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CULTURE AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Laura Sterponi and Paul F. Lai

1 Introduction

In *The Language Instinct*, Steven Pinker celebrates the acquisition of language as ‘one of the wonders of the natural world’, the mundane yet remarkable ability of human beings to ‘shape events in each other’s brains’ with words (1994: 15–16). By the utterance of a sequence of sounds, for instance, a 1-year-old child manipulates the mental awareness of a caretaker to an undetected soiled diaper or a preference for warm or cold milk. Yet Pinker argues, along the lines of various innatist or linguistic nativist perspectives, this ability is ‘not a cultural artifact ... but a distinct piece of the biological makeup of our brains’ (ibid.: 18). Chomsky (1965) famously postulated a theory of Universal Grammar which sought to explain how young children could so readily adopt most of the complex deep structures embedded in any language, not to mention creatively generate acceptable sentences of incredible variety. Chomsky (ibid.) argued this feat could only be accomplished by means of a genetically inherited Language Acquisition Device, a hypothesized cognitive structure of pre-programmed constraints and possibilities, which exists *a priori* in children as a set of ‘switches’ (for instance, between a Subject–Verb–Object or a Subject–Object–Verb pattern) that are then calibrated to the specific primary language a child is reared in.

Nativist perspectives dismiss culture as a relevant variable to include in their developmental model, allowing only for a secondary influence of the environment, conceptualized exclusively as linguistic input (e.g. Regier and Gahl 2004). A different treatment of culture is found in critiques to the Chomskian theoretical lineage.

However, what is meant by the term ‘culture’ in these alternative perspectives is not homogeneous. A central distinction points back to Herder’s *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* ([1784] 1968), where the German philosopher marked out the difference between *Kultur* and *Cultur*. The German *Kultur* shared semantic territory with the idea of ‘civilization’, that which distinguishes humanity from animals and facilitates our development. But Herder advocated the other usage, the German *Cultur*, which emphasized cultures (plural) in their diversity and their particularity, as opposed to the notion of a single, universal trajectory of social development.

These two conceptions of culture, one as a singular system acting as a developmental mechanism in humans, the other as an ongoing proliferation of specific and irreducible social contexts, have bearing on the question of how culture functions in language acquisition. Put

simply, culture can be said to be the resource that underpins people's universal proficiency with language (in contrast to, say, a language gene). Or, culture can be said to be the distinctive social situation in which each child is apprenticed into local systems of meaning. *Culture* structures *Language*, or *cultures* structure *languages*. But are those conceptions mutually exclusive?

In a thought-provoking, in her own words 'heretical', paper published in 1990, prominent scholar in linguistic anthropology and founder of the language socialization research paradigm Elinor Ochs has contended that culture is both 'a universal property of the human condition' and 'local, particular, unique' (1990a: 1). In effect, culturally embedded uses of language must be a species-wide resource for the development of linguistic structures as well as a local and unique context within which meaning is found. In this chapter we embrace such tensions and consider ways in which both *universally* and *specifically* culture structures language development.

To this aim we engage two research paradigms, which have different disciplinary roots: the usage-based approach, from developmental psychology, and the language socialization approach, from linguistic anthropology. We argue that these two research traditions offer insights on the relationship between culture and language development that are not only *compatible* with each other but also and most importantly *complementary* to each other. In this chapter we thus outline the main distinctive contributions of each research paradigm and the ways one supplements the other. Our aim is to offer a comprehensive account of current understanding of the cultural universals and the cultural specifics of language development.

2 Culture and cultures

In their attempt to provide an alternative approach of language development to the Generative Grammar model, both the usage-based and the language socialization paradigms have granted culture the central stage. As we shall outline in this section, however, the treatment of culture related to each paradigm is profoundly different.

Culture is what Michael Tomasello (2000a, 2009b), the leading figure of the usage-based approach, posits to be the key distinctive feature between humans and non-human species (including those exhibiting complex forms of social organization and advanced cognitive capacities, notably chimpanzees). In Tomasello's perspective what is distinctive is not only the impressive variety of artefacts – material, such as tools, and symbolic, such as languages – that culture produces over historical time but also the coevolved uniquely human capacity to acquire them at ontogenetic scale. Human beings can engage in forms of learning that cannot be found consistently in non-human animals. These forms of learning underpin the transmission of culture and have coevolved precisely to enable such transmission. Because of this mutually implicative relationship, these specific forms of learning are referred to as *cultural learning* (Tomasello *et al.* 1993).

