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

Elinor Ochs
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Studies in the Social and
Cultural Foundations of Language No. 6

Culture and language development

As children are learning to become competent members of their society, so also are they learning to become competent speakers of their language. In other words, socialization and language acquisition take place at the same time in a child's experience. In this book, Elinor Ochs explores the complex interaction of these two processes.

Focussing in particular on the experiences of children in Samoa, Ochs examines both the cognitive and socio-cultural dimensions of children's language development. She shows that language competence includes not only knowledge of grammatical principles and sentence construction, but also knowledge of the norms that link language to social and cognitive context; and that local social and cultural systems, as well as children's individual psychological and biological capacities, organize their understanding and production of particular language constructions. She also illustrates how children are socialized through language and socialized to use language, examining in particular the way in which the verbal strategies used by caregivers socialize children into theories of local knowledge; how literacy instruction socializes children into notions of task accomplishment as they are learning to read; and the way in which children come to understand the socio-cultural organization of emotion through learning the norms and expectations surrounding its linguistic expression.

This innovative study will appeal widely to anthropologists, developmental psychologists, psycholinguists, sociolinguists, communication specialists, and educationists interested in child development and caregiver-child communication.

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Studies in the Social and
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The aim of this series is to develop theoretical perspectives on the essential social and cultural character of language by methodological and empirical emphasis on the occurrence of language in its communicative and interactional settings, on the socioculturally grounded 'meanings' and 'functions' of linguistic forms, and on the social scientific study of language use across cultures. It will thus explicate the essentially ethnographic nature of linguistic data, whether spontaneously occurring or experimentally induced, whether normative or variational, whether synchronic or diachronic. Works appearing in the series will make substantive and theoretical contributions to the debate over the sociocultural–functional and structural–formal nature of language, and will represent the concerns of scholars in the sociology and anthropology of language, anthropological linguistics, sociolinguistics, and socioculturally informed psycholinguistics.

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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521348942

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First published 1988

Reprinted 1992, 1993

Re-issued in this digitally printed version 2009

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-34454-8 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-34894-2 paperback

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- 1 Mother with children and *matai* of the family
- 2 Infant under mosquito net
- 3 Older children taking care of younger children
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Foreword

This case study will be of considerable interest to linguists, anthropologists, and psychologists who study child language. The Samoan language and culture present rich examples for those who have puzzled over links between the evidence for universal innate linguistic capacities and accounts of widely differing conditions of socialization. Social stratification, together with the emphasis the society places on learning by observing, determines the ways children have access to, can participate in, or are rewarded for responding to or producing specific language forms.

Those who study and theorize about child language acquisition, as well as those who have attempted to document the widely varying contexts of socialization for children around the world, will find much here to challenge their theories and inspire further fieldwork. For example, those who have focused on theories of 'learnability' to account for the innate capacities that underlie language growth will find relevant and rich language data, described in the contexts of what adults do with language and the extent to which young children have access to these language forms. Those who concern themselves with possible ways in which children reorganize their knowledge of language rules as they grow older will find numerous examples of system building in which children broaden and narrow certain categories to which rules apply as they grow older and receive more consistent exposure to forms of both 'good' and 'bad' speech. Those who wonder about ways children pick up registral variation and tie this variation to factors such as audience, topic, and relations between speaker and listener will find good evidence on which to make judgments about the extent to which principles of conventionality become salient at certain points in children's maturational development as well as in coordination with their growing social awareness of themselves as members of a culture. In short, this book demonstrates how interdisciplinary approaches to child language can help us consider in new ways both the potential of the 'human bioprogram' for language and its interdependence with sociocultural factors.

Fundamental to the assumption that language is innate are particular

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approaches to uses of theory and types of data collected, as well as the very methods of collection and analysis. Until the past few years, psychologists and linguists heavily influenced by methods and theories of psychology predominated in the study of language acquisition. Much of the work of these researchers focuses on the individual development of what might be termed mainstream children of nuclear families – strongly oriented to formal education and committed to the view that adults hold primary responsibility for nurturing and educating the young in the skills and knowledge of their elders. Mainstream adults, whether acting as parents or researchers, generally embrace some version of a developmental model of learning that assumes a linear and relatively orderly progression of learning in which earlier stages will not normally be repeated, and behaviors characteristic of later stages will not precede or appear in the place of behaviors judged as simpler or more fundamental than others. Mainstream families facilitate research with children in both laboratory and home settings. They exercise a high degree of control over unpredictable interruptions; they honor time commitments and keep appointments for data collection scheduled at intervals; and their geographic and economic stability offers considerable assurance of long-term studies. Often adults in the household can be enlisted to provide data in audio or written form to supplement the data collection of researchers.

