

## CHAPTER TEN

# LEARNING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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Universally, young children are positioned as novices and are expected to progressively acquire a wide array of competencies. This complex and multifaceted apprenticeship process features language both as a central means of knowledge transmission and as a critical target of transmission.<sup>1</sup> In fact, apprenticeship *through* language and apprenticeship *into* language are inseparable dimensions of the process of becoming a competent member of the social group (Cook-Gumperz 1987; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986a, 1986b).

As a simple example, think about the question “What do you say?” This question is used pervasively by American and European middle-class adults in addressing their young children (Ely and Berko-Gleason 1995; Fasulo and Pontecorvo 1999). What it solicits is not a display of linguistic proficiency, but rather a demonstration of cultural competence: the expected response from the child is usually “Thank you” or “Please,” which demonstrate politeness; or “I’m sorry” or “I apologize,” which demonstrate moral awareness; or “Good morning, Sir,” which signals respect. Similar instances of explicit language socialization, such as elicited imitation routines, reformulations, and rhetorical questions have been observed in communities around the world. Prompting practices, in particular, have been documented among the Basotho (Demuth 1986), the Kwara’ae (Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1986), the Kaluli (Schieffelin 1986, 1990), the Indo-Guyanese (Sidnell 1997), and the Zinacantec Mayan (de León 1998).

Language use is a form of social action. As such, it is structured by social norms, cultural constructs, beliefs, and ideologies pertaining

to language use itself, but also a range of other practices, interpersonal relationships, and individual and group identities. While language development is shaped by neurological and cognitive factors, mastery of one's mother tongue (and similarly of another language) cannot be characterized simply in terms of lexical wealth, semantic complexity, and syntactic virtuosity. Children's communicative development is also molded and organized by sociocultural processes. Grammatical forms are used to carry out social acts and to express opinions. These in turn are connected to social identities and cultural practices, whose meanings reflect and instantiate a community's beliefs and worldview. Thus, in discerning developmental trends in language comprehension and production, the sociocultural matrix of a community's communicative practices has to be taken into account.

Certain patterns of language development that can be observed in young children learning their mother tongue are conundrums if evaluated according to their grammatical properties. 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 could be predicated 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*.<sup>2</sup> But in Samoan society, the documented order of acquisition can be explained by the hierarchical organization of society, 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 (insofar as it implies that the beggar is in a submissive position with re-

spect to the bestower). When this sociocultural context is taken into account, the order of acquisition of the two deictics makes sense.

This chapter discusses language acquisition as a fundamentally cultural process. It draws primarily on the research paradigm of language socialization, which conceives of language acquisition as socialization and contends that the socialization process happens simultaneously *through* language and *into* language (Ochs 1988; Ochs and Schieffelin 1984; Schieffelin 1990; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986a, 1986b). The chapter first examines how culturally specific dispositions differently organize communicative practices and diversely configure communicative competence. Second, it considers child-directed communication and how the language learner is engaged in and exposed to conversational interaction with more competent speakers of the social group. The culture-specific role of child-directed speech in language acquisition is discussed, followed by a further examination of children's positioning in communicative practices and the link between participation structure, socialization, and the expected role of the learner at different developmental stages.

This exploration of the language socialization process continues with an analysis of the relationship between acquisition of discourse practices and identity formation. Special attention is given to narrative as both a social activity and a mode of cognition. Narrative is a powerful resource for apprehending and navigating one's own milieu. The chapter examines its importance both in socializing children to certain socially sanctioned roles and identities and in enabling those same children to construct their own trajectory and a sense of authentic self. The final section reflects on children's agency in the language socialization process: the role of the child in her or his own socialization and in the socialization of others. I argue that the language socialization process is inherently reciprocal and spans a person's lifetime. This argument also sheds light on children's impact on cultural transmission and change.

## **Sociocultural Dispositions and Communicative Practices**

In order to understand the relation of language to sociocultural constructs and processes, and thereby discern the intricacies of acquiring communicative competence, scholars in linguistic anthropology have engaged

the semiotic notion of indexicality. Because it is central to understanding what constitutes language competence, a brief discussion of this concept is necessary to provide the context for the more general exploration of language socialization.