The most basic and consequential form of cultural learning is *imitative learning* (*ibid.*), which occurs when the child reproduces 'the adult's actual behavioral strategies in their appropriate functional contexts, which implies an understanding of the intentional states underlying the behavior' (*ibid.*: 497). In human ontogeny, imitative learning is followed by instructed learning and collaborative learning. Without going into detail to depict these two other forms of learning, it suffices to say that each entails a more sophisticated type of perspective-taking. Indeed, underpinning all forms of cultural learning is a social cognition milestone: the perspective-taking ability, or, put slightly differently, the capacity to perceive other persons as intentional agents (Carpenter *et al.* 1998). This distinctive capacity emerges within the first year of human life and comprises the ability to coordinate attention with an interactional partner towards an object (*joint attention*) and the ability to recognize the adult as intentional agent with specific goals (*intention reading*) (Tomasello and Farrar 1986; Tomasello 2001). We thus have a set of

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mechanisms specific to the human species whereby individual beings appropriate the community cultural inheritance. Cultural learning enables a child to acquire language (see section 3).

Culture does not only underpin language development but also situates it within a historically contingent social matrix whose impact on language learning is no less significant. In this situated sense, culture is plural, particular, and ideological. In a brief commentary to the seminal article on *Cultural Learning* by Tomasello *et al.* (1993), Jerome Bruner points to this situated conceptualization of culture, inviting the reader to think about it as a way to 'buttress' Tomasello *et al.*'s key contribution. In Bruner's own words:

Far more needs to be said about how collectivities of people operate to empower, sustain, pattern, and enforce these acquisitions. An example: Tomasello *et al.* acknowledge that human mothers become enormously diligent and skillful in 'teaching the culture', as illustrated in their management of imitative, instructed, and collaborative activity in their children's language acquisition (e.g., Ninio and Bruner 1978). But Tomasello *et al.* tend to ignore the fact that mothers also impose strong normative expectations on their children in the process. What 'should' be done or said becomes as important in the child's conception of agency as the act itself. Felicity conditions are usually imposed more rigorously than syntactical rectitude. The representation of the intentions and beliefs of others is as deontic as it is epistemic: full of oughts, musts, and notions like 'good manners' ... So, although Tomasello *et al.* are compelling as far as they go, I sorely miss a discussion of the normative, deontic side of participating in a human culture.

(1993: 516)

The language socialization theory has engaged the deontic and normative dimensions of human culture by delineating the *cultural ecologies* of language acquisition (Ochs and Schieffelin 1995), that is by attending to the systems of beliefs, norms, preferences, and social orders that profoundly affect the processes of teaching and learning to talk (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986a). The scope of language socialization inquiry is not simply to document the variety of learning contexts and social activities that are associated to acquiring the mother tongue across different speech communities. Language socialization posits that such diversity is to be illuminated by an analysis of the indexical order of speech community's communicative practices. As we shall see in section 4, such an analysis layers the deontic and ideological onto the epistemic and cognitive dimensions of language development.

Culture is both related to the psychological make-up of the individual and to the socio-historical contexts in which s/he is born and develops. Children acquire culture and learn culturally. Culture permeates the subjective and the intersubjective. The usage-based and the language socialization approaches provide a set of conceptual and methodological tools to illuminate the many facets of the intersection between language development and culture.

3 Cultural learning and the usage-based theory of language acquisition

The usage-based approach to language acquisition has countered generativist claims of the necessity of *a priori* mental structures for language learning, building upon an empirical foundation to demonstrate that children's language develops through *cultural learning* and exploiting the cognitive skills of intention-reading and pattern-finding (Tomasello 2003, 2009a). Rather than speculating about the miraculous mechanics of a 'distinct piece of the biological makeup of our brains' (Pinker 1994: 18) specifically devoted to language acquisition, Usage-Based Language

Acquisition posits that children's general cognitive capabilities provide the means to learn, if not the deep structures proposed in a hypothesized Universal Grammar, then a range of linguistic constructions relative to surrounding inputs and communicative occasions. If language structures are not inherent in the mind but induced from the surrounding context, how cultural learning results in language development requires a research-grounded account.