Those who study nonmainstream sociocultural groups often have no such predictable supports for their data collection. They cannot assume biological parents as agents who control the spatial and temporal commitments of young children; neither can they assume that the researcher's focus on an individual's development will evoke cooperation from either adults or children. Adults of the society may not accept the notion of research on human behavior as a worthwhile – or even reasonable – activity, and the study of something so 'natural' as children learning to talk, listen, and respond may seem a particularly irrational pursuit. That Ochs chose to work in a society that acknowledged almost none of the givens of research into mainstream language acquisition is a credit to her ingenuity and persistence. In the Samoan village she studied, the child is community member, not individual; that which is to be learned need not be verbally displayed; demonstration and apprenticeship with numerous young sibling caregivers provide the major means for learning.

For most researchers in child language, the absence of expected contexts for research poses insurmountable difficulties; thus the patterns of language acquisition of many speech communities do not receive consideration. Moreover, a priori approaches worked out before field investigation rarely turn out to be either feasible or appropriate in nonmainstream settings. Ochs makes clear the details of her research methods and demon-

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strates how the ongoing analysis of her data in the field led her to alter methods, consider new hypotheses, and test theories as she collected more data. We can be grateful that Ochs chose to lay her methodology out carefully for the benefit of others who want to study language acquisition among societies of widely differing socialization contexts.

At least three guidelines from Ochs's collection and reporting of data can serve others who choose to work in nonmainstream societies: (1) acquire intimate knowledge of daily lifeways of the contemporary group as well as oral histories of individuals and recurring situations; (2) take a comparative perspective on interactions among group members as well as with outsiders; and (3) place oral language within the range of symbolic systems and communicative forms of the society. Of primary importance was Ochs's extended fieldwork within the village as well as her familiarity with prior research carried out in the region. She and her co-workers operated as unobtrusive adult members of Samoan village life to the extent possible, and they were also helped by the happy coincidence of having their own young children present during the fieldwork. Any long-term participant-observer study of child language acquisition gains by comparing adult-child interactions with those that take place only among children.

Besides descriptions of daily life and talk of Samoans among themselves, Ochs also gives us data on their relations with Western-based institutions and individuals. For example, her examination of the school's literacy expectations, task orientations, and patterns of reward and punishment highlights differences between within-group communication patterns and those that include outsiders. She clearly documents the interplay of affect, sensory perceptions and responses, and oral or written language uses that distinguish indigenous institutional habits from practices in the school.

Finally, Ochs's study of language socialization among the Samoans lets us know the importance of recognizing that oral language performance stands within an array of other communication forms. Gesture, written language, song, and numerous other symbol systems hold different levels and types of influence in different societies. Ochs's account of role assignments and the nature of their distribution – fluid or rigid – tells us much about the extent to which Samoan children of different social standings have access to language models beyond the intimate caregivers of kin and friendship ties. The wider the net of these associations, the greater the possibility of familiarity with a range of communication forms and language reinforcements and restrictions that include those of such Western-based institutions as the school.

Data for those who take up Ochs's guidelines will consist primarily of the scenes which surround children as they perceive, store, and make patterns of the communication systems that surround them. Details of these situ-

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ations provide fundamental data of cues that repeatedly attract and sustain the attention of language learners. In addition, features of their environments will be seen to co-vary with different types of learning that children display without prior modeling or with only single occurrences. Close recording and analysis of such data can suggest the most salient paths of access to meaning that different sociocultural systems provide their young.

Beyond these methodological guidelines, what does Ochs's work suggest about the uses of such detailed case studies of small-scale nonmainstream societies? We cannot read this book without being struck by the need for more comparative work that will allow us to look at specific linguistic features, patterns of development, and approaches to parenting across societies. This current study certainly benefited greatly from earlier work in Samoa, as well as from the studies of Kaluli speakers of Papua New Guinea carried out by Ochs's colleague Bambi Schieffelin. As the research community provides more such case studies, we shall have the particulars with which to search for possible universal patterns of co-occurrence of language and social interactional habits. However, if such universals are to be at anything more than the most general level, fieldworkers must continue to work toward improved ways of observing, recording, and analyzing their data and demonstrating the interdependence of language structures and uses and social and cultural patterns.

Reaching such a goal begins by acknowledging the need for more researchers to set aside some time-honored premises of child language research and to take up new starting principles: cross-cultural studies cannot regard the basic socializing agent as the mother, a single dialect (or language) as the norm, the referential function of language as consistently primary, or spoken forms as uniquely favored for abstraction (and hence presumed maximum transfer potential). Ochs's study makes it clear that the concept of childhood and its relation to adulthood vary across cultures and shift across time. Samoan adults do not see infants of their community as conversational partners; they do not believe they have to teach directly or model speech for their children to learn to talk. In past first-language research, assumptions about a mythical universal notion of childhood have led us to accept the view that infants are exposed primarily to caregiver speech and acquire their early speech within certain structural routines and predictable contexts. Within such interactions, we have expected children to learn to take turns and negotiate the social meaning of utterances. Underlying such assumptions are implicit notions about the speaker as individual who pits his or her speech against that of others in a one-at-a-time exchange. Instead, among the Samoans, multiparty talk that is not directed to young children or talk 'through' children to a high-status individual occurs frequently. Thus, the assumptions of those who would

