Lashly, Chomsky, and others came to reject a probabilistic, stimulus-response model of language acquisition and competence.

In its place emerged what is now termed "transformational" grammar, which is an attempt to explain how speakers of a language are able to rearrange elements in their native language. Transformational grammar identifies such operations as substitution ("what" for "the ball"), displacement (preposing of "what"), permutation, and others. It is assumed that these operations are linguistic universals, found in all known languages.[11] The goal of this syntatic theory is to account for all linguistic behaviors as if these behaviors always involve the transformation of language elements. Slobin comments: "The transformationalists assert that a grammar is a theory of a language. It is a theory which should be able to discriminate sentences from nonsentences, assign degrees of deviance to nonsentences, relate sentence structures to both meanings and sounds, and it is a theory which should be able to account for, or "generate," all possible sentences of the language."[12]

Grammar, as a theory of language, must be able to generate all the grammatical sentences of a language. Yet this is not a theory of language in usage. It is an attempt to explain how it is possible for people "(generally linguists) in ideal situations to make judgements of grammaticality, identify grammatical relations, and so on."[13]

4. Critique. Beginning with one set of problems inherent in a stimulus-response, probabilistic model of language usage, Chomsky and the transformationalists have moved to a position which may carry more problems than the perspective they rejected. If a child does not learn how to make proper utterances based on the usual variables of reinforcement, imitation, and indifference, then how does he learn the rules necessary to make such utterances? The transformationalists have removed the problem from direct empirical testing by asserting that an underlying cognitive structure

[9] Chomsky, rev. of Skinner, pp. 26–58.

[10] Kenneth S. Lashly, "The Problem of Serial Order in Behavior," in *Cerebral Mechanisms in Behavior*, ed. L. A. Jeffress (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1961), p. 113.

[11] See Slobin, p. 17. [12] Slobin, p. 5.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

in the human brain determines such acquisitions. Von Raffler-Engel has suggested that recent work by the transformationalists involves a debate over "whether or not there is a separate Language Acquisition Device (*LAD*) distinct from all other learning strategies of the child."[14] She proceeds to argue that language is just another of many social activities the child learns to master: "It does not appear to necessitate an autonomous mechanism."[15]

It can be asserted that the position of Chomsky and others has underestimated the capacities of the human organism to learn. It is evident that children do learn beyond mere stimulus-response exercises. Yet one need not resort to innate cognitive structures to explain how that process occurs.

Following Mead, we must assume that the child possesses the physiological and neurological abilities to engage in minded, self-reflexive behavior; that is, the child has the ability to stimulate and respond to its own behavior. It is able to mediate the external environment and its own internal environment through the manipulation and organization of symbols. The child enters an ongoing universe of symbolic discourse, and the progressive acquisition of that universe of meanings leads the child to engage in increasingly complex forms of self-stimulation and self-other interaction. As language and speech abilities are acquired, the child is able to guide and direct its own behavior.[16] Consequently, the child, as Vygotsky noted, is able to produce silent, self-spoken utterances and directions.[17] Language becomes the main mediator between the child and the external world. Through the use of language the child is able to formulate plans of action and mold lines of activity. In this way, the child becomes an active constructor of its own social reality.

Such a view of the human organism is not present in the transformationalists' view of learning and language acquisition. Indeed, their conception of language in large part impedes their understanding of the learning process. It is that topic to which I turn next.

5. A definition of language. A theory of language and of language acquisition must be more than a theory of the grammar of a given language; it must be a theory of language in use. It must be able to account for how the

[14] Walburga von Raffler-Engel, "The LAD, Our Underlying Unconscious, and More on 'Felt Sets'," *Language Sciences* (Dec., 1970), p. 16.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

[16] See Mead, pp. 148–152.

[17] Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, ed. and trans. Eugenia Hanfmann and Gertrude Vakar (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1962), pp. 7–8.

infant acquires, improvises on, and utilizes the linguistic symbols, meanings, and utterances it receives. It must be a formulation that takes into account nonverbal gestures as well as verbal utterances. A definition of language which differs from a strict grammatical viewpoint must be offered. Language consists of more than rules of syntax, semantics, and morphology.

