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978-0-521-34894-2 - Culture and Language Development: Language Acquisition and Language Socialization in a Samoan Village

Elinor Ochs

Excerpt

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1. To know a language

I. GUIDING PRINCIPLES

When I first began recording Samoan children and their caregivers in the summer of 1978, I encountered a serious methodological problem. Instead of engaging in the usual range of everyday household activities and interactions, the children would sit very properly on mats near my own mat and either wait for me to tell them what to do or perform at the command of an older sibling, parent, or other relative. Worse for the poor researcher, instead of conversing in the register typical of most social interactions in the village (the register Samoans call 'bad speech'), caregivers and children appeared to use only the register Samoans call 'good speech', characteristic of written Samoan and of Samoan spoken in school, church, and certain business settings and to foreigners who know Samoan. 'Please', I would say over and over to members of the household, 'just go on doing what you usually do and do not pay attention to me.' I hoped somehow that this formula would magically create the context for the 'spontaneous' talk of children and caregivers that is characteristic of longitudinal studies of child language in other societies. How else would I be able to bring back 'comparable' data? The failure of my magic and the prospect of loss of face in the world of developmental research led me to a full-scale analysis of the basis of this problem.

In transcribing the first tapes I discovered that while most of the talk was 'good speech', some of it was not. Initially it seemed that caregivers switched to 'bad speech' when they spoke to persons some distance from the area around the tape recorder and microphone. My first hypothesis was that caregivers would switch when they thought the microphone was not picking up what they were saying. That is, they had on-stage and off-stage (Goffman 1959, 1963) registers. I pursued this hypothesis, checking the locations of different addresses through my notes on context taken during recording sessions. I found that talk to anyone seated on mats in the central area of the room was in 'good speech', whereas talk to those hanging around the periphery of the house, either standing or seated on pebbles or the bare

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floor, was in 'bad speech'. A closer look showed that the central area was actually toward the front of the house, with my mat always the closest to the front. Those in the peripheral areas stayed toward the sides and back of the house. My methodological dilemma was partially resolved when I realized that the ethnographer Bradd Shore's analysis of spatial contrasts in Samoan society had a linguistic counterpart. In Shore's account (1977, 1982), the orientations of front versus back and center versus periphery are associated with more-controlled versus less-controlled demeanor and activities. Front versus back is also associated with the place of higher-ranking persons (see also Duranti 1981a). It became obvious to me that, whereas I saw myself as a researcher coming to record speech, the rest of those in the house saw me as a guest and a foreigner. The placing of my mat in the front of the house and my sitting on it defined me as a relatively high-ranking person and defined the social event as formal. As was appropriate to this identity, the disposition of others was to serve my needs. Knowing that I was a teacher, the children waited to be instructed, and when this expectation was not met the caregivers initiated a series of performances that displayed for me the skills and knowledge of the children. Given that I was a foreigner and that the situation was partially defined as 'doing school', all of the talk oriented toward the goal of satisfying my needs was in 'good speech'.

You might wonder why I introduce my study of Samoan language development with such an episode. My primary intention is not to convey the hazards of cross-cultural research and ways to overcome them. It is, rather, to communicate to my readers, who I presume are primarily researchers in child language, the theoretical import of this methodological crisis. I temporarily resolved my methodological dilemma by becoming more familiar with the household and by sitting in the back of the house, often off a mat. I also learned to exploit my knowledge of space and language to elicit a wide range of speech styles from children and caregivers. But this is not all I learned. These methodological problems moved me to analyze the language of children over developmental time and the language of caregivers in the context of the Samoan social order and cultural ideology. My odyssey at the start of data collection turned into a piece of data in itself, for I realized that in a very general sense an odyssey of this sort is also experienced by every child acquiring language. In making sense out of what people are saying and in speaking in a sensible fashion themselves, children relate linguistic forms to social situations. Part of their acquired knowledge of a linguistic form is the set of relations that obtain between that form and social situations, just as part of their acquired knowledge of a social situation includes the linguistic forms that define or characterize it. My incompetence lay precisely in this area: I could not figure out the overall goals of household members that linked one speech act to another, and I could not figure out why my request that they ignore me was not heeded.

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My request was absurd or at least difficult to carry out, given that I defined the event as a formal visit through my seating pattern. Meaning is embedded in cultural conceptions of context, and in this respect the process of acquiring language is embedded in the process of socialization of knowledge.

