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THE CHILD'S ENTRY INTO THE SOCIAL UNIVERSE OF DISCOURSE

In light of recent literature on language and species evolution (Bickerton, 1990), one can accept that the human child is born ready for participation in his or her speech community. Language, from a functional viewpoint, evolved for two reasons indispensable for species survival and further evolution: communication and concerted action (Pinker & Bloom, 1992). Language has its antecedents in the pre-existence of a species-specific system of mental representation of the world (Bickerton, 1990). Thus we can postulate that the child, genetically equipped for language and maturing in a normal discursive environment, helps himself or herself to enter a "universe of discourse" by means of building a meaning potential. On the basis of behavior stream studies of two-year-olds, as well as of three-year-old children's action coordinations in dyadic situations, we propose some concepts for grasping the acquisition of meaning potential which includes illocutionary as well as referential meaning. These concepts (activity situation and reference situation), applicable for empirical analyses, take into account the intrapersonal as well as interpersonal sides of discourse function. Two frameworks for discourse development (action discourse and topical discourse) are analyzed in their dynamic interplay. We come to the conclusion that discourse in various participant structures is the child's primary tool for acquisition of meaning potential.

Recently a neurochemist friend asked me in a dinner-table conversation a rather surprising question: "Why do you think children talk at all?" I knew it was meant as a serious question. This friend had long been thinking about the nature of language and of human users of language. So I said I thought that children talk for the reason that everyone else talks. Everyone understands and speaks a language - it is the way we are, it is our human nature, as Jackendoff (1993) put it in his book, "Patterns in the Mind". What does it mean to be born a member of a characteristically talking species, that acts through and by means of words, who can say and understand anything that can be expressed in language?

The issue of language antecedents and its evolutionary route has been occupying the minds of incisive thinkers to an ever growing extent, to mention only Bickerton, Chomsky, Gould, Jackendoff, Pinker, Tooby and Cosmides. The most debated questions are not whether our species is genetically programmed for language (no longer does this seem to be controversial), but what aspects of language are genetically programmed and by what adaptive mechanisms, and how these aspects interact with the human environment re-

sponsible for the reasons we talk and the way we talk - in other words, by what learning mechanisms is the genetic plan realized in terms of language functions. Also, what relations does this have to the evolution of social exchange behavior, an ancient and central part of human social life (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992).

There are compelling arguments supporting the belief that language evolved for two interlocking reasons without which the survival and further evolution of primitive man would have been impossible. Pinker and Bloom (1992) refer to these as communication and concerted action. Only language could have made it possible to coordinate the actions of large numbers of people (Jackendoff, 1993). But, in turn, there are necessary antecedents of language in man, as Bickerton (1990) argues. In his book "Language and Species", Bickerton has characterized these antecedents as a species-specific system of mental representation of the world. Primitive man, he claims, just like the lower species, had to be able to identify and categorize significant elements in the world, and also - unlike the lower species - had to be able to represent mentally non-present situations so as to plan on a social scale of action.

All particular languages, after Pinker and Bloom (1992), share a design for fulfilling the fundamental functions of language mentioned above. Thus, language contains mechanisms that presuppose the existence of a listener, as well as pragmatic devices to encode topic, illocutionary force, and so on. It is these complex mechanisms that children learn, and which enable them to acquire a language exactly like that of other speakers in their environment. In turn, it is the speech of the community that makes available the information for acquiring arbitrary sound and meaning pairs or - in Searle's (1976) terms - matches of word and world. After all, everyone in English says "dog" for a dog, and only for a dog.

When in the sixties students of language ontogenesis recognized that children were mentally constructing autonomous systems for connecting words, they thought of these as formal grammars, like "pivot syntax" (Braine, 1963). But soon two important facts were noted. One was that children produced these novel constructions in situations of reference (Bloom, 1973), which enabled the listener to attribute meaning to the utterance. This kind of meaning was called semantic meaning. The second important fact was that early utterances served "interpersonal functions" (Smoczyńska, 1978), and conveyed primitive illocutionary meanings (Antinucci & Parisi, 1973; Dore, 1975; Gruber, 1973) - they indicated something in the world, commented on it, changed states of the world, made demands upon the listener for some action as well as issuing imperatives for self. Further, in these same years, mother-infant interactions were being studied to show the beginnings of social exchange patterns, joint reference and joint action (Bruner, 1975) as well as early dialog (Bullowa, 1979; Söderbergh, 1974) and conversational turn-taking (Snow, 1977).