Language must be viewed on at least two levels: the verbal and the nonverbal. It is necessary to view language as a set of "more or less significant gestures, the meanings of which arise out of specific interactive situations." These gestures are both verbal and nonverbal, and they can be silent or vocalized. They are significant gestures in the sense that they signify for the gesturer and the receiver, lines of action which should be taken when they are made and received. They may or may not be consensual; all they need do is call out in the recipient a response, or body of alternative responses, which will, or can be, made upon reception. This definition of language does not assume that speakers possess a consensual understanding of the utterances and gestures which they produce and receive. Rules of syntax and semantics may be incompletely understood for any group of speakers. Their ability to engage in minded-reflective behavior permits them to interpret and give meaning to the utterances and gestures they receive. This fact is critical because the neonate's early sounds possess no intrinsic meaning for the caretaker. They are given an understandable meaning as the reactions to them produce "satisfactory" results for the caretaker.

Three forms of linguistic behavior can now be discussed: silent, vocal speech is defined as thought; public, verbal utterances which are defined as speech; and paralinguistic gestures, including facial movements, smiles, nods, frowns, as well as movements of the body. The child is socialized into a speech community which consists of these three forms of linguistic behavior. Following Lewis, it is assumed that the child is born a speaker in a symbolic universe of speakers.[18] The child vocalizes, hears vocal utterances, gestures, and sees nonverbal gestures. The universe of discourse that it enters consists of speakers who hear these utterances and view these gestures, and, by responding to them, thereby give them meaning. However, initially they carry no intrinsic meaning for either the infant or the adult. The child's acquisition of language must be traced to this universe of discourse and action, for it is here that meaning is learned.

Consider the following example offered by Lewis on how his son learned the meaning of the word *no*:

> 0;9.5 He has seized a piece of newspaper which he is about to put into his mouth. I say NO! In a loud voice. Immediately he stops the movement of his

[18] See Lewis, p. 13.

> hand and looks towards me. He keeps his eyes steadily on me for a minute or so, then turns back to continue the movement of the paper towards the mouth. I say NO! again. Again he turns towards me and stops the movement of his hand. This time he looks at me for quite two minutes. I look steadily back at him. He begins to cry and continues for some minutes.[19]

At the age of 1;7.9, Lewis' son was observed as follows:

> He reaches out for a medicine bottle. His mother says No bottle, baby....He replies NO! and desists from trying to touch the bottle. Later in the day this happens again.[20]

A week later the same child engaged in the following behavior:

> He is offered, for the first time, some clotted cream in a spoon and takes it. His mother offers him more but he turns away his head and says, NO![21]

We see, in these language specimens, the emergence of two meanings of the word *no*. In the first, the child learns that the word *no* means to desist, or to stop a line of action. In the third, he learns that the word can be used to express refusal; it is used as a statement of intent.

Two other factors are operative in these examples. First, it must be noted that Lewis engaged his child in visual interaction as he uttered the word *no*. Second, in the third example the child states the word *no* when it was not spoken to him by his mother. We can assume that the child called out in his own mind the word *no* and then verbally uttered it. The three forms of linguistic behavior noted above are illustrated in these examples. Lewis' son can be seen acquiring a linguistic repertoire that rests on non-verbal gestures, spoken utterances, and silently vocalized thoughts. Furthermore, he is learning the meaning of words, and his learning process occurs within a matrix of interpersonal interaction, which is the next topic to be considered.

6. The matrix of interpersonal interaction in early childhood. Given the foregoing assumptions and definitions, the following model of interaction can be proposed. The social order as it is known, sensed, and experienced by the caretaker is symbolically presented to the young infant through linguistic and paralinguistic acts. In the first three months after birth, the child hears and makes sounds which are symbolically responded to by the caretaker. The sounds that the child makes and hears carry no meaning, however, and inner thought, as it will later be experienced, is not sensed. Sounds are not yet attached to objects, settings, activities, or other individuals. A relatively simplistic stimulus-response model of learning operates at this level of cognitive development. Yet critical to these early interactions