As previously mentioned, the usage-based approach identifies the foundation of language acquisition in the infant capacity to attain joint attention. Joint attention is not solely a cognitive phenomenon but also an interactional process as it entails the engagement of an interactant with whom the child co-orient attention (Bakeman and Adamson 1984). The engagement in repetitive, hence predictable interactive episodes scaffolds the child's detection and tracking of the adult's attentional focus and his/her intended linguistic (or gestural) referents (Bruner 1981; Tomasello and Farrar 1986).

Starting from roughly their first birthdays, children build from joint attention to the social cognitive skills of *imitative learning*, utilizing tools, artefacts, and symbols according to the models of adults around them. When infants begin to reproduce those sounds they see and hear adults around them using as conventionalized linguistic symbols, they engage in the imitative process of cultural learning. While imitative learning might bring to mind the image of an adult picking up an object, naming it, and asking the child to repeat the name of the object, in reality such a process accounts for a very limited portion of language, of caregiver behaviours, and of cultural practices in the world. Instead, children read the intentional goals of adults as those adults interact in habitual ways with objects, artefacts, and symbols, and they imitate the use of the same tools for the same intentional means, not only learning about things in the world *from* adults, but learning about things in the world *through* adults and what they do (Tomasello 1999: 514–15).

This is why, among the available theories for the beginnings of children's language learning (notably Bloom 2000; Golinkoff *et al.* 1994; Smith 2000), Usage Based Language Acquisition subscribes to a social-pragmatic theory (Nelson 2007; Tomasello 2003), which analyses as its fundamental unit the *utterance* (Croft 2009). The utterance as a basic unit emphasizes the fact that meaningful language units are used in particular contexts with specific communicative intents behind their usage. Social-pragmatic theories of early word-learning suggest that rather than the accessibility of concepts, the ease of association between words and things, or the pre-existence of mental categories, what makes words and phrases meaningful to young children is the salience of the social situation, undergirded by children reading the communicative intent of people in their surrounding context. Rather than hearing words and simply fast-mapping them to an array of concepts (Bloom 2000), the earliest sequences of sounds that children learn, whether words or phrases, are ones that they encounter 'in situations in which it is easiest to read the adult's communicative intentions' (Tomasello 2003: 49). These early utterances include the more easily individuated concrete nouns predominant in nascent lexicons (*chair, milk*), but also less tangible nominals (*dinner*) and other types of words (*sit, thank you, warm*) that have interpersonal and social relevance in children's worlds. These phrases and words – utterances – can be easily imagined surrounding the children in joint attentional interactions with caregivers and siblings attached to others' intentions in meaningful usages of linguistic tools. Meanings are made in this interpersonal, cultural territory.

Thus, when children begin to produce their own utterances, they do so as imitative cultural learning, attempting to reproduce not only the sounds of individual words, but entire 'goal-directed act[s]' (Tomasello 2000b: 65). Instead of children speaking their first words, Usage-Based Language Acquisition suggests that children imitate in *holophrases*, single-word or single-phrase stand-ins for larger whole utterances, such as 'doll' for 'Where's the doll?' (Barrett 1982; Dore 1975). Those utterances are not limited to words and their denotations, but larger schema that

might include certain occasions, participants, and other contextual aspects of an utterance's use. In fact, some usage-based proponents would contend that the idea that words map onto privately held, firm denotative concepts is misguided. In keeping with the later Wittgenstein, Nelson for instance argues that there is no such thing as a 'private language', the meaning of particular symbols not dependent on the conceptualizations of individuals but on a community's norms and rules of usage for those symbols (Nelson 2009). In other words, children begin not with concepts and their labels, but with culturally grounded meanings and rules for communicative utterances.

