Language Socialization in the Tub: Examining Both Sides of the Interaction

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As a first-semester doctoral student in Leslie Beebe's Linguistic Anthropology class, when the time came to start developing my final project, I had read seminal articles on language socialization, as well as more recent studies. I also had great data (20 months' worth of video recordings of interaction between a child and her caregivers), but no direction in which to take it. As Leslie advised, I reviewed the video recordings to find excerpts that seemed superficially interesting to me, and then transcribed those instances in detail to determine why I had found them interesting in the first place. Again and again in office hours, she urged me to find the gap in the literature and to be clear about the story I wanted to tell with my data. Working with Leslie to narrow my focus led me to a work process that I have returned to time and again in subsequent projects. It is a process I am utilizing now as I analyze data for my dissertation. I will briefly present my findings from that earlier language socialization study below, and will conclude by examining how the experience of working on that project has shaped my subsequent work.

Linguistic anthropologists who initially studied language socialization (LS) felt that such a focus allowed them to address a major gap in the language acquisition literature (i.e., culture), as well as a major gap in the socialization literature (i.e., language; Kulick & Schieffelin, 2004). LS is an inextricable part of socialization, the process of learning the culture of a particular community and becoming a competent member of that community; practitioners of LS research argue that the socialization process is realized largely through language use, as language is a medium that contains and reproduces cultural knowledge. LS was established as a field of study based on Schieffelin and Ochs' (1986a) contention that "ordinary conversational discourse is a powerful socializing medium" (p.172). A great deal of early work in LS focused on cross-cultural differences in language socialization practices to highlight the situated and particular nature of such practices (cf. Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986b). Although LS researchers profess to be concerned with language use by children and to children (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2001), an examination of a number of LS studies shows that more often than not, the speech under analysis is that of the caregiver, and not of the child. My study sought to address this asymmetry, and to examine the implications of LS by looking at the interaction between caregiver and child, rather than just one side of the conversation.

Given the importance of culturally situating LS research, it is important to be clear about the context of my study. American, white, middle-class (AWMC) caregivers, the community to which my participants belong, treat children as active conversational participants from birth, whereas caregivers in other cultures may treat utterances by their children as lacking meaning, or ignore the utterances entirely. Specifically, Balog and Roberts (2004) mark the difference between toddler speech that is vocalization for its own sake and speech that is intended for other interactional participants. The authors suggest that AWMC caregivers often cross the line between "overly interpret[ing] intentionality" (p. 838) and orienting to relevant prior turns of toddlers. Ninio, Snow, Pan, and Rollins (1994) argue that, even in the earliest stage, of particular interest is the period between 14 and 20 months, when many children's vocabularies explode and they begin to talk in earnest (i.e., talk for communication, not vocalization). Ninio et al. note that children in

this age subset are more easily understood by their caregivers, and that children rely less on nonverbal means to express themselves than they may have previously. My study looked at an extended interaction between an AWMC caregiver and her 23-month-old daughter, Kaya, in order to examine how each participant contributed to the interaction as a whole. Transcripts were created using a conversation analytic method, and initial analyses focused on two common concerns in conversation analysis (CA): turn-taking and repair.[1]

While there were several findings in the larger study, I will highlight one here: even before she was able to form words and sentences correctly, Kaya had acquired the norms of conversational turn-taking, and was able to react to situations requiring repair (although much of the repair ultimately failed). In the following excerpt, Kaya reforms her utterances in an apparent attempt to be better understood. She has acquired the competence to understand when repair is needed, and in response to a non-specific request for clarification, she attempts to alter what may be the trouble source. Levy (1999) found that in 65-100% of the cases, children were found to repeat and change parts of their utterances in response to non-specific requests for clarification (e.g., "What?"). Likewise, below, Kaya can be seen making small changes to her utterances, and when her attempts at communication fail, she changes topic.

Excerpt 1: Kaya at 23 months, Blue/Boo

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1           ((Kaya drops her sippy cup into the tub))
2 Mother:   Oooh! Uh-oh,
3 Kaya:     {doo-doo-dih. ((looking at Mother))}
4 Mother:   What?
5 Kaya:     {doo-dyu-dih. ((looking at Mother))}
6 Mother:   Your drink fell?
7 Kaya:     {d-doo-doo-weh. ((looks away then back at Mother))}
8 Mother:   I don't understand wh[at            yo]u're saying,
9 Kaya:                         [{caha ((looks down at crayons)) ]        [color]
10 Mother:  There's your colors.
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Kaya's mother, true to the AWMC norm, attempts to reform Kaya's utterances, either by lengthening them to full sentences or by correcting pronunciation, but Kaya rejects all attempts to change her language. The mother tries several different clarification requests, ranging from a non-specific request in line four to directly stating her inability to understand in line eight. Similarly, when Kaya tries to communicate (evidenced by eye gaze), her mother tries repeatedly to understand Kaya's utterances through a combination of various types of requests for clarification. Kaya obliges by reforming her utterances, but to no avail. After several failed communication attempts, Kaya abandons her efforts and moves on to a new topic. While it is difficult to speculate on Kaya's intended meaning in this excerpt, it is clear that she is an active participant in the conversation with substantial knowledge of turn-taking conventions and the process of repair. Without inclusion of Kaya's utterances, analysis of this excerpt would produce an incomplete picture of the process of language socialization.

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[1] Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998) consider repair to be "a generic term. . . used. . . to cover a wide range of phenomena" (p. 57) encompassing all sources of trouble in the talk to which participants orient. Trouble sources can include production trouble (e.g., stumbles or stuttering) and factual errors, among other categories.

A great deal of LS research focuses on one side of the conversation, making an analysis of repair (or any other interactional accomplishment) implausible. Working on this project with Leslie led me to internalize her two great pieces of advice: find the gap and tell your story. In my doctoral work on classroom discourse, I continue to focus on both sides of the interaction, including and focusing on student participation in addition to the usual focus on teacher talk. I have found the gap, and now I must tell my story.

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APPENDIX

Transcription Notations

!	surprise/excitement perceptible in intonation
.	sentence-final falling intonation
?	yes/no question rising intonation
,	phrase-final intonation (more to come)
[ ]	overlapped talk
(( ))	comments on background, skipped talk or nonverbal behavior
{(( )) words.}	{ } marks the beginning and ending of the simultaneous occurrence of the verbal/silence and nonverbal; the absence of { } means that the simultaneous occurrence applies to the entire turn.

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