[19] Lewis, p. 43. [20] *Ibid.*, p. 45. [21] *Ibid.*

is the fact that the caretaker, as a significant other, provides the verbal and visual stimuli to the infant which provoke the child's verbal and visual response and stimulus patterns of activity. In this first phase of linguistic development, the child hears sound but does not hear words. It will take at least three more months before repeated stimulus-response reinforcement sessions will produce the utterance of sounds which bear some resemblance to words (as they are known and sensed by the caretaker and by any other native speaker of the infant's natural language). Yet the sounds and utterances of the young infant are likely to form a pattern of rhythm, cadence, and intonation that closely resembles the normal pattern of talk and speech in the adult world. On this point Sullivan writes:

> Quite early, I suppose by the eighth or ninth month, the infant is spacing things like "da" so that it comes out "da-da-da" and presently "da-*da*-da." This means that the element of melodic repetition, the rhythmic tonal business, is already being caught on by the infant. In this process some things like "dada" happen to be said at an appropriate time, so that an enthusiastic parent is apt to wonder if it isn't an attempt to say "mama" or "papa" or something else, and there is a certain amount of response. If by any chance "mama" is said, that is considered proof that the child has learned to call mother something (which I think is almost infinitely improbable), and there is a strong tender response. I think this is about all there is to it. . . .[22]

Those early utterances which are defined as coming close to words are rewarded by the significant other and are often repeated after the infant utters them. They may even be imitated by the adult.[23]

On the other hand, those sounds made by the infant that are not perceived as having the shape or semblance of words are responded to by indifference or are ignored. They get, as Sullivan notes, "no special returns."[24] Thus a large proportion of the early sounds produced by the infant are simply not responded to either because no one hears them, or because they do not strike a responsive cord in the listener's ear.

7. The responses of the significant other. The child's significant others thus become critical variables in the language acquisition process. Their responses of a rewarding, negative, or indifferent nature to the child's sounds and utterances provide the stimulus feedback that leads to a convergence in sound patterning on the part of the child. Such convergences in response, in turn, lead the child to relate specific sounds to words, objects, situations, activities, and so on.

[22] Harry Stack Sullivan, *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1953), p. 180

[23] See Roger Brown, *Psycholinguistics: Selected Papers by Roger Brown* (New York: Free Press, 1970), p. 86.

[24] Sullivan, p. 181.

8. A model of language acquisition. The influence of the significant other on the child's language skills can be posited as follows. The significant other provides visual and verbal stimuli to which the child responds. The critical variable is the child's ability to make a symbolic connection between a verbal or visual stimulus and the response made to the stimulus. As noted above, the child's first behaviors are of a relatively simplistic stimulus-response nature. In the *first phase* of language acquisition stimulus reinforcement principles operate. In the *second phase* of development, which will be termed *imitation*, the child makes crude subjective links between the stimuli of others and his responses to them. Inner thought of a relatively undifferentiated nature is present in phase 2.

The imitation of the behavior of others is critical since, in phase 1, the caretaker imitates the child, but the child does not imitate the caretaker. When the child's visual stimuli and verbal responses substitute for, or are exchanged with, the significant other, then symbolic behavior has occurred.[25] This appears in phase 2. At this stage the child is still unable to fully, or with any regularity, evoke in himself the responses to the stimuli of an absent other. When the child is able to say "No" to himself as he approaches a plant or an ashtray, and then pulls back his hand from that object, then he has progressed to the *third level* of linguistic development. In phase 3 the basis for concerted face-to-face interaction is present. At this stage, the child produces verbal and visual stimuli which are understood and responded to by the significant other. They are conjointly exchanging understandable utterances and gestures.