Like other language-acquisition studies, this book is dedicated to understanding the process of becoming a competent speaker–hearer, attending to both universal and particular aspects of this process. The present study should not, however, be read as a ‘standard’ psycholinguistic consideration of language acquisition. It is important for the reader to note that the author is an anthropologist by training and that the processes under consideration in this book are relevant to the sociocultural as well as the intra-individual cognitive domain. Certain chapters dwell almost exclusively on one of these domains, while others evaluate both dimensions of a particular linguistic structure. For example, Chapter 6 focuses primarily on how word-order preferences in Samoan adult and child language use relate to saliency and ordering of particular concepts. Chapter 7 focuses on the social and cultural information indexed in the clarification sequence, a discourse structure pervasive in children’s conversations with others. On the other hand, Chapters 5 and 9 consider both cognitive and sociocultural parameters of children’s acquisition of case (Chapter 5) and affect (Chapter 9) morphology.

There are many who wish that research would display once and for all a clear division between areas of language that are insulated from social processes and areas that are vulnerable. The story of language turns out not to lend itself to slick generalizations of this sort, however. My own view is that the relative importance of intra-personal cognitive processes and society depends less on a particular area of language structure and more on the question posed concerning language. Social processes will be highly relevant to questions concerning patterns of language production and comprehension. Social processes figure largely in discussions relating linguistic forms to meaning. On the other hand, social processes are not of immediate explanatory relevance (even though a sociolinguist will likely take this as a challenge to prove otherwise) when one is investigating whether or not particular lexical items are constituents of the same type.

Acquisition research is still a long way from an account of how children perceive and conceptualize events, states, and objects (including persons) in the world and how they map this information onto lexical, grammatical, and discourse structures. An idea supported by several researchers, including Nelson (1981), Peters (1983), and Slobin (1986), is that children organize information in terms of conceptual scenes or frames (Bateson 1972). In Slobin’s account, any one event or situation is a complex outcome of different kinds of knowledge, e.g. sensori-motor, perceptual–cognitive,

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social interactional. Language encodes these different facets of scenes. Thus far, acquisition research has generated numerous studies and hypotheses concerning children's strategies for mapping sensori-motor and perceptual-cognitive concepts onto linguistic structures. Much less is understood about children's concepts of affect, social acts, social activities, social events, social relationships, and other areas of sociocultural knowledge and how these concepts relate to children's understanding of scenes on the one hand and language on the other. The acquisition of language entails coming to tacitly know the multiple kinds of information or meanings that linguistic structures index. The task of the researcher is to characterize this process as accurately as possible. Such a task involves resources from several disciplines. The present study offers primarily an anthropological linguistic orientation to this theoretical concern.

This volume explores ways in which Samoan children and adults represent events, activities, and object (including person) relations through language and ways they use language as a social tool (Vygotsky 1978). It asks what kinds of meanings are expressed and what kinds of structures express these meanings in the course of children's verbal interactions with others and in the course of children's language development. A major guiding principle of this book is that interpretation and meaning are necessarily embedded in cultural systems of understanding. If language is a meaning-making system and speaking and listening are meaning-making activities, then accounts of these phenomena must at some point draw on accounts of society and culture.

A number of scholars have contributed to the view I am advocating, namely that language participates in a network of semiotic systems (Sapir 1921) and that speaking and listening are social practices (Bourdieu 1977; Garfinkel 1967; Giddens 1979, 1984; Hymes 1974; Leontyev 1981) with social histories and consequences (Bakhtin 1981) and social expectations and preferences (Gumperz 1982; Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks 1977). The relations obtaining between particular linguistic structures and linguistic practices become part of a language acquirer's linguistic knowledge, part of his or her understanding of those structures. As language acquirers develop – indeed throughout individuals' lifespans – they use linguistic structures to engage in different practices and in so doing continually modify their conceptions of these linguistic structures.

II. A SOCIOCULTURAL FRAMEWORK FOR LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Specifying precisely what constitutes a sociocultural perspective of language acquisition is no simple matter. We need an understanding of how

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sociocultural knowledge, linguistic knowledge, and the processes of socialization and language acquisition impact each other. Let us begin with a brief overview of society, culture, and the process of socialization. After this discussion, we shall consider the relation of these phenomena to language and its acquisition.