Similarly, when children begin to utilize syntactic units, the so called 'pivot schemas' that characterize early acquisition across languages, such as 'Where's the X?' or 'Put X here', these utterances should not be analysed according to adult-like categories of syntax that linguists attribute to them (Tomasello 2009a). Added to the joint attention and intention-reading that supports imitative learning, Usage-Based Language Acquisition also rests upon the empirically established *pattern-finding* cognitive abilities of young children (Goldberg 1995, 2006; Tomasello 2009a). These pattern-finding capabilities include children's competence with schematization, exemplar-based categorization, distributional analysis, and analogy recognition (Gentner and Markman 1997; Tomasello 2003). Usage-Based Language Acquisition argues that these domain-general, rather than language-specific, cognitive competencies lead the way to constructing the grammar of language users.

Here, Usage-Based Language Acquisition reveals its theoretical origins in Cognitive Linguistics, an alternative to the dominant generative traditions of North American linguistics. Classically, the problem of how children go from simple word-learning to more complex syntactic constructions is the challenge for generative grammar: it both necessitates and yet still confounds the Chomskian invocation of a Language Acquisition Device. When researchers begin with the varieties and constraints of the syntactic structures of a generativist account of grammar, and then proceed to study what children can understand and produce, the leaps appear to be unaccountable. But Tomasello observes in empirical research on children more support for the description of grammar of cognitive linguists, who, rather than abstracting syntax from the context of meaning and use, recontextualize grammar in human experiences, conceptualizations, and meanings. In particular, Goldberg (2006) delineates a fundamental unit of *constructions* that, as opposed to words, phrases, clauses, or sentences, mirrors the units of language which any caregiver can testify that children acquire – whatever chunk they have associated with some level of meaning. Children learn idiosyncratic and idiomatic sentences, collocations, interjections, and streams of discourse in haphazard but culturally based ways, developing inventories of particular constructions from repeated and situated occasions of adult and peer usage. This approach to language learning is known as Construction Grammar (Goldberg 1995, 2006; Tomasello and Brooks, 1999).

For a usage-based approach, Construction Grammar can explain the acquisition of language by providing a model of language where particular items or tokens can be schematized into the grammar that language users master. In Construction Grammar, a particular token instance of language serves multiple functions, functions at the level of a whole construction and sub-functions for component parts. Take for example an older sister's request, 'Can I have some *more?*' to a parent in front of her 1-year-old brother during a meal. First, there is a communicative function of the construction as a whole, a petition for more that leads to another helping served. Then there is the meaningful sub-construction of a question-inflected utterance of *more*, which perhaps the 1-year-old also recognizes and even uses in other such request situations. And then again, the older child's question provides another token instance of a question construction modal auxiliaries or that, at this point, the 1-year-old will not analyse or

appropriate, but will serve as an exemplar, a case of use, that will accumulate to a later schematization of question constructions for the younger language learner. And, thus, constructions exist at nested levels with varying complexity. The important point is that each instance of use is both a concrete utterance token and an exemplary type. Meanwhile, the language learner moves from part to whole and from whole to part, recognizing patterns, appropriating, and gradually schematizing from specific phrases to more abstract constructions (Dabrowska and Lieven 2005). As language develops, construction chunks are blended in various ways to generate the creative array of utterances displayed in language in use (Kemmer and Barlow 2000).

4 Situating language acquisition in cultural contexts: language socialization

Language development cannot be characterized simply in terms of lexical wealth, semantic complexity, and syntactic virtuosity. When, how, and why young children apprehend grammatical forms is not solely informed by a uniquely human psychological endowment. It is also 'culturally reflexive' (Ochs and Schieffelin 1995: 74), that is, shaped by local dispositions, beliefs, and norms that structure communicative practices and the child's participation therein.

The study of language acquisition as sociocultural process has emerged in the early 1980s, within linguistic anthropology. The methodology is not only longitudinal but also ethnographic, and the scope of the inquiry includes an examination of the speech community's social organization, world-view, and communicative habitus. Such an approach to the study of language acquisition is known as *language socialization* (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986a). Developing their programme at a time when the nativist perspective prevailed within language acquisition research, language socialization scholars set out to discern the impact of culture on the acquisition of language, thereby beginning to debunk claims of universal developmental patterns as well as homogeneity in learning conditions and outcomes across societies (Heath 1983; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986b).