It must be noted that the child's utterances will be of a shorthand, holophrastic, and telegraphic nature until the age of two. Short one-, two-, and three-word sentences will predominate. Their utterances in phase 3, as Markey substantiates, tend to be action-oriented and the symbolic contents of these early utterances tend to reflect the self and immediate surroundings of the young speaker.[26] Pronouns are prominent. In phase 3 the beginnings of a self-conception are emerging. The child begins to express personal ownership of prized objects. He begins to talk out loud to himself. Inner thought flows together with speech and the child will be observed to literally talk out loud. This does not support Piaget's suggestion that early speech is monologue-like and egocentric in nature.[27] It simply indicates that, until the child has fully acquired an elaborated self-conception, his thoughts will flow together with his actions and vocal utterances. Furthermore, he will be the center of that universe because he is the person who has the most constant and direct access to it. It can be

[25] See Markey, p. 41. [26] Markey, pp. 150–151. [27] Piaget, *Language and Thought*, p. 41.

argued, following Lewis, that the child likes to hear the sound of his own voice.[28] Vocal utterances are their own reinforcers. Speech and thought become autotelic, self-reinforcing activities that produce more speech, talk, and thought. By engaging in such behavior, the child proves, establishes, and reestablishes his growing symbolic mastery of the world around him.[29]

9. Passing on language: Elements of nonliteracy. A three-phase model of language acquisition and interaction has been proposed. Thus far the model has only considered the role of one significant other, typically the mother. The role of the absent other has not been elaborated, nor have multiple others been considered. Before these two topics can be treated, it is necessary to consider exactly how it is that significant others pass language along to their children.

Goody and Watt have proposed a rather complex model which accounts for the emergence of written language in human history.[30] It is from this model that I draw in the following section.

It can be assumed that an American or West European child is born into a company of speakers who not only can speak their native language, but can also read and write it. The young child cannot perform any of these activities. The child's significant others pass on their conception of their native language to the child both orally and nonverbally. In passing a language on to the child, they are attempting to transform a nonliterate human being into one who is literate in each sense indicated above. Transmitting the verbal elements of their language to the child involves oral activity, requiring that the child be exposed to long chains of interconnecting conversations. They must encounter face-to-face interaction.

Goody and Watt make this observation concerning members of preliterate societies: "The transmission of the verbal elements of culture by oral means can be visualized as a long chain of interlocking conversations between members of the group. Thus all beliefs and values, all forms of knowledge, are communicated between individuals in face-to-face contact; and, as distinct from the material content of the cultural tradition, whether it be cave-paintings, or hand-axes, they are stored only in human memory."[31] A similar process must operate for young infants. They learn a language through repeated exposures to conversations. These conserva-

[28] See Lewis, p. 21.

[29] These speech acts also gain the attention of the caretaker, whose response to them can be seen as rewarding; that is, they bring the caretaker directly into the child's visual and auditory field of perception.

[30] Goody and Watt, pp. 304–326 and 332–345.

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 313.

tions constitute the substance of the linguistic socialization process. They must learn the etiquette of conversations. They must learn how to listen, when to speak, and when to be silent. They must learn how to recognize age, sex, and social status differences between speakers; they will also quickly acquire a kinship terminology which permits them to distinguish immediate kin from absent and nonkin persons. As with members of a nonliterate culture, they store what they learn in their memory.

Oral communication has a variety of distinct features, noted by Goody and Watt, which are relevant to the language acquisition process in childhood.[32] It has a directness of relationship between symbols and referents. A child must learn that the word *milk* refers to a white, liquid substance. In the early stages of language development, the child and the significant other have no recourse to the dictionary. They must produce their own interpretations of sounds and, in this sense, the caretaker has to learn an unwritten language: the language of the child. The early utterances of the child do not acquire successive layers of meaning, as they do in a literature culture. Their meanings must be ratified in successive concrete situations and exchanges. Such ratification is typically accompanied by verbal inflection and nonverbal gestures. Goody and Watt remark: "This process of direct semantic ratification, of course, operates cumulatively; and as a result the totality of symbol-referent relationships is more immediately experienced by the individual in an exclusively oral culture, and is thus more deeply socialized."[33]

The child is a member of an oral culture and, as in all oral cultures, the elaborateness of his vocabulary will reflect the particular interests and problems he and his caretakers confront and process. To the extent that baby talk works and functions for the child, he or she will talk within a constricted vocabulary.