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 1990; Silverstein 1976). Thus linguistic forms bear indexical meaning: their meaning is based on contextual connections. In turn, the inherent indexical value of linguistic forms is such that every instance of use contributes to reconstituting the relevant context.<sup>3</sup>

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 1990; Silverstein 2003). On the one hand, a single linguistic feature may index a wide range of possible social contexts.<sup>4</sup> Deletion of the copula in spoken Standard American English is a case in point: for instance, when someone says “you hungry” instead of “you are hungry,” it can index the social status of the person being addressed, such as a child, a foreigner, or an elderly person (Ochs 1990). On the other hand, linguistic forms also occur in patterns, 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 may index (and typify) certain ethnic identities, social roles, or subject positions (Agha 2004). A well-known example of register is baby talk.<sup>5</sup>

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, 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 (e.g., Heritage and Raymond 2005; see also chapter 11, this volume).<sup>6</sup>

Finally, indexical relations are noticed, given meaning, and made objects of evaluation, thereby becoming ideologically loaded and pragmatically usable constructs (Silverstein 2003). This ideological layering is captured in Silverstein's concept of *indexical order*, according to which second-order indexicality is generated when first-order indexical variation is "swept up into an ideologically-driven metapragmatics" (Silverstein 2003, 219).

### **Indexical Relationships and the Organization of Sociocultural Practices: An Illustration**

The concept of indexicality provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding the embeddedness of communicative practices in complex sociocultural contexts. An analysis of the act of clarification is offered as an illustration of how everyday routines and conversational exchanges children experience are organized by norms, cultural constructs, beliefs, and ideologies pertaining not solely to language use but also to the pursuit of knowledge, interpersonal relationships, and social order (Ochs 1988). The activity of clarifying one's own or others' talk and behavior is found in all cultures, being undoubtedly a central practice for securing interpersonal intelligibility and attunement. However, what is deemed important to elucidate and the ways in which clarification is pursued vary cross-culturally. These differences reflect distinct epistemologies, folk theories of communication, and principles of social order.

Young children's unintelligible utterances and nonverbal behavior are particularly salient targets of clarification among American white middle-class caregivers, while they are more rarely objects of attention and clarification sequences in other communities, such as the Inuit (Crago 1992), the Kaluli (Schieffelin 1990), or the Samoan (Ochs 1988). When infants and young children produce unintelligible verbalizations (or nonverbal actions), American white middle-class caregivers tend to pursue clarification by proffering candidate understandings: *expressed guess strategies* (Ochs 1988) such as "Do you mean X?" or "X? Is that what you're saying?" articulate a clarification for the child to confirm or reject.

In Inuit, Kaluli, and Samoan communities, explicitly inquiring about what someone else is thinking is an undesirable activity. Insofar as clarification may imply guessing the unintelligible communicative intentions of another, such activity is seen as inappropriate. This is especially true when differently ranked individuals (e.g., adults and children) are involved in the clarification activity and the unintelligible utterance is produced by the lower-ranking interlocutor. In these societies, higher-ranking members do not normally accommodate lower-ranking individuals and hence do not attempt to clarify an interlocutor's unclear utterance by guessing its meaning.

When Inuit, Kaluli, and Samoan caregivers do solicit clarification from their children, they most frequently employ *minimal grasp strategies* (Ochs 1988). They display minimal or no apprehension of the child's verbalization (or nonverbal action). Statements of nonunderstanding (e.g., "I don't understand," "I can't understand what you're saying"), *wh-* interrogatives (e.g., "What?" "Who?" "Where?"), quizzical expressions (e.g., "Huh?" or raised eyebrows), as well as explicit requests or directives to repeat the unclear utterance or action (e.g., "Say it again," or "Show me again"), call for the child to take full charge of clearing up unintelligible utterances.