In a word, while mentally constructing his or her linguistic system, the child is already using the system to learn "how to mean", to quote Halliday (1975). Given this background, I shall now speak more directly on the topic of this paper, to which I have given the title: "The child's entry into the universe of discourse".

The phrase „universe of discourse" can be understood in a linguist's view and in a discourse theorist's view .

According to Lyons (1969), a universe of discourse is restricted to the society to which people belong, where participants share the more general beliefs, conventions and

presuppositions of that speech community. The stuff of which the universe is made are objects such as propositions, concepts, and the like, largely stored in the minds of participants, which makes for the intersubjective nature of a universe of discourse (Lyons, 1979).

According to van Dijk and other leading discourse theorists, discourse can be characterized as the planning and executing of various goal-oriented actions as part of the social and cultural management of communicative interaction. Pragmatic strategies are needed to achieve plans effectively. Plans are the mental representations of global actions (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). Discourse coherence are problems of communication which postulate that people understand each other (Tannen, 1982). According to Gumperz (1982), the universals of human interaction are discourse tasks.

These definitions of discourse - on the one hand, emphasizing the intersubjective nature of discourse and on the other, stressing the task nature of communication - clearly overlap and supplement each other in important ways. They enable us, in light of our knowledge of children's early meaning acquisitions sketched above, to state the following: The universe of discourse into which the child enters is the speech community within which the child functions as a co-participant from the beginning of life, and in which the child learns to solve with others the problems of communication and achievement of joint activity. We shall postulate that the child's entry into his or her universe of discourse is accomplished by the interplay of three basic factors:

- nature - genetically evolved preparedness,
- nurture - the environment,
- the child's own powers to create a meaning potential. The prerequisites can be

formulated simply as follows: Given normal maturation and development in a nurturant environment,

a) there must be discourse partners who recognize what can serve as a contribution from the child, who accept it, and who use it for discourse purposes,

b) the child must already be in possession of a "meaning potential" that awaits realization in the form of discourse.

In what follows, I would like to concentrate on how the child builds a meaning potential, using as basis some of the research that I have been conducting for several decades of child language study. This will have two parts: one referring to early research on individual children at age two, and the other referring to later research on three-year-old children's interactions in dyadic situations.

From humble beginnings

Our early research dealt with the relationships between a child's activity and his or her utterances. Our observations covered a year starting when two children, in different families, were just starting to combine words in their utterances. The children were observed in social situations in which the speech and actions of others were noted as well.

We developed a method of behavior stream description and analysis, and from the data obtained we arrived at a number of conclusions, of which two are most pertinent to the present discussion.

Firstly, there are two major categories of episodes, each of which comprises a different social framework for learning ways of using utterances. Discourse develops differently in these two contexts.

Secondly, to understand how a child acquires a meaning potential, we need to draw

a distinction between activity situation and reference situation.

Let us now consider the significance of these two conclusions.

Episodes as frameworks for utterance uses

Child utterances occur in episodes of different types. Episodes are stretches of ongoing activity within social situations. They comprise units that can be identified by their composition and direction of action. The behavior stream is an organization of episodes of different sorts. Episodes are linked together both sequentially and simultaneously. They make up a mosaic of actions within situations.

There are three major categories of episodes on speech criteria:

- episodes of action without child speech,
- episodes in which utterances occur related to activity with objects, in which other persons may or may not be involved,
- "verbal episodes", or episodes comprised of exchanges with a partner and focussed on a topic.

These three episode categories may be linked formally and functionally. One type can co-occur as well as include another. For example, the child can be making pies in the sandbox and at the same time conversing with mother about a visit to grandma - two distinct lines of attention and action. The child may at some point drop the topic altogether, and focus entirely on sandpie making, during which he calls upon mother to come and see, thus engaging her as an active participant in his line of action.

The three types of episode referred to above seemed to have a stable place in the composition of the behavior stream of the children we observed. This is shown in the following table from a composite analysis of 1000 episodes identified at five intervals across the year of observation.

EPISODE TYPES	Małgosia	Mikołaj
a) Activity without utterances	28%	12%
b) Activity with utterances	48%	63%
c) Verbal episodes	24%	25%

Proportions of episode types were fairly stable over the year studied (Shugar, 1976).

Note that the majority of episodes occurred in the framework of activities with objects that included child speech (nearly half for the girl and two-thirds for the boy). Silent activities with objects comprised the least frequent category, while verbal episodes, as defined above, made up one-quarter of the sum total of episodes across the year for both children.