Like members of a preliterate culture, the child-speaker and his caretakers keep their language alive through memory and through continual use. What is remembered and kept alive will reflect what is important to them, but it is likely the child's early baby-talk language will be short-lived in the collective memory of the family members. My eldest daughter J, now seven years old, was recorded at the age of three years, eleven months using the word *Nanny* to refer to herself. The word was an approximate attempt to speak the last syllables of her own name. The word is no longer used. Similarly the same child used the familiar *bow-wow* to refer to 'the barking of dogs' until the age of four years, one month. *Cra-cow* referred to 'crawl' and 'crayon', *wo-wo* to 'water', *pa-pa* to 'paper', *ea-ea* to 'eat'.

[32] *Ibid.* [33] *Ibid.*

Other neologisms were prominent in her speech. None of them exist at this date. They have ceased to play any role whatsoever in the collective actions of the family. They died as they were replaced by conventionally spoken words that had their proper referents.

The social functions of memory and forgetting in the language acquisition process can now be seen, since that which is remembered can be stored and reused in the future. That which is forgotten can not be retrieved because it failed to be recorded in print or memory. Language, in the form of a written vocabulary, is acquired by the age of six or seven, depending on a child's educational experiences. Consequently, the young child has little access to, nor a great perception of, the past unless his unwritten language was learned and written down, or firmly embedded in his memory. Otherwise the child's past cannot be reconstructed.

The pastness of the past, then, can only operate, as Goody and Watt state, when there are historical records of it—when there is a recorded and recordable language, and when there is someone present who will make such recordings.[34] The child's first efforts at speech are seldom recorded; instead the significant other's activities are pragmatically directed to resolving the source of the sound, or to fulfilling the vaguely stated request of the child. The repeated conversational exchanges between the child and the caretaker thus can be seen as attempts on the part of two parties to learn two totally different (for them) unwritten languages.

10. Levels of reflexivity and complexities in taking the role of the other. Given this conceptualization of the child's early speech patterns, it is now possible to discuss how the child learns to take the role of and respond to absent and multiple others. The first three phases of self-other development outlined above assume the presence of one significant other. Clearly, though, the child's world is populated with multiple significant others. He progressively acquires the skill and ability to distinguish, separate, and mold into single and cohesive units the points of view of multiple others. He is able to do this first on a singular, one-to-one basis, shifting from one viewpoint to another, but seldom combining the viewpoints of his entire family unit into a generalized common perspective. Thus the child's coupling of language-in-use with face-to-face interaction experience moves from what Mead termed the *play stage* of development, through the *game* to the *generalized other* stage.[35] The movement from one stage to another is

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 315.

[35] See Mead, pp. 153–154, and Gregory P. Stone, "Appearance and the Self," in *Human Behavior and Social Processes*, ed. Arnold M. Rose (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), pp. 86–118.

contingent on the development of sufficient language skills and on the presence of interactive experiences with those others.[36] Furthermore, it assumes a working knowledge of the languages that make up his social world.

A child, then, can respond to (1) a single other who is present, (2) multiple others who are present, (3) a single other who is absent, and (4) multiple others who are absent. When multiple others are considered one may respond to them serially, or as a collectivity, jointly combining all of their responses and utterances into a single viewpoint. Responding to the absent other requires more language skills than does responding to the present other since the child has no verbal or visual cues to utilize when calling forth the viewpoint of the former.

When another perspective is taken into account, the following conditions can occur. First, there may be no response by one of the individuals in the situation: the other responds to the child, but the child does not respond to him. Second, both respond to one another, but not on comparable symbolic grounds: the child cries; the mother picks her up, feeds her, changes her, rocks her, places her back in the bed; and then the child coos. Third, both respond to one another on similar symbolic grounds: the mother talks to the child in a form of preliterate language; she is talking to the child in terms of the child's language, not in terms of her own literate language. Fourth, both individuals talk to one another in a commonly understood verbal and visual language that any speaker of the language could understand and talk in terms of. When the perspective of another is acted on, the person in question may note the perspective yet not adopt it. The perspective is only dimly grasped; it is not made an explicit object of attention. On the other hand, the perspective may be taken and adopted, as when Lewis' son learned the meanings of the word *no*. Finally, the child may take the perspective of multiple others but be unable to separate those lines of action.