These different cultural approaches to the clarification activity reflect distinct local epistemologies. The preference for a certain kind of response to unintelligibility is informed by tacit assumptions about how knowledge is pursued and what can be accessed as objects of knowledge. In the American white middle-class community studied, deployment of expressed guess strategies instantiates the Socratic method for gaining knowledge (Ochs 1988). Learning and understanding are pursued through articulation and testing of hypotheses. Utilizing this procedure to gain knowledge about the communicative intentions of another also indicates that what is in another's mind is deemed a legitimate and possible object of knowledge. In contrast, ignoring unintelligibility or addressing it through minimal grasp strategies reflects the belief that another's unclear expression cannot be made the object of (verbal) speculation and that knowledge can be gained through repeated exposure.

Different cultural approaches to the clarification activity also reflect distinct folk theories of meaning-making and communication. The aim

of expressed guess strategies is to grasp the child's communicative intention, and the child is called on to confirm or disconfirm the interpretation. An utterance or action's correct meaning corresponds to the utterer or actor's intended meaning. In contrast, avoiding speculation about others' thoughts and communicative intentions is linked to a folk theory that emphasizes the consequences of an utterance or action as central to determining the utterance or action's meaning (Schieffelin 1990).

Finally, different cultural approaches to the clarification activity result from different social orders. Expressed guess strategies used to clarify young children's statements are oriented toward and accommodate the child. In offering a possible interpretation of the child's unclear utterance or action, the caregiver takes the perspective of the child; that is, she mobilizes cognitive resources for decentering and articulating a considered guess (Ochs 1982). In a social matrix in which social relationships are closely mapped on hierarchical status, accommodation to the lower-ranking child is inappropriate for the higher-ranking caregiver. Contrariwise, young children are expected to adopt a sociocentric perspective, to notice and accommodate the needs and preferences of higher-ranking persons: for instance, by clarifying their utterances or actions (as well as those of higher-ranking interlocutors).

In summary, clarification is a compelling example of how cognitive and linguistic processes are socioculturally organized. As participants in the clarification activity, young children not only become familiar with the cognitive operations and discourse structures that lead to identification and resolution of unintelligibility; they also learn what can and cannot be accessed as objects of knowledge and valued ways to pursue knowledge. They are socialized into local perspectives on meaning and meaning-making, and into norms and expectations concerning social identities and interpersonal relationships.

Much of social meanings of discourse practices—such as clarification—are constituted and transmitted through indexical relationships that link linguistic forms to acts, stances, roles, identities, and activities. The relation of language to cultural constructs and social order exceeds the semantic domain and is more complex than a one-to-one mapping of form and meaning. It is woven in intricate ways on the axes of multiple orders of indexicality.

## **Child-Directed Communication and the Child as Interlocutor**

Theories of language acquisition comprise claims about the nature and role of input in first-language learning (for reviews, see Gallaway and Richards 1994; Snow 1995). Chomsky's initial theorization of the *language acquisition device* was based on an assessment of input as unsystematic, incoherent, and often fallacious (Chomsky 1965). Interestingly, many scholars who criticized innatist theories of language acquisition ended up making claims of universality as well. Baby talk, a specialized register used to address young children, was considered a universal phenomenon, in fact a requirement for children's language acquisition.

In the early 1980s, linguistic anthropologists 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 present. In addition, they observed that features of child-directed speech recurring in different speech communities are differentially frequent.

In light of their fieldwork observations, Ochs and Schieffelin concluded that linguistic simplification is not required for the young child to learn the mother tongue. In fact, Ochs and Schieffelin argued that the notion of input in itself had to be reexamined, in that it implies the need for language to be addressed to the child and to be closely connected to a dyadic model of communication; but it is not the case that everywhere in the world children are spoken to by adults or engaged in dyadic exchanges (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 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).<sup>7</sup> 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 *eĕma* ("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).<sup>8</sup>

In more recent years, Elinor Ochs has returned to an examination of baby talk and has offered an alternative construct for the various ways competent members of different social groups interact verbally and non-verbally with children. Ochs, Solomon, and Sterponi (2005) engage a set of sociocultural dimensions—comprising ideologies, habitats, participation frameworks, activities, and semiotic repertoires—to illuminate the specificities of a community's communicative habitus and in particular child-directed communication. In proposing a multidimensional model of child-directed communication, Ochs and colleagues (2005) extend

the range of communicative modalities beyond speech, consider a wider range of communicators (older siblings and other relatives, in addition to the mother).