Drawing on Hymes's theorization (1967, 1971), language socialization research developed as a multidimensional enterprise: it examined child directed communication and the child's language development as influenced not solely by cognitive and psychological factors but also by a number of culture-specific elements, notably (a) the community's communicative repertoire with special attention towards communicative behaviours directed to infants and young children; (b) the role of speaking in native conceptions of cultural transmission and modes of teaching; (c) conceptions of children's communicative intentions and capacities; (d) the speech community's attitudes towards linguistic codes in relation to valued social roles and subject positions. Hymes conveyed the broader scope of his research programme through the idea that infants and young children begin by acquiring not simply a system for creating an infinite number of grammatically correct sentences (which Hymes referred to as *linguistic competence*), but rather a tool for carrying out culturally appropriate communicative actions. In Hymes's words: 'We have then to account for the fact that a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences, not only grammatical, but also as appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, why, not, as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner' (1972: 278). The focus is thus on *communicative competence* (ibid.) in which linguistic ability is qualified by appropriateness norms, related to social roles and cultural expectations.

To illuminate the relation of language to sociocultural constructs and processes, and then to discern the intricacies of acquiring communicative competence, language socialization scholars have engaged the semiotic notion of indexicality. Drawing from Charles S. Peirce's (1974) account of the ways in which meaning can be conveyed through signs, linguistic anthropologists have

brought to light how members of each speech community associate particular linguistic features – as elementary as morphemes and particles, and more complex grammatical forms or registers – to specific types of speakers or contexts (Agha 2007; Hanks 1990; Ochs 1990b; Silverstein 1976). Thus linguistic forms do not solely convey symbolic content but also bear indexical meaning, which is based on connections with the social context. In turn, the inherent indexical value of linguistic forms is such that every instance of use contributes to reconstituting the relevant sociocultural context.

A broad spectrum of sociocultural information can be indexed through linguistic forms, notably gender, social status, affective and epistemological stances, ethnicity, and identity. Indexical relationships, however, are more complex than one-to-one direct associations (Ochs 1990b; Silverstein 2003). On the one hand, a single linguistic feature may index a wide range of possible social contexts. The use of the pronoun *vous* as second-person singular address form in French is a case in point: it can index a power asymmetry between the speaker and the person being addressed, but it can also index the encounter between individuals with no prior relation or one that is unknown to the individuals; or it can index the encounter as formal (Morford 1997). On the other hand, linguistic forms also occur in clusters, which as a whole index some contextual meaning. Register is a good example of this kind of indexical complexity, being constituted by clustered and patterned linguistic, paralinguistic, and discursive features that as a whole signal and enact certain ethnic identities, social roles, or subject positions (Agha 2004). A well-known example of register is baby talk (see section 5). Further, indexical meanings may be conveyed through direct relations between one or a cluster of linguistic forms and some dimensions of context. Alternatively, certain sociocultural information is conveyed indirectly, via the mediation of another indexical relation. Evidential markers (e.g. the modals *may* and *might*, the clause *I think*, the adverbs *surely* and *maybe*), for instance, may index the speaker's epistemic stance, and via a claim of knowledge (or lack thereof), they may index authority and power asymmetry (Ochs 1996).

When children acquire language they thus experience, apprehend and deploy the indexical scope of grammatical structures (Ochs 1990a, 1990b). In acquiring language children are socialized into certain subject positions, social relationships, ways of knowing, relating, and acting (Ochs and Schieffelin 1995; Kulick and Schieffelin 2004).