We have called the episode types b) and c) two different frameworks for learning the place and functions of utterances in discourse. In the framework of Episode Type b), ACTION DISCOURSE is learned, while in the framework of Episode Type c), TOPICAL DISCOURSE is learned (Shugar, 1982, 1995). This will be exemplified below.

I turn now to the second important conclusion from the behavior stream studies which deals with the child's acquisition of meaning potential within the social framework of his own activity.

Activity situation and reference situation

There are two categories of situation that we can distinguish conceptually. These are activity situations and reference situations. We postulate that the ways in which these

categories of situation relate to each other comprise a basic source for the acquisition of a child's meaning potential. An **activity situation** exists in the here and now, and is concrete. It is the set of objective relations between elements (objects, persons, and so on) and their states in a given spatial and temporal field. An activity situation is defined in the perspective of a focal agent: it is "his" or "her" situation. By virtue of the focal agent's activity, as well as that of other active participants, a situation is never static, but is always changing. The active child whose perspective we take is the principal causal agent in activity situations.

A **reference situation** exists in the mind of the speaker, and emerges with the formation of an utterance. It represents what is referred to when something is uttered in an activity situation, that is, when a speaker produces a semantic construction. Utterances are acts that occur within the sphere of ongoing activity, but their references need not be inherent in that situation. They may inhere in other, non-present situations, other states of the world, past, predicted, imagined, hypothetical. Utterances are semantic realizations of reference situations. In a social communicative context, reference situations have an intersubjective quality. For communication to be achieved, speakers' reference situations evoke corresponding states in listeners' minds. For mutual understanding, the equivalent of a speaker's reference situation must also arise in the mind of the listener.

Relations between activity situations and reference situations can vary in discourse:

- they can overlap (reference situation is identical with actual activity situation),
- they can be displaced spatially and temporally (reference situation can be identical with the prior or the succeeding activity situation as related to the actual one),
- they can be unrelated, for instance, when reference situations are imaginary or hypothetical states of the world.

This distinction has empirical implications. The relations between an activity situation (AS) and a reference situation (RS) can be identified by means of discourse analysis (Shugar, 1978, 1995).

We shall now discuss and exemplify the significance of the two major conclusions from our early research as presented above. Let us start with considering some developmental aspects concerning the acquisition of meaning potential.

We are concerned here with the process of learning the relations between the linguistic (textual) side and the nonlinguistic (situational) side of discourse, and with the ways these relations come to be manipulated in speech.

The context of this learning is within the child, who is the subject of the process of discourse development. The child needs discourse skills to regulate his relations with the external environment and at the same time within himself. As a consequence, it is not profitable to think in terms of speech for self and speech for others, in the traditional way; rather we need to think of speech both for self and for others, in terms of momentary priorities (Shugar, 1981).

The child is a particular kind of listener, who benefits from his or her own utterances for intrapersonal ends, whereas other listeners use the child's utterances for interpersonal ends. The child mentally processes all the utterances he or she listens to, establishing correspondences of words to their referents in line with his or her own orientations and intentions. In processing linguistic information in relation to nonlinguistic information, the child constructs the semantic content of utterances. For this the child needs to rely on reference situations in the mind. At the same time, the child is learning

pragmatic meanings - what can be done with and through utterances - as a way of making changes in the world. Thus, from the perspective of the child who is building a meaning potential, discourse has two dimensions: intrasubjective and intersubjective.

We can illustrate our argument by examples from recorded discourse. For example, consider the meaning of *biega* (English: "run").

On the same day of observation, Małgosia, aged 19 months, uttered the single word *biega* in three different activity situations.

- a) Małgosia is running across the room. At each step she says: *biega biega biega*.
- b) Magosia is sitting in her baby carriage pushed by mother. Suddenly she stretches out her arms to mother and repeats: *biega! biega! biega!*
- c) Małgosia is sitting in her little chair. She says: *biega* several times, and then she gets up and starts to run.

In the first instance, we have a classic overlap of the performance of an action and its accompaniment with an utterance referring to it. In the second instance, there is no overlap. The reference situation is an activity situation not yet realized, but whose realization is desired. In the third instance, as in the second one, the reference situation is a non-actual activity situation, but whose realization is predicted and is named by the utterance.

In the latter two cases, the utterances have illocutionary meanings as well as referential. In the second case, it has the force of a directive addressed to the mother and conveys the speaker's intention that the listener enable the desired change of situation to occur. In the third case, the utterance has the force of a self-addressed directive and conveys the speaker's intention to perform the named action herself. In both instances, reference situations are displaced from actual activity situations both temporally and spatially, and represent states to be brought about by the effects of utterances, leading to instantiation of new intended activity situations.