Ochs and her colleagues suggest that the way different cultures organize child-directed communication “is not neutral with respect to its influence on children’s development” (560); that is, it may not maximize the communicative potential of all children. Ochs and colleagues then demonstrate that certain features of Euro-American child-directed communication may hinder the communicative capacities of children with autism spectrum disorders. Specifically, face-to-face body orientation, speech as the primary semiotic medium for the child, and interlocutors’ slowed speech tempo and profuse praise, compound the communicative difficulties of children with autism. The case of an Indian woman, mother of a child with severe autism, reported by Ochs and colleagues (2005), shows, however, that the communicative habitus is open to transformation: in trying to overcome major difficulties in the communication with her nonverbal son, Soma Mukhopadhyay challenged commonly held assumptions about autism and adopted an alternative set of child-directed communicative practices attuned to severe autism. These practices—which include side-by-side body orientation, pointing to symbols as the primary semiotic medium for the child, and rapid prompts and restrained praise by the caregiver—allowed the autistic child to communicate extensively with his mother and others.

### **The Child’s Positioning in Communicative Interaction**

Previous sections of this chapter have discussed the differential positioning in communicative practices that young children experience in different communities. As the discussion pointed out, theories of language acquisition that presuppose direct input through dyadic simplified verbal interaction do not withstand the evidence of cross-cultural studies. This section further explores the organization of participation in talk when young children are present, and it discusses the link between participation structure, socialization, and expected roles for the child at different developmental stages. Specifically, it examines how the acquisition of communicative competence is closely associated with learning to assume

certain subject positions and participant roles and learning to shift among them with different interlocutors and in different activities.

In many cultures, a child's first display of communicative competence is that of attuned listener (e.g., de León 1998, on the Zinacantec Mayans; Gaskins 1996, on the Yucatec Mayans; Schieffelin 1986, on the Kaluli; 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 (see chapter 5, this volume; Lave and Wenger 1991; Rogoff et al. 2003).<sup>9</sup>

As previously mentioned, among the Kaluli, preverbal children are not treated as communicative partners (Schieffelin 1985). However, as early as the first 6 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 behavioral 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 León 1998). Both speech acts are addressed to other co-present family or community members. Infants are thus considered *protospeakers* 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 dinner conversations among Italian family members, co-present young children (age 3–5 years old) are usually ratified participants and treated as competent interlocutors (Fatigante, Fasulo, and Pontecorvo 1998). Sometimes, however, they are made the topic of talk while being relegated to the more peripheral position of unaddressed recipient

or *nonperson* (Benveniste 1996, as cited in Fatigante et al. 1998). Such a change of position is common when dealing with a child's problematic conduct. The child as "dangerous interactant" is thus controlled by casting the child as an unrated participant who can only overhear how others characterize her or his behavior. Alternatively, the adults refer to the child in the third person and metaphorically set the stage for her or him to perform in the way they are talking about. The key of this kind of sequence is usually playful. The child is thus called on to parody her or his own behavior, thereby aligning herself or himself with the characterization the adults have provided verbally.

In summary, 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.

## **Discourse Practices and Identity Formation**

The acquisition of communicative competence, being essentially the process of "becoming a speaker of culture" (Ochs 2002), encompasses learning a variety of discourse practices that are part of the community's cultural repertoire. These discourse practices can be conceptualized as social activities and also as modes of cognition and orienting frameworks. As such, their apprehension equips speakers with linguistic and cognitive resources to navigate in their own environments and construct their own trajectory and experience therein.

Narrative is recognized as the most significant and powerful tool for making sense of life experiences as well as for configuring stances and identities (e.g., Bruner 1990, 1993; Mattingly 1998; Morrison 1994; Ochs and Capps 2001; Ricoeur 1984). Ubiquitous across the world's societies, yet culturally stipulated, narrative practices socialize children into a community's worldview and moral perspective, and into expected

subject positions, including gendered roles and collective alignments. Cultural and comparative studies have shown that very young children participate in oral narrative activity and that these early stories are already culturally differentiated.

