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978-0-521-29513-0 - Talking to Children: Language Input and Acquisition

Edited by Catherine E. Snow and Charles A. Ferguson

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Talking to children

LANGUAGE INPUT AND ACQUISITION

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Edited by

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Preface

The interests of linguists, anthropologists and psychologists converge in many areas, and it often happens that they are working at the same time on the same problem with little or no contact. When they do get together to exchange views, research methods, findings and conclusions, the experience is almost invariably of value to members of all the disciplines. Such an interdisciplinary conference, entitled Language Input and Acquisition, was held 6–8 September 1974 at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Boston, Massachusetts, under the sponsorship of the Committee on Sociolinguistics of the Social Science Research Council of the USA.

The conference was organized in an attempt to bring together linguists who had been studying baby talk as a sociolinguistic phenomenon, psychologists who had been studying speech to children as a factor in language acquisition, and anthropologists who had been comparing mother–child interaction across several cultures. These three groups spent two and a half days presenting and discussing their most recent research findings. The discussion was enriched by the comments of the discussants, Susan Ervin-Tripp and Allen Grimshaw, presenting the points of view of the psychologist and sociologist, respectively.

The papers collected in this book grew out of that conference, though the book is not a direct reflection of what went on at the conference. Some papers given at the conference are not included in the book, either because they were progress reports on ongoing research which is not yet completed, or because they have been published elsewhere since the conference. Some of the papers in the book were written subsequent to the conference; these include the two discussion papers and Roger Brown's introduction. In addition, the papers by James Bynon, Toni Cross, Sara Harkness, Elissa Newport and Henry and Lila Gleitman, and Marilyn Shatz and Rochel Gelman include data analyses performed since September 1974. All the

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papers in the book benefited from the discussions held at the conference, and many were written or revised with the help of the excellent discussion notes taken by Sandra Weintraub during the conference.

The purpose of a book like this is not only to make available an interesting body of work on a single topic. It can also serve to increase awareness among its readers of the importance of phenomena like baby talk and other simplified registers, the nature of speech to young children and differences in styles of child care. Increased awareness on the part of linguists, psychologists and anthropologists that such phenomena constitute interesting areas of research, which are also relevant to the study of language acquisition, might lead to more attention being paid to the environment in which language acquisition occurs and to the social-interactional nature of what is acquired. One hopes thus to progress from a situation in which linguists, psychologists and anthropologists read one another's papers, to one in which they ask some of the same questions and occasionally provide one another with answers.

This book is much more a progress report than a summing-up. An informal questionnaire recently circulated among the 30 participants in the Boston conference elicited information about several ongoing projects concerned with how caretakers talk to children and why they talk the way they do. For example, Jean Berko Gleason reported recently to the Georgetown Roundtable that the speech of adult males ('fathers and other strangers') to children was quite similar to that of adult females, but that fathers' speech was less precisely attuned to their children's level than mothers' speech. Gleason and Sandra Weintraub also reported at the 1975 Stanford Child Language Forum on how parents teach children specific politeness formulas. Gleason is currently starting, together with Weintraub and Esther Greif, a project called Studies in the Acquisition of Communicative Competence, in which the speech of mothers and fathers to boys and girls will be collected, as well as information concerning what parents know about their children's linguistic and cognitive abilities.

Marilyn Shatz is engaged in several projects concerned with how interaction influences the child's induction of linguistic structure. For example, mothers' non-verbal behaviors and their attempts to repair misunderstandings are being analyzed as sources of information about language; the functions of mothers' questions and availability of cues about their meaning are also being studied. Elissa Newport is studying the effects of repetition on comprehension, besides

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continuing, with the Gleitmans, the kinds of analyses reported in their paper on both new and already collected material.

More extensive description of baby talk is being provided by the project headed by Ben Blount, in which 34 baby talk features have been identified on the basis of material from nine families.

Jacqueline Sachs has been studying the emergence of the various features in the baby talk of one child between the ages of 20 and 60 months. This study follows on from the analysis Sachs & Devin (1976) made of baby talk produced by four children aged 3;9 to 5;5, published in the *Journal of Child Language*.

Charles Ferguson is continuing his work on simplified registers, comparing characteristics of baby talk and 'foreigner talk' and exploring the relation between such registers and the simplification of the 'broken language' of second language learners.

Patricia Broen is studying mothers' speech to retarded (Down's syndrome) children in an attempt to determine whether that speech is as appropriate as a basis for language acquisition as speech to normal children. Catherine Snow is analyzing the speech addressed to children and adults learning a second language in a natural situation, operating from the same hypothesis that impaired language acquisition might directly reflect inappropriate input.

Finally, Mathilda Holzman and her colleague Elise Masur as well as Catherine Snow are carrying out studies of social interaction and the nature of mothers' speech during the first year of life. Holzman is especially interested in the means by which non-verbal communication is established and how clues to the meaning of the mother's utterances are provided. Snow is interested in cross-cultural differences in the nature, style and frequency of social interaction, and in the language used by the mothers to structure the interactions.

This is, obviously, only a very incomplete list of ongoing research in the field of language input and acquisition, but it does give a sense of the depth and breadth of the current activity. The conference held in Boston in 1974 may have to some extent contributed to this activity; the appearance of this book may be hoped to reinforce it.

The editors wish to express their warm appreciation to David Jenness and the Social Science Research Council for their organization of the Boston conference, to the Grant Foundation for their funding of the conference, and to all participants in the conference, who contributed greatly to the final versions of the papers by their useful discussion. The preparation of this book was carried out while

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Catherine Snow was a visiting scientist at the Unit for Research on the Medical Applications of Psychology, University of Cambridge, and Charles Ferguson a visiting fellow at the Department of Phonetics and Linguistics, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London; we are grateful to both these institutions for providing the facilities and the propinquity which made the collaborative editing possible.

Amsterdam and Stanford
February, 1976

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