When the child takes the viewpoint of a significant other, he may take the perspective in a passive, nonreflexive fashion, as when an infant permits a mother to slip a bottle into his mouth. At the other extreme, the child may take the perspective of the other, and actively define it, identify with it, and use it in novel, or reflexive ways.[37]

11. Social experience and symbolic behavior: Markey and Mead's model. The acquisition and use of language involves the interconnection of a set

[36] See Norman K. Denzin, "Play, Games and Interaction," pp. 458–478.

[37] These points are taken from Ralph Turner, "Role-taking, Role Standpoint, and Reference Group Behavior," *American Journal of Sociology*, LXI (Jan., 1956), 316–328.

of processes which progressively become more and more complex. These processes can now be summarized in terms of three factors, or stages, which are functionally interdependent. Originally developed by Markey, who was building on the early writings of Mead, they are presented here.[38] The child must have learned through association and conditioning the ability (1) to substitute the visual stimuli and behaviors of the significant other for his own; that is, the child connects his own behavior with the behavior of another. He is able to do this so well that (2) he can now arouse in himself the same behaviors that would be aroused were the other present. He can act "as if" the other were present. He connects visual and verbal stimuli with internal thought processes which in turn mobilize physical, gestural, and verbal responses and behaviors. Most critically, he is doing this in the absence of the other. At the same time, (3) the child is able to arouse "similar and conditioned responses" to his own visual and verbal responses and utterances.[39] These responses, in turn, arouse other stimuli and other responses. Thus the child has learned to stimulate his own behavior and, in so doing, he enters into the organization of that behavior. He is now able to differentiate his own verbal stimuli and responses from the stimuli and responses of the caretaker. As Markey observes, this differentiation gives some validity to the very utterances the child is able to produce.[40] A crude sence of self-awareness begins to emerge, and the child is now able to recognize the sound of his own voice and to respond accordingly. These utterances, as noted earlier, take on the autotelic, self-rewarding character such that the infant or young child can be observed talking to himself. He carries his own monologue and dialogue-like conversations with himself as he makes sounds, forms words, and utters the phrases of absent others. The child has entered the world of symbolic behavior and is quickly on the way to becoming a literate member of his respective language community and family culture.

No mysterious underlying cognitive structures, or "language acquisition devices", need be called upon to explain this process. The child as an organism is capable of responding to and manipulating symbols and its body. The child becomes an organism that engages not only in minded behavior, but in self-reflexive behavior as well. The origins of this process are to be lodged in the social order which he is born into and not in physiological structures, innate needs and drives, or in age-specific developmental

[38] See Markey, pp. 138–139; and George Herbert Mead, "A Behavioristic Account of the Significant Symbol," *Journal of Philosophy*, XIX (1922), 157–163, and "The Genesis of the Self and Social Control," *International Journal of Ethics*, XXXV (1924–25), 251–277.

[39] Markey, p. 35. [40] *Ibid.*

phases. Most importantly, that order is presented and "re-presented" to him through the symbolic gestures and utterances of the significant other. It is this interpersonal relationship, and the specific symbolic transactions and conversations which it produces, that accounts for the origin and use of language by the average four-year-old American child. The child is, as Lewis argues, truly a speaker born into a universe of fellow speakers.[41] That these speakers at first do not understand one another, yet somehow manage to stage and produce social transactions, simply attests to the strength of the interpersonal relationship which must be regarded as the nexus of linguistic socialization. That relationship—formed and grounded, as it is, in endlessly repetitive face-to-face interactive episodes—presents the infant or the young child with all he needs to become a competent speaker of his native language, namely, interactional experiences.

12. Summary. The acquisition of language in early childhood has been compared to the ways in which members of a preliterate culture acquire and pass on an oral tradition. The interactions between the child and the caretaker are critical because they give the child a set of symbolic experiences which are progressively molded into inner, silent speech and thought. A child can be said to have a language when he or she can evoke the perspective of an absent other and can arouse and stimulate their own behavior in that process. Markey's view of the symbolic processes was presented and related to Mead's view of reflexive behavior. The position of Chomsky was also reviewed.

Department of Sociology
University of Illinois
at Urbana-Champaign
Urbana, Illinois 61801

[41] Lewis (see n. 4 above).