Shirley Brice Heath's (1983) classic study of three communities in the Piedmont Carolinas has revealed that different social groups adopt distinct criteria of tellability and norms for recounting events. More specifically, Heath found that the white working-class community of Roadville, used factual narratives based on personal experiences, with focused attention to detail and truth-value, to convey moral lessons. In contrast, the black working-class Trackton community valued story-tellers who exploited the fictional realm to embellish the narrative and make it more entertaining for the audience. Socialization into these different narrative practices not only configures children's narrative competence differently but also conveys distinct values about what is worth telling and the appropriate framework for interpreting events (see also Preece 1987; Sperry and Sperry 1996).

In exploring the role of narrative practices in the early socialization of Chinese and American children, Peggy J. Miller and colleagues have shown that Chinese parents overwhelmingly employ the recounting of past experiences to remind children of misdeeds and of moral standards. In contrast, American parents utilize stories about their children's past experiences primarily as a medium of entertainment and self-affirmation (Miller, Fung, and Mintz 1996; Miller et al. 1997; see also chapter 11, this volume). Wang and Leichtman's (2000) analysis of the social, emotional, and cognitive features of American and Chinese 6-year-olds' narratives offers congruent findings: Chinese children's stories are more concerned with moral standards and social rules than those produced by American children. In addition, Wang and Leichtman found that in recounting past experiences Chinese children are oriented toward social engagement and interpersonal relationships, whereas their American counterparts show greater orientation toward individual needs, preferences, and lines of action.

Narratives about personal experiences and autobiographical memories are thus culturally specific products, inextricably bound into the community's symbolic and ideological order (Miller, Fung, and Koven 2007; Wang and Brockmeier 2002). Narratives are also instrumental in

identity formation: they offer subject positions for children to take on. A community's narrative genres are frameworks that allow members to represent themselves and others in particular ways. At the same time, individuals use narratives to transform their experiences, resist and transcend pre-established identity attributions, and strive for authenticity and self-expression (Bruner 2002; Ochs 2004; Ochs and Capps 2001; Wortham 2001). Indeed, these dynamics of cultural transmission and transformation occur both at the level of the narrated event and the event of narration.

Numerous studies have highlighted how gendered identities are constructed and negotiated through narrative activity. Robin Fivush's research offers a nuanced developmental account of relations between gender, identity, and autobiography in white middle-class families (Fivush 1994; Fivush and Buckner 2003; Fivush et al. 2000). Fivush has found gender differences in the ways girls and boys tell stories about their lives as early as the preschool years. Specifically, preschool girls tend to talk more about the emotional and interactional aspects of their experiences than boys do. By studying spontaneous parent-child conversations about past events, Fivush has been able to connect these early gender differences to the ways mothers and fathers reminisce with their daughters and sons. In those dyadic interactions, mothers and fathers behaved strikingly similarly in engaging differently in narrative with their daughters and sons. With their daughters, both parents talked about emotions and situated events in an interpersonal matrix to a greater extent than with their sons. Although these findings do not indicate that there are monolithic and fixed gender differences in the way males and females talk about past events, the convergence of fathers' and mothers' narrative styles when reminiscing with their daughters and sons is evidence of an early socialization process into culturally appropriate gender roles.

Narrative is also a central tool for the construction of collective identities and a sense of belonging. In her study of narrative renditions of the apparition of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe in religious education classes, Baquedano-López (2000) shows how teachers use narrative activity to draw children of Mexican descent in Los Angeles into a paradigm of national, albeit diasporic, identity. Baquedano-López's analysis reveals that while the narrative calls for identification with the protagonist, the oppressed Indian who challenges the Spanish clergy, it also represents the

master narrative of the Catholic Church in that the ultimate liberating act comes about in the form of divine intervention. In other words, while identification with the protagonist endows children with counterhegemonic storylines that construct an agentive Mexican identity, the narrative also restrains the subversive potential of legitimization of a rebellious character by subsuming his actions within a broader project of collective devotion and redemption.