In the above, we have illustrated our argument with examples of action discourse. Now let us consider how reference situations can be evoked for producing topical discourse.

A two-year-old child can generate a new topic of discourse by shifting the reference situation already introduced. Here are two instances.

1. The child J. together with the experimenter (Bob) was engaged in naming toy objects brought by the latter to J.'s home for this purpose. When a toy penguin was produced, J. said:

I eat that penguin.

After much questioning and pointing, Bob discovered that J. was referring to a box of cookies on the kitchen shelf. It had the trademark PENGUIN. J. liked these cookies. (From Grieve & Hoogenraad, 1976)

2. The child M., aged 21 months, was seated with a group of elders around the table having tea and cake. The elders were talking together. Suddenly the child, looking blankly into space, said: *Misio je zupę* (English: "Teddybear is eating soup"). The elders looked at her, at a loss for her meaning. Then father recalled that *Misio* was their name for a stray dog who used to come to the kitchen door of their summer cottage where he received a bowl of soup. The conversation around the table now turned to this topic. (From the author's observations).

The latter is an instance where the child constructed a reference situation from past

experience, thus providing a new topic for conversational discourse. Her success was due to the fact that a listener managed to identify the reference situation the child had in mind. In a study reported in Shugar (1978), three children aged 19 to 24 months, contributed topics to discourse by means of shifting reference situations. Based on analyses of 177 episodes of mother-child discourse in free play sessions including looking at picture books, topics were identified in terms of RS and AS correspondences. The results are summed up as follows (data from Shugar, 1978):

RS = AS (reference situations and activity situations coincide) 40%

RS \neq AS (spatio-temporal displacement of RS from AS) 20%

RS = AS (reference situation and pictured event coincide) 30%

RS \neq AS (non-present states and events, recalled or simulated by pretend play) 10%

The topics initiated by the child could function as topics in discourse because the mother was able to reconstruct in her mind an equivalent reference situation. Thus, depending on recognition and acceptance by the interlocutor, the child is able to play an initiatory role in constructing topical discourse.

From the study just mentioned we note that the construct of reference situation serves also as a methodological tool for discourse analysis (Bokus, 1979; Bokus & Shugar, 1979).

Learning to collaborate in activity with another child

Our later research concentrated on social situations in which two children played together freely without adult presence. We were interested in how children in this situation coordinated their individual activities, and how their utterances were used for this purpose.

In the early years of a child's life, learning to collaborate in activity with another individual not only expands the meaning potential of the child but will make demands upon that potential in new ways. This involves practical knowledge about how to bring activities of different agentive sources into mutual relations of coherence and compatibility of aims. Consider the following utterance: *Give it to me, I'll give it back in a minute.* Note the dynamics of cooperative interaction, the potential need of persuasion and argument. One party is to relinquish a desired object in the belief that he will receive it back, while another party stands to gain the desired object by virtue of a promise to relinquish it again. From an early age children practice the social contract of benefits and costs (Pinker & Bloom, 1992) in the course of social interaction. But first the child as agent learns how to coordinate his or her line of action with that of another agent.

Our later research showed that three-year-olds are capable users of language for coordinating activities with others (Shugar, 1986; Shugar & Stonczerwaska, 1989). We observed child-child interactions during 15-minute play sessions. Video recordings were transcribed. Using the same method of analysis as in our earlier research, we followed the separate behavior streams of the two children concurrently, and analyzed the intersections of their action lines. When children coordinated their activities in some way, we identified interaction units (Bokus, 1984; Bokus & Shugar, 1984).

The patterns we identified by which child-child interactions were initiated were the following:

- a) one child draws the partner into his or her own action line,
- b) one child - uninvited - enters the partner's action line,
- c) both children initiate a joint action line,
- d) both children engage in verbal exchanges around a topic of discourse.

The first three interactional patterns listed above were action coordinations oriented to objects in the respective action fields, while the fourth pattern comprised verbal interactions oriented to topics, the sources of which in major part were to be found in the children's action lines (Shugar, 1981).

Thus from analyses of dyadic situations of children's free play we discovered the same two frameworks of discourse as in our first study. Action discourse developed in children's action coordinations oriented to objects, and topical discourse developed in verbal exchanges focussed on topics. We also found, as in our earlier study, that one type of discourse tended to transform into the other type, and vice versa, depending on the dynamic changes in forms of action coordination.