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focus only on mother–child dyadic and direct discourse seem highly simplistic. In situations such as those described by Ochs, the search for something like negative evidence becomes impossible even with the most sophisticated equipment, since overlapping and layering of utterances with nonverbal communications as support or parallel structuring are the norm. Moreover, young children are not expected to be verbal among adults. Adult models, conversational exchanges, and purposeful mediation of the environment through adult language, as these are generally conceived in the literature on mainstream child language, occur rarely or in highly marked circumstances. In this society, the biological mother serves primarily the feeding needs of her young and adopts an early monitoring role through which she evaluates the caregiving responsibilities of those older siblings who gradually take more and more charge of the infant.

Though anthropologists such as Ochs agree that the potential for grammar and development of cognitive schemata rests in the human neurological and biochemical systems, they also strive to describe how the shaping and, to some extent, the ordering of the realization of grammar and cognitive organization depend in large part on practices of language socialization. For two central points related to key mechanisms and processes of language growth – the role of affect and the interdependence of social perception and language learning – Ochs provides considerable evidence. Moreover, she demonstrates that the acquisition of certain grammatical forms believed to be universally acquired before other forms depends in large part on the amount and kind of exposure children have to these forms. In particular, the sorting out of the kin system and the hierarchy of social stratification rests with the ability of children to perceive subtle behavioral differences and to link these with variations in language forms and uses.

Ochs's work bears close links with current neurological and biochemical research with both humans and lower-order animals that underscores the fundamental role of both the perceptual and affective environment of the young. In this research, learning is a form of selection in response to environmental presentations. Patterns of neural connections are selected and made more or less active in recombinations at synaptic junctions in response to environmental contexts. Cross-correlations or patterns of presentations with varying degrees of affectual support stimulate highly variable and individual patterns of such neural connections.

Ochs's work should serve as a model of the rigor with which those who study child language in nonmainstream societies must document the kinds and degrees of displays and cuing systems that these environments present to children. With more and more such studies, we can hope that we shall eventually be able to establish fundamental social communicative operating principles that enable children to come to their sense of individual and

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group identity and to function as communicating members of their particular primary group. Moreover, we can hope that studies such as that presented here will draw increased scholarly attention not only to the role of affect – a little-understood phenomenon in language development – but also to ways that visual perception of the social relations of others gets mapped onto grammatical forms as the social role of the child changes during maturation. This kind of understanding takes us farther than we have yet come in accounting for ways in which children sort out semantic or role relations of agent/patient, etc. These issues relate directly to our need to understand how infants develop selective attention to certain cues that become especially salient in leading them to hypothesize and to automate the numerous decisions that direct and monitor grammatical competence and role relations in language learning.

There is much else in this case study that speaks to the future of child language research, as well as related topics, such as language varieties, the role of nonverbal symbols, and literacy acquisition and retention. Ochs reminds us of the need to recognize that many children of the world grow up learning two or more language varieties, either as dialectal or registral varieties or as different languages. Samoan children learn two registers at the same time, but sometimes from different speakers and in different settings, and often with dissimilar role relations to speakers of these varieties. Yet another reminder from Ochs's study is the fact that the spoken form of communication is not uniquely favored for young children across cultures. Indeed, some cultures downplay spoken language in daily activities and stress nonverbal signals of environmental and emotional states. The Samoan society illustrates how the spoken language of children stands relative to numerous other symbolic forms – gesture, spatial distancing, and affectual displays. Moreover, language in this society cannot be considered apart from its coordinated supports – demonstration of activities, apprenticing of roles, or ceremonial keying. These and other variations in the ways that societies approach symbolic systems can tell us much about why and how certain societies take to literacy more readily than others and how and why certain children learn to recognize and respond to conditions and elements dominant in the environment but rarely labeled. The Samoan case of literacy learning in school and in conjunction with church uses stands in sharp contrast to the 'natural' patterns of learning oral language the children followed before their entry into classrooms and 'lessoned' language.

The American poet Wallace Stevens has said, "There is nothing in the world greater than reality. In this predicament we have to accept reality itself as the only genius." The clearly and carefully detailed realities of a small-scale society in a place far distant from most of the readers of this book leave little doubt of what we may call the human genius that lies within

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the variety of patterns of language acquisition and language socialization around the world. I hope that this book will not only challenge our current theories of language acquisition but also stimulate other child language researchers across disciplines to take up similar studies that will enable us to accept reality as genius.