By taking into account the indexical scope of linguistic structures, certain documented patterns of language development that would be conundrums if evaluated only according to linguistic complexity and frequency in the input can be better understood. In traditional Western Samoan communities, for instance, young children have been documented to master the deictic verb *aumai* ('to bring/give') before the deictic verb *sau* ('to come') (Ochs 1988; Platt 1986). Both verbs are used in imperative constructions, to summon others (*sau*) and to demand or request goods (*aumai*), and they are widely used in the social environment in which young children are immersed. If the order of acquisition of these deictic verbs were to be predicated on their relative frequency of usage in the children's communicative environment, or on their semantic structure and on the cognitive load that structure demands for comprehension and production, one would expect *sau* to be mastered before *aumai*. *Sau* is semantically simpler than *aumai*: unlike the former, *aumai* is a causative verb and its informational content is wider than *sau*'s (Platt 1986). But in Samoan society, the documented order of acquisition can be explained by the hierarchical organization of the community, in which physical movement is associated with relatively lower-status individuals. Higher-status persons tend to minimize movements and delegate to lower-status community members actions that require a change of physical location. The deictic verb *sau* is chiefly used to orchestrate those actions and movements. Young children are usually the lowest-ranking people in the household, so while they are frequently summoned

with *sau* imperatives, there are few opportunities for them to use the verb appropriately. In contrast, *aumai* is the verb conventionally employed to carry out the act of begging, which is considered an appropriate and indeed expected action for young children to perform (in so far as it implies that the beggar is in a submissive position). We thus need to take the sociocultural context into account in order to explain the acquisition pattern of the two deictics in Samoan.

This example clearly illustrates the tight and complex relationship between language and social practices: grammatical forms are used to carry out social acts. These in turn are connected to social identities and cultural activities, whose meanings reflect and instantiate a community's beliefs and world-view. Language acquisition is a situated process, deeply connected to the life-worlds of the community of speakers.

5 Rethinking input in language development

The treatment of input in first language acquisition is traditionally highly debated (Ellis 2002; Zyzik 2009). While nativist theories contend that input under-determines linguistic competence (primarily on the basis of the poverty of stimulus argument: e.g. Crain 1991; Hornstein and Lightfoot 1981), the usage-based approach puts a premium on it, considering input a key determinant of language acquisition (Lieven 2010). Naturalistic as well as laboratory studies have recorded frequency effects for morphological, lexical, and syntactic phenomena (e.g. Huttenlocher *et al.* 2002; Lieven 2008; Reali and Christiansen 2005). At the same time, a number of factors interacting with frequency have been identified, notably form-function mapping (Cameron-Faulkner *et al.* 2007), neighbourhood relations (Dabrowska and Szczerbinski 2006), and multiple cues (Dittmar *et al.* 2008).

Usage-based studies have thus offered nuanced analyses of input as linguistic phenomenon. Language socialization research offers a complementary and equally important treatment of input as a sociocultural phenomenon. The speech to which young children are exposed is characterized in terms of social actions embedded in social activities constitutive of the community's repertoire of cultural practices (Ochs 1990a, 1990b). The child vocalizations as well are examined in relation to the course of action in which they are produced and to the interpretation that they receive by the interlocutors.

This approach has unveiled that variability in the input extends well beyond linguistic terms and is indexical of culturally specific dispositions and world-views (Kulick 1992; Ochs and Schieffelin 1984). We can take the key topic of *baby talk* as a case in point. Baby talk, a simplified register used to address young children, has traditionally been considered a universal phenomenon, in fact the indispensable input for children's language acquisition. In the early 1980s, language socialization pioneers Elinor Ochs and Bambi Schieffelin (1984) put forward a groundbreaking reconceptualization of baby talk based on their fieldwork in Western Samoa and Papua New Guinea respectively. Ochs and Schieffelin revealed that child-directed speech does not exhibit the same characteristics across cultures; notably, simplification is not universally as pervasive as in Euro-American child-directed communication. In addition, they demonstrated that dyadic exchanges are not always the primary communicative set-up in which the child is exposed to and apprehends her mother tongue (see also Akhtar 2005; Blum-Kulka and Snow 2002; de Léon 1998).