To exemplify the two types of discourse, we present a number of fragments from our observations, to which a discussion is attached.

Fragments of action and topical discourse

I. This fragment of action discourse shows how child-child interactions are formed when one child calls the other into his own line of action. Here, two interactions overlap:

Robert picks up a toy tank and examines it. He says: *Here's where the soldiers get in, isn't it?*

Irek is trying to hook together two train wagons.

Irek looks at Robert's tank and says: *Yes, but ...*

Robert looks at Irek's wagons and says: *Oh! here!* and points to the engine.

Irek goes back to his train wagons, and says: *Why are these wagons like this? How do they hook up?*

Robert goes off.

Irek bends over the engine. *They get hooked up like that? No wagon ever ...*(falls silent)

In these interactions, each child follows his own line of action, into which he calls the partner. Each child is verbalizing a different reference situation. Robert is thinking of soldiers and tanks. Irek is thinking of trains and wagons.

Both children have a pragmatic problem. They want answers to questions. Are their questions addressed to the partner? to self? to both listeners?

II. This fragment of action discourse illustrates how a joint action line is initiated. Necessary for achieving joint action coordination is the use of illocutionary meanings.

Robert starts to push his toy tank away from Irek. He says: *Come on, we're going on the tank.*

Irek is pushing his tractor along the floor.
He says:
You go on the tank and I'll go on the tractor. Let's go!

Note that directives are self-addressed, other-addressed, and jointly addressed. Together these meanings comprise a program.

III. This fragment of action discourse has turned into topical discourse.

Robert has a train wagon and begins to push it.

Irek is pushing another wagon along the floor.

The two wagons meet head on. Each child holds his wagon still in this position.

Robert: *Collision!*

Irek gently shoves R's wagon forward, and says: *It's not a collision!*

Robert: *Yes, it is a collision.*

Irek gently backs up his wagon and mutters: *Ciuch ciuch ciuch ...*

Action discourse has turned into a dialog oriented to a topic. The topic is derived from the activity situation, and can be called: *What is happening?* (Shugar & Kmita, 1990). But the dialog is not successful. For each speaker a different reference situation has formed in the mind. For Robert, two train wagons are colliding. For Irek, a train wagon is shunting forward and backward from one railway track to another. (N.B. This explanation was provided by the father who watched the video). Note that Irek uses non-verbal means to compose his contribution to the dialog.

IV. In this fragment of topical discourse the children reach mutual interpretation of a state of reality.

Irek picks up a rag turtle.

Robert is holding a pair of scissors.

I.: *What's this? A beggar man?*

R.: *I guess so.*

Irek drops the turtle, and says:
I don't like him.

R. watches Irek.
You don't like him?

I. takes a toy iron, and pushes it along the carpet.
I don't like him. Do you like him?

R.: *No.*

I.: *'Cos you're scared of him.*

R.: *Uhhuh.*

I.: *I'm scared of him too.*

R.: *I'm scared of him too.*

I.: *Why?*

R.: *'Cos he can come to my house.*

I. looks closely at the turtle.

He's got legs?

R.: *No.*

I.: *So he won't come 'cos he hasn't got any legs.*

A topic *what is this?* is explored, and the children's attitudes are expressed in orderly exchanges. Step by step the children's mental representations come to coincide, and they reach a mutual representation of the object of discourse. This is the outcome of a discourse process constructed by three-year-olds by which they have been able to achieve a state of intersubjectivity.

Conclusions

Whether we observe the child as focal agent of action and speaker-listener (a single behavior stream), or children as dyadic agents and speaker-listeners (intersected behavior streams), relations between activity situations and reference situations are basic to understanding how meaning potential is acquired in the experience of the child.

From the start, discourse is a tool for developing meaning potential. Meaning potential is the basic factor enabling the child to enter into his or her speech community. This factor relies on the child's creative powers, in interplay with his inherited human nature and the nurturant environment.

Basic discourse learning takes place in two frameworks: action discourse and topical discourse, by which children act upon states of the world and talk about states of the world. Within these frameworks children will learn many more particular types of discourse (story-telling, pretending, playing rule-governed games, instructing others, etc.). Meaning potential will continue to grow along with discourse competence as the child takes effective part in more and more varied participant structures (Shugar & Kmita, 1990).

Reverting to Pinker and Bloom's view (presented at the beginning of this paper) that our language evolved for reasons of human communication and concerted action, from explorations at the level of the two- and three-year-old child, treated as agent of action in social situations, we conclude that a child's meaning potential is acquired for these same purposes.

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