A. Society, culture, and socialization

One of the distinctive characteristics of the human species is that it transmits both social skills and cultural knowledge to its young. The transmission of cultural knowledge has been referred to as *enculturation* (Mead 1963), but a term that covers transmission of both procedures ('knowing how') and premises ('knowing that') is *socialization* (Cicourel 1973). For purposes of the discussion here, socialization will be considered as a more general term referring to the process by which one becomes a competent member of society (Ochs & Schieffelin 1984; Schieffelin & Ochs 1983, 1986a). An important point put forward in this book is that children's speech behavior over developmental time will be socially and culturally organized. To understand the form and content of children's language, it is necessary to incorporate a sociocultural level of interpretation.

A theory of socialization will draw on theories and definitions of cultural and social systems. As numerous reviews have pointed out (Geertz 1973; Keesing 1974; Leach 1982; Sapir 1924; Tyler 1969), the definition and significance of culture vary from school to school within the field of anthropology. Most approaches, however, treat culture as a system of implicit and explicit ideas (Keesing 1974) that underlies and gives meaning to behaviors in society. Culture has been defined as a world view of members of a society (Sapir 1921; Whorf 1941), as premises that order thought and feeling (Tindall 1976), as a cognitive map (Goodenough 1957; Wallace 1970), as a system of symbols and meanings (Geertz 1973; Lévi-Strauss 1968, Schneider 1968). These orientations are related (in various ways, to varying extents, according to 'school' and paradigm) to social behavior, including political, economic, religious, and kinship relations, events, interactions, and institutions; to values; to conceptions of the world; to theories of knowledge and procedures for understanding and interpreting.

One of the major points of disagreement in anthropology concerns the locus of culture – the extent to which it is in the heads of all members (Conklin 1962; Frake 1964; Goodenough 1957); the extent to which it is created, negotiated, and redefined continually between persons (Geertz 1973) participating in some context or situation (Malinowski 1978).

Within the first theoretical approach, socialization might be viewed as the transmission of cultural knowledge (and its corresponding behavioral

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expression) that is shared by adult members of the society to which a child belongs. Socialization consists, in this framework, of transferring principles for making sense out of the world and procedures for engaging in it from one generation to the next. Socialization is complete when a child has acquired this knowledge.

In the extreme of this view, culture is a closed system of ideas. As such, this approach assigns a relatively static role to culture. But we know that cultures evolve and change and that not all of these changes can be accounted for as responses to changes in the physical environment or contact with another society and its cultural system.

A more comprehensive approach is to view culture as a loose set of guidelines and premises, shared to varying extents by members of a society. To adopt the view taken by Keesing (1974), certain basic orientations will be shared and lie in the heads of all competent members of a society, whereas others will vary among members within the society. Among other routes, members of a society may alter their 'theories' of the world through exposure and reaction to other's orientations. That is not to say that the orientation of one member becomes the orientation of another. Rather, the messages and actions of one member are interpreted in terms of and integrated within the existing orientations or 'frames' of the other (Goffman 1974). The extent to which we as adults transform our theories about the social and physical world will be limited, as will children's, by our egocentric tendencies and our willingness to empathize with others (Langness & Frank 1981).

Socialization, in this view, is not a process limited to early childhood; instead, socialization is a lifespan experience (see Cicourel 1973; Ochs & Schieffelin 1984; Schieffelin & Ochs 1986b for extended discussions of this point). Throughout our lives, we are socializing and being socialized by those we encounter (including by our own children).

The effects of social experience on culture and culture on social experience are complex and have been the subject of philosophy of social science for some time (Bleicher 1982; Heidegger 1962; Husserl 1970; Ricoeur 1971) as well as a major point of dispute dividing social and cultural anthropology (see discussion by Leach 1982). Simply put, for social anthropologists, cultural beliefs and values are byproducts of social institutions, and function to sustain those institutions. That is, social organization creates culture. Cultural anthropologists, for the most part, have viewed culture as broader in function and significance – a complex system, (partially) shared and created among members of a society, that organizes meanings of events at different levels. This system may facilitate the perpetuation of social institutions and the survival of the group, but these goals cannot account for the breadth and complexity of the system of ideas generated among members of society.