Ochs and Schieffelin's contribution did not stop at documenting the cultural variability in child-directed speech. Most significantly, they offered an analytic framework that allows us to understand that such variability reflects (that is, is indexical of) distinct systems of beliefs, epistemological orientations, and social orders. For instance, among the Kaluli in Papua New Guinea, infants are considered unable to understand or communicate (Schieffelin 1985, 1990). Mothers do not engage them in dyadic (proto)conversation or take infant vocalizations as precursors of speech

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endowed with communicative intention. The exposure to language is nevertheless rich, as Kaluli infants are always carried on their mother's body and held facing outward; hence, they are continuously immersed in activities and conversations among adults and older children. In addition, Kaluli mothers often initiate triadic exchanges in which they ventriloquate for their babies using a high-pitched, nasalized voice to engage an older child or adult in conversation. In voicing for their infants, Kaluli mothers use well-formed and unsimplified language.

The Kaluli child is treated as an interlocutor only once she or he begins uttering the words *no* and *bo*, 'mother' and 'breast' respectively (Schieffelin 1990). At that point, the child becomes the target of explicit language instruction. The most frequent language instructional practice is a prompting routine that consists of offering a model for what the child should say followed by the imperative *a:la:ma* ('Say it like that'). No simplification or prosodic alteration is featured in this instructional practice. Indeed, Kaluli caregivers believe that simplification is counterproductive to language acquisition. Learning to talk is a hardening process whose goal implies both mastering 'hard words' and overcoming the vulnerability of infancy.

In other cultural groups – such as American and European middle-class communities – newborns are considered intentional communicators, and infants and young children are expected to take on the demanding communicative roles of addressees and speakers. Infants' vocalizations are treated as speech acts (e.g., requests, assessments, complaints) and are often taken up and ratified through repetition or expansion. Indeed, caregivers as well as occasional interlocutors extensively simplify their own linguistic production when talking to children (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984).

The treatment of input as sociocultural phenomenon across cultures compels researchers in language development to extend the examination beyond child-directed communication to include an analysis of how the child is positioned, spatially and semiotically, within communicative interaction (Ochs *et al.* 2005). The presupposition of many language acquisition studies that infants receive linguistic input directly through dyadic verbal interaction does not withstand the evidence of cross-cultural studies. In many cultures, a child's first display of communicative competence is that of attuned listener (e.g., de Léon 1998, on the Zinacantec Mayans; Gaskins 1996, on the Yucatec Mayans; Toren 1990, on the Fijians). Infants are not recruited as interlocutors, either as speakers or addressees, but are nevertheless engaged in the flow of communication and activities in ways that require them to be attentive – that is, active peripheral participants (Rogoff *et al.* 2003).

As previously mentioned, among the Kaluli, preverbal children are not treated as communicative partners (Schieffelin 1985). However, as early as the first six months of life, infants are often involved in triadic interactions with an adult caregiver and an older sibling. An older sibling may be prompted to address rhetorical questions or imperatives to younger brothers or sisters in order to get them to change their course of action. Infants are not expected to respond verbally; in fact, they are not assumed to understand the propositional content of what they are told. The goal of the activity is a behavioural adjustment by the infant, which is usually effectively accomplished.

Among Zinacantec Mayans, infants' vocalizations, gestures, and eye gaze are interpreted as conveying communicative intention, which adults respond to in two ways: either by producing a verbal gloss or by quoting the baby (employing a reported speech frame) (de Léon 1998). Both speech acts are addressed to other co-present family or community members. Infants are thus considered proto-speakers long before they begin to talk, but they are not recruited as addressees and speakers in dyadic exchanges. A triadic participation format is more common with children who have begun babbling or uttering words. In elicitation routines, the child is addressed and at the same time invited to speak to a co-present third party.

In summary, both usage-based and language socialization approaches assign an essential role to input in language development and have contributed to deepening our understanding of it.

Usage-based studies have shown that input cannot be considered solely in terms of frequency effects, bringing to light complex relationships between concurrent language phenomena. Language socialization studies have revealed that children's language learning does not depend on the child being addressed (in simplified or other form) by adults and other competent speakers, or on being treated as an intentional communicator beginning in infancy. Different participant structures recruit children to language socialization practices. These forms of participation and the children's allocations therein vary developmentally and cross-culturally. On the one hand, they are associated with stages of expertise and maturation; on the other, they are related to local theories of socialization and childhood. In this sense, acquiring communicative competence encompasses taking on culturally appropriate subject positions.