Narrative activity is also key to the shaping of family identity. In the intimate context of dinnertime, Italian families often engage in co-narration (Fasulo and Pontecorvo 1997; Pontecorvo and Arcidiacono 2007). Most frequently, family members, including young children, revisit past events that feature the family as protagonist. Approximately 30 percent of the co-narrations, however, feature others—that is, individuals not connected by kinship to the participants—as protagonists (Pontecorvo, Amendola, and Fasulo 1994). Both kinds of collective narration contribute to the construction of and socialization into a family identity: in talking about unrelated protagonists, family members take stances and call for people to express opinions about others' behaviors and experiences.

In American white middle-class families (Ochs and Taylor 1992), family narration is less frequently centered on the family as a group. The children are the most frequent protagonists; however, they rarely introduce the narratives themselves. The parents orchestrate the activity, taking on the roles of introducer, primary recipient, and problematizer. In this case, the narrative activity seems to serve as a powerful tool for the construction of the political order of the family (Ochs and Taylor 1992).<sup>10</sup>

### **Active Apprentice: The Role of the Child in Language Socialization**

A fundamental tenet of the language socialization research paradigm is that both adults and children, experts and novices, are engaged in teaching and learning practices as active agents. Young children do not passively internalize cultural knowledge, and cultural apprenticeship does not only happen in childhood (Ochs 1986, 1988).

A convincing illustration of children's agency within and in relation to processes of sociocultural and linguistic apprenticeship is offered by Amy Paugh's (2005) work on language acquisition, use, and shift in

Dominica, West Indies. On that Caribbean island, adults forbid children from speaking Patwa, which is the local creole and the language adults use for informal exchanges and emotionally expressive utterances, in favor of English, the official language and the language of schooling. Still, children often speak Patwa during play with their peers, using it to try out social identities and acts that defy authority and power asymmetries. Paugh argues persuasively that these children are both actively engaged in acquiring communicative competence in an ideologically charged multilingual context and also having an impact on broader processes of language maintenance and shift.

Further evidence of children's agency in language apprenticeship is offered within the research tradition of developmental psycholinguistics. Nancy Budwig (1989, 1990), for instance, has studied the use of self-reference forms by young children acquiring English as a first language. Budwig has observed that the children use personal pronouns ("I" and "me"), and their own names in a systematic but unconventional way, to contrastively mark different agency attributions and degrees of control.

Acknowledging children as agents in the social world, researchers are also compelled to explore how children's actions have implications for others. Children are not only active in their own socialization but are also active socializers of others (Gaskins, Miller, and Corsaro 1992; Pontecorvo, Fasulo, and Sterponi 2001). In many societies, children are responsible for socializing their younger siblings. Linguistic anthropologist Penelope Brown has shown, for example, that in the Tzeltal-speaking Mayan community, children as young as 5 years old are caregivers and employ complex forms of nonliteral language, notably threats and lies, that until very recently had been used on them. In employing those complex forms, children display their ability to consider what others are thinking and manipulate it creatively (Brown 2002).

In Kwara'ae (Solomon Islands), Watson-Gegeo (2001) has observed that as early as when they turn age 3 and begin working regularly, children perform two modal presentations of self: child mode and adult mode. Adult mode is primarily employed in work contexts, where children take on the demeanor of adults and interact with them as equals. By switching between child and adult modes, and by integrating knowledge achieved with peers through pretend play and that attained from adults and first-

hand experience, Kwara'ae children "learn about and transform social reality, (re)modeling their culture" (Watson-Gegeo 2001).

Pontecorvo, Fasulo, and Sterponi (2001) have highlighted children's active role in socializing other family members, notably parents, just as they are socialized by them. In other words, while children are engaged in the process of becoming competent members of the social group as children, they are also contributing to the socialization of their parents to culturally specific parental practices (see also Orellana 2009). In Italian families (and likely in many other cultures around the world), children frequently ask their parents for information and explanations (Pontecorvo et al. 2001). In doing so, the children activate a novice-expert framework and assign those roles to themselves and their interlocutors respectively. The addressed parent is thus solicited to display his or her expertise. Such expertise includes knowledge the child lacks, as well as the ability to provide an answer that is intelligible to the child and is culturally appropriate. Moreover, children's questions invoke parents' knowledge as it applies to certain experiences or lines of reasoning with which the children are concerned: parents must package their answers in ways that are responsive to the children's frame of inquiry.