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The relation of social behavior to culture is not simple in any current view. First of all, for any social behavior, there may be different *realms* of understanding that experience. This is Geertz's point about culture being an 'assemblage of texts' (1973; Keesing 1974). Second, members of the same society may not have identical conceptualizations (implicit and explicit) of social behaviors. Indeed, having partially different understandings of a social activity does not seem to preclude participating in that activity (if we can still refer to it as the same activity). Students attending a university may have somewhat different notions concerning what students are doing, what professors are doing, etc., but they interact with one another rather smoothly nonetheless most of the time (though not, for example, in the 1968 student revolt in Paris). Third, culture and social interaction have a cybernetic relation (Bateson 1972, 1979), each affecting the other. Culture emerges through social interaction, and at the same time it organizes social interaction. Giddens (1979, 1984) refers to a similar relation between social systems and social activity as the 'duality of structure': 'By the duality of structure, I mean the essential recursiveness of social life, as constituted in social practices. Structure enters simultaneously into the constitution of the agent and social practices, and "exists" in the generating moments of this constitution' (1979:5).

In our concept of socialization, we want to provide for these complex relations between cultural systems and social behavior. On the other hand, we need to recognize that the attainment of an adequate account of these relations is beyond current reach. Though structural analytic methods have been used for isolating different levels and structural relations characteristic of cultural systems (Goodenough 1957; Lévi-Strauss 1968), there is still no acceptable means of validating these accounts. Further, there is no clear means of determining variation and sharedness of assumptions within a social group. And this leads to problems in defining and demarcating the boundaries of a culture (Sapir 1924; Wallace 1970). Is one a member of a culture because one identifies oneself as such? because one acts in appropriate ways? because one shares a way of interpreting social behavior? How much or what has to be shared? Certainly these are very real problems, particularly for those carrying out research in complex, multiethnic societies (see Gumperz 1982 for a discussion of this point). Finally, the process or socialization element in culture seems particularly difficult to document. While the broad outlines of the negotiation of meaning, drawn from the phenomenological, ethnomethodological, and hermeneutic literature, have been presented (see Wentworth 1980), the details of this very important process have not been provided. Close analysis of the sociolinguistic organization of the speech activities in which children (novices) engage is a means of getting at just these details linking communication to culture.

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Just as the concept of socialization implies notions of society and culture, so one's understanding of language acquisition depends on how one conceptualizes language. We take for granted that language is organized in terms of a set of principles (Slobin 1986) or rules (Chomsky 1986) constraining form–form and form–meaning relations. From the perspective of generative grammar, these principles or rules are seen as generating grammatical sentences in a language. (We shall take up this point later in discussing alternatives to this view of the *langue–parole* relation.)

While recognizing the extraordinary complexity and systematicity of grammar, we consider language to have forms of organization beyond the sentence. 'Discourse' typically refers to multiclausal, multisentential, or multiutterance structures; the term is also widely used to refer simply to relations between clauses, sentences, or utterances and context. Rather than referring to structures directly, I believe that 'discourse' should refer to a set of norms, preferences, and expectations relating linguistic structures to context, which speaker–hearers draw on and modify in producing and interpreting language in context. Discourse in this sense is comparable to the notion of grammar, although grammatical principles are formulated as rules and constraints that generate all allowable sentences in a language.

Structures covered by discourse principles include speech acts, conversational sequences, episodes, rounds, speech activities, speech events, genres, and registers, among others. Part of every native speaker–hearer's competence is a tacit understanding of these constructions. This understanding involves tacit knowledge of norms, preferences, and expectations surrounding linguistic form–form, form–meaning, and form–function relations. Knowledge underlying form–form relations includes knowledge of co-occurrence (e.g. to form registers) and sequential-order (e.g. to form conversational sequences and speech events) relations. Knowledge of form–meaning and form–function relations includes knowing how forms index contextual information, such as speaker and/or situation goals, social identities and relationships, affective and epistemic stances.

The use of linguistic forms to signal that a particular context is in play has been a major concern of those interested in pragmatic properties of language. Let us consider here some facets of this context-generating capacity of language and its acquisition by young children.

1. Metacommunicative and paradigmatic relations

'*Metacommunicative*' is a term borrowed from Bateson (1972, 1979), who in turn draws on the notion of *indexicality*, introduced by Peirce (1931–58).

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Indexicality refers to the property of a sign as an indicator of some aspect of the situational context in which the sign is used. The notion has been developed in a series of articles by Silverstein (1976a, 1981a, b), who has distinguished 'referential indexes' and 'nonreferential indexes', the latter being 'features of speech which, independent of any referential speech events that may be occurring, signal some particular value of one or more contextual variables' (1976a:29). Nonreferential indexes, for example, may signal something about the social organization of a speech event, such as the social rank of participants, or they may refer to affective or epistemic stances vis-à-vis some expressed proposition.