6 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the relationship between culture and language development through the lens of two developmental models that feature culture centrally. The usage-based approach posits that underpinning language acquisition is a uniquely human form of learning, which has coevolved with cultural practices.

The language socialization paradigm argues that language development is intertwined with, as well as constitutive of the process of becoming a competent member of the social group. The two perspectives are *compatible* because the conceptions of culture that each adheres to stand in a reconcilable tension: culture is a species-wide resource of ontogenetic development, but cultures are dynamic and differentiated systems particular to times and places. The two perspectives are *complementary* because while the usage-based approach explains how the rules of language use are gained from context, language socialization examines the ways that the context of language use structures those rules.

Both the usage-based and the language socialization paradigms have solid empirical foundations (a basis that the nativist model to which they reacted does not hold). The usage-based approach focuses 'on the specific communicative events in which people learn and use language' (Tomasello 2000b: 61). The language socialization scholar examines 'socializing routines' – recurrent, situated activities that provide structured opportunities for children to engage with caregivers and other community members' (Garrett and Baquedano-López 2002: 343). The dimensions of context that these two paradigms examine are however different: the usage-based model considers the specific interactional event as an activity format, which constitutes the functional grounding for the child's and her interlocutor's linguistic acts (Nelson 2009). The language socialization scholar examines the social structuring of the communicative event in which the child is engaged, and illuminates the ideological substratum that informs how she is positioned therein, what stances and actions she is exposed to and is prompted to perform.

We have argued in this chapter that the dimensions of context brought to bear in usage-based and language socialization research are non-equivalent and interdependent. The way these dimensions of context are laminated onto each other and interact is yet to be examined. We thus propose a research agenda that ambitiously aims to illuminate the intersection of activity and practice in language development. We posit that such research enterprise entails some arbitration of different theoretical pronouncements as well as a methodological synthesis; indeed, much needed deepening of collaborations across disciplines.

Despite their strong emphasis on the role of context in language development, neither the usage-based model nor the language socialization approach is deterministic or unidirectional and both position the child as agent, creatively engaged in her learning experience (Carpenter 1998; Ochs and Schieffelin 2012; Tomasello 2000b). In usage-based research we see the child

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appropriate and deploy linguistic construction in the expression of her own intentions. She also displays remarkable audacity in blending constructions and creating novel utterances. In language socialization studies we see that as children take up – through language and with language – expected social roles and subject positions, they also creatively negotiate and manipulate – through language and with language – their social and existential spaces (Goodwin and Kyratzis 2012; Paugh 2005; Pontecorvo *et al.* 2001). Language as both a system and a social practice is continually object and instrument of improvisation and change.

Related topics

ethnopragmatics; linguaculture: the language–culture nexus in transnational perspective; culture and language processing; language, culture and interaction

Further reading

- Bavin, E. (ed.) (2009) *The Cambridge Handbook of Child Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. A comprehensive survey of language acquisition and development research. Organized by topic, the handbook traces the development of language from pre-linguistic infancy on. The volume also includes chapters on bilingualism, sign languages, and language impairments.
- Duranti, A., E. Ochs, and B. B. Schieffelin (eds.) (2012) *The Handbook of Language Socialization*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell. This edited collection provides an invaluable introduction to language socialization research. The field's theoretical underpinnings and methodological commitments are discussed before considering studies spanning across the life span, a multitude of cultures and institutional settings.
- Kramsch, C. (ed.) (2002) *Language Acquisition and Language Socialization: Ecological Perspectives*. London: Continuum. A remarkable interdisciplinary collection which offers insights into the social, cognitive, and semiotic processes that shape both the acquisition of language and the formation of the subject and the social.
- Rogoff, B. (2003) *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Winner of the William James Book Award and translated into several languages, this book presents a compelling argument for appreciating human development as a cultural process, not simply a biological or psychological one.
- Wootton, A. (1997) *Interaction and the Development of Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. An illuminating longitudinal case study that focuses on key developmental issues through the study of spontaneous interaction. A sophisticated social constructionist approach to children's language and cognitive development.

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