## Conclusion

Language and verbal communication are defining features of humanity. Though universal, they are also inherently culturally stipulated. Language acquisition is thus quintessentially a socialization process through which children become *speakers of culture* (Ochs 2002).

This chapter has discussed the relationship between communicative practices and sociocultural structures, in particular the ways this relationship informs the process of language socialization. It described how in different cultures and communities, children experience verbal interaction and come to master communicative competence through different paths and forms of participation. The discussion also highlighted children's agency in language socialization and noted the reciprocal and lifelong character of the process. Indeed, becoming a speaker of culture means learning to speak like a child, a sibling, a parent, a teacher, and many more ways in the different moments of one's life course.

As children take up—*through* language and *with* language—expected social roles and subject positions, they creatively negotiate and manipulate—*through* language and *with* language—their social and existential spaces. Language as both a system and a social practice is continually object and instrument of improvisation and change. Children’s role in the transmission and transformation of culture cannot be overstated and should be further explored through multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary endeavors.

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## Notes

1. In this chapter, the term *apprenticeship* is used to forefront the situated nature of learning and to focus attention on contexts of acquisition rather than individual mental processes (Rogoff 1990). In this broad sense, the notion of apprenticeship acknowledges the active role of children in organizing learning and socialization but does not necessarily ascribe intentionality or awareness in acquiring cultural knowledge.

2. Unlike *aumai*, *sau* is a noncausative verb (Platt 1986).

3. Not only linguistic signs are inherently indexical, but all kinds of signs can potentially convey information about contextual variables, such as the status or ethnicity of the actor. Goffman (1956), for instance, offers a sharp analysis of “embodied indicators of status and character,” which he captured with the notion of demeanor.

4. Ochs (1990) has defined this form of indexical complexity as *collocational indexing* (294).

5. Essential properties of baby talk comprise prosodic features such as high pitch and exaggerated contour, phonological features such as reduplication and special sounds, syntactic features such as parataxis and repetition, lexical features such as hypocorism and kin terms, and discourse features such as question and pronoun shift (Ferguson 1977).

6. Evidential markers express the evidence a speaker has for his or her statement and/or the speaker's degree of confidence in his or her statement (Chafe and Nichols 1986).

7. In many communities around the world, a child's first word is given special attention. Community members often speculate about what that word will be. While there are considerable cross-linguistic similarities in the linguistic characteristics of children's first words (Bornstein et al. 1997; Gentner 1982; Tardif et al. 2008), what the first word means and what this meaning says about the child's presumed nature vary substantially across cultures.

In traditional Western Samoa communities, children are said to utter *tae* as their first word (Ochs 1988). *Tae* means "shit" and is recognized as part of the more complex expression *ai tae*, "eat shit." A curse is thus what Samoan children are expected to utter as their first linguistic act. The expectation and interpretation of children's early vocalization as curse is linked to the cultural concept of the Samoan child's nature as wild, willful, and irreverent. Similarly, among the people of Gapun, Papua New Guinea, infants are considered obstinate and bad-natured (Kulick 1992). The first words attributed to Gapun infants are expressions of dissatisfaction and frustration, such as *oki*, "I'm getting out of here", or *mnda*, "I'm sick of this" (Kulick 1992, 101–2).

8. For an encompassing look at child-rearing practices and parents' cultural belief systems in several cultures, see Harkness and Super (1996).

9. It is worth mentioning that in many cultures, attentive listening is an appropriate behavior not solely for infants but also for older children and adults with certain social statuses (Nicolaisen 1988; Philips 1972).

10. See Aukrust (2002), Beals and Snow (2002), and Georgakopoulou (2002) for additional cross-cultural studies of family narrative and identity formation.

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