Bateson's writings concern indexes that signal the type of action or speech event taking place. *Metacommunicative markers* provide listeners with information concerning what actors/speakers are doing. They indicate the contextual 'frame' in which verbal and non-verbal behavior is to be interpreted. These markers are similar to what Hymes has called 'keys' (1974), Goffman calls 'keyings' (1974), and Gumperz (1977, 1982) and Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz (1982) have referred to as 'contextualization cues' or 'contextualization conventions'. Most of Bateson's discussion focuses on metacommunicative markers that signal that an act is not serious, that it is to be taken as 'play'. Bateson contends species other than humans have metacommunicative markers that signal this information and have the capacity to recognize them in their interactions; hence, dogs distinguish the 'playful nip' from the 'bite' (1972).

The kind of knowledge that we are discussing here could be subsumed under knowledge of paradigmatic relations among contexts. Metacommunicative knowledge helps members of society to relate an action (including an utterance) to one or more contexts out of a set of alternative contexts. Part of what it means to participate in a society is to have what Schutz would call 'stock knowledge' (1967) of the conventions for marking metacommunicative information. Members of a community partially share postures, movements, and verbal means for indicating the nature (in Bateson's terms, the 'logical type') of the activity occurring (e.g. 'This is play', 'This is a serious threat').

This does not mean that participants always provide the same contextual frame for a verbal or nonverbal action. Certain behaviors may be ambiguous with respect to their interpretive frames. The ambiguity may be consciously exploited, as in the case of threats. It may not always be clear whether a threat is a 'mock threat' or 'serious threat'. Speakers/actors may 'play' on this ambiguity, letting the listener entertain the more serious interpretation (see Kochman 1981 for an extended discussion of this strategy in black culture). Indeed, disagreements often arise concerning just this type of information ('I was only kidding.' 'No, you weren't').

Although children's capacity to play has been a traditional concern in child-development research (see for example Bruner 1972, 1975; Garvey

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1977; Piaget 1926, 1929, 1951), it is only recently that children's understanding of others' messages as playful or nonliteral has been considered. A series of studies of *teasing* (Briggs 1986; Demuth 1986; Eisenberg 1982; Heath 1983; Miller 1986; Mitchell-Kernan & Kernan 1975; Ochs 1986b; Schieffelin 1986b; Watson-Gegeo & Gegeo 1986) indicate that there is cross-cultural variation in when and how teasing is directed to small children and in the developmental point at which children are expected to recognize and produce markers of this activity. In many white middle-class American families, mothers do not frequently tease infants and small children, although fathers may do so, particularly their young sons (Gleason & Greif 1983; Gleason & Weintraub 1976). On the other hand, teasing by both parents and others of infants and toddlers of both sexes is frequent in many other societies, including working-class American (Heath 1983; Miller 1982, 1986), Mexicano (Briggs 1986; Eisenberg 1982, 1986), Kaluli of Papua New Guinea (Schieffelin 1986b), Basotho of South Africa (Demuth 1986), Kwara'ae of the Solomon Islands (Watson-Gegeo & Gegeo 1986), and Samoan (Mitchell-Kernan & Kernan 1975; Ochs 1982a). In these societies, caregivers will alter their voice quality and their facial expressions as they engage their young charges in teasing. Briggs reports that Mexicano family members speaking to a girl of one year and nine months 'alter the pitch, quantity, rhythm, and patterns, and the speed of utterance of their speech. In some cases, these are used in marking an utterance as motherese or baby talk. But they are also used by [the caregiver] in framing the relative ludic vs. admonitory character of her statements' (1984:8). Both Briggs and Eisenberg report that Mexicano children just over the age of two can produce and recognize certain metacommunicative markers of this distinction.

To be competent communicative partners, children must acquire knowledge of both contextual frames for interpreting actions and meta-communicative markers indicating which frames should be supplied. Bateson's major point in two volumes of collected writings is that communication is related to species survival. We can see here that communication and survival rest on one's capacity to distinguish the metacommunicative markers of 'play' from those associated with other activities. The film *War Games* dwells on this theme. The major plot revolves around the inability of humans and machines to communicate with each other. While able to understand the computer's printout statements concerning enemy offensive movements, Defense Department officials are unable to understand that the computer is playing a war *game* and not war itself. We are saved from World War III by a last-minute appearance of the original creator of the program, who interprets the true goals of the computer for the top brass with their fingers on the button. This film resembles the scenarios drawn by Bateson of cross-species miscommunication. The theme has parallels as