Shirley Brice Heath
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Acknowledgments

Throughout the preparation and writing of this book, I have received support from colleagues, family, and the adults and children of Falefaa. The study undertaken in this book attempts to articulate relations between language acquisition and culture. Such an enterprise could not be attempted without the availability of detailed linguistic and anthropological accounts of Samoan language, society, and culture. Luckily, Samoan has recently been the object of several rich grammatical descriptions, a circumstance I have taken advantage of throughout this study. I have also benefited from the previous research of Keith Kernan and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan on Samoan language acquisition. The Kernans generously provided me with their transcriptions of children's speech prior to my own field research. In terms of encouragement, facilitation, and ethnographic wisdom, Bradd Shore has been invaluable. My decision to carry out this project in Western Samoa was very much due to Bradd's support and the breadth and insight of his accounts of Samoan social life. Bradd not only provided an ethnographic context for our acquisition study, he also facilitated our entry into the village of Falefaa, where we remained throughout the course of our field research.

Three people – Sandro Duranti, Martha Platt, and myself – composed the research team who went to Falefaa in 1978. Martha's linguistic fluency and integration into the social life of the village were always a marvel to me. The solidness of the study rests on her systematic efforts to gather, transcribe, and understand the utterances of children and others. Sandro played many roles in the course of our stay in Falefaa. I can't imagine the study's success without his efforts as sociolinguist, cameraman, *matai* 'titled person', and family man. My son David contributed valuable insights into the cultural construction of childhood as he established friendships and immersed himself in the life of his school-aged peers. In 1981, when we returned to Falefaa for a second round of fieldwork, my eight-month-old son Marco was, unbeknownst to him, a contributor to our research. As Samoans have a simplified foreigner talk register but not a simplified baby talk register, we wondered how they would talk to an infant foreigner. Babyhood won over!

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Our stay and work in Falefaa were possible primarily because of the hospitality and support of Pastor Fa'atau'oloa Mauala and his wife Sau'iluma, who introduced us to the families of Falefaa and helped us to build a house on the Congregational Christian Church land. Fa'atau'oloa and Sau'iluma helped us to locate families for our study and allowed us to tape and film the pastor's school. Most valuable of all, they gave us their friendship, which we have sustained throughout these years. During both periods of fieldwork John and Dotsy Kneubuhl and Tate Simi and Noumea Pesetaa opened their homes to us and offered us good counsel and good company. I am particularly grateful to Dotsy Kneubuhl for her insights into the expression of emotion in childhood.

The study itself involved entering the lives of six children – Pesio, Niulala, Kalavini, Matu'u, Iakopo, and Naomi – and their families. These children, their peers, and their caregivers tolerated the presence of the intruding researchers with their recording equipment and their insistence on remaining for entire mornings or afternoons or sometimes both. I owe a tremendous debt to these households.

In the course of our stay, several thousand pages of transcription were completed. Such a massive data base depended on the efforts of several field assistants, who transcribed five or six days a week, working hours on end each day. At times, our house looked like a transcription factory as we listened, consulted over difficult passages, wrote, and checked the data. I am grateful to all those who assisted in this task.

Since leaving Falefaa, I have been working very closely with my colleague Bambi Schieffelin, who carried out similar research in Papua New Guinea. We have woven our insights into a comparative perspective, and it is this perspective that pervades the present study. I have also benefited from numerous talks with my departmental colleagues and from long lunchtime discussions with Manny Schegloff about clarification and with Patricia Greenfield, Pat Zukow, and Judy Reilly about language-acquisition theory. All of these scholars have read earlier versions of chapters and offered valuable suggestions. My initiation into the theoretical intricacies of Soviet psychological research has been greatly facilitated by conversations with Mike and Sheila Cole, Peg Griffin, and Jim Wertsch. The interface between language socialization and the social construction of development is the point of departure for our continuing dialogues.

In preparing the final manuscript, I have worked closely with Lori Powell. I am indebted to her for preparation of the list of references and close readings of various drafts. I am also grateful to other members of the departmental staff, particularly David Srebnik, for their help in getting the manuscript completed.

Throughout data collection and analysis of the Samoan speech data I have been fortunate enough to receive financial support from several

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institutions. The National Science Foundation supported my initial field research and analysis from 1978 to 1980 and has awarded further support for a three-year (1986–9) study of the acquisition and use of genitive noun phrases in Samoan. From 1980 to 1981 the Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, supported a second field trip to Western Samoa and the writing up of the Samoan data. A grant from the Howard Foundation in 1982–3, a stipend and office space from the Istituto di Psicologia (Consiglio Nazionale di Ricerche) in Rome, 1983–4, and a Guggenheim Fellowship, 1984–5, supported my research on cross-cultural patterns of language socialization. I wish to thank all of these research institutions for funding this study.

This book is dedicated to my husband and intellectual partner, Sandro Duranti.