

Lecture 6 PRAGMATIC DIRECTIONS ABOUT LANGUAGE

The plan:

- Pragmatic directions of parents
- The language of the community
- Language addressed to children

Parents offer children pragmatic directions about language use as they talk to them. Aside from giving them general information about when to talk and when to keep quiet, they tell them about how to talk, when, to whom, and what to say on particular occasions – how to greet, to thank, to apologize, to congratulate, to request, to assert, and so on. They give directions on how to be polite (and how polite to be), how to address people, how to behave and just what to say on occasions like birthday parties or Halloween. As they do this, they are simultaneously telling children how to represent the world around them in this particular language. They tell them what things are called and also how objects and events are related to each other (Clark & Wong 2002; Berko Gleason 1988; Berko Gleason et al. 1984).

Adults offer children information about words in the language they are acquiring. In particular, they offer the conventional terms for the objects and events that provide the focus of attention on different occasions. These offers may be direct in form (e.g., “This is a Z,” “That’s called a Y”), or they may be indirect in that they 4 It’s possible there is an element of hit-or-miss here since the adult’s interpretations of the child’s intentions may be off, because the child’s form of expression or pronunciation of the target words is still so far from the adult versions (see also Braine 1971). For example, a child in a high-chair who has just dropped a cup and says Down cup could be construed as saying ‘I just dropped my cup’ or, alternatively, ‘I want to get down to get my cup back’.

But adult repeats that miss the child’s intended meaning are typically rejected on the spot getting started occur as corrections or repairs to whatever the child has proposed. The adult in such cases replaces the term the child has proposed by another more appropriate one, and the child often takes this up in the next turn (Clark 2002b, 2007; Clark & Wong 2002; Jefferson 1982). Such offers of conventional terms for the objects or events in question are important for children as they try to work out just what meaning is carried by each form they have isolated or been offered. Linking a form and a meaning requires also coming to understand both how that combination differs from its neighbors and how it is related to other terms in the same semantic domain.

Consider terms like owl, duck, and chicken, or dance, hop, and jump: Just what properties distinguish one from the other? And what makes the terms in each set belong together? Adults often offer very young children explicit information about what

distinguishes one term from another – for instance, they may identify one or more properties that distinguish the referents: Sound or shape can distinguish a duck from an owl (e.g., quacking versus hooting); type and speed of motion can distinguish dancing from jumping (e.g., Callanan 1990; Clark 2002a, 2007; Clark & Wong 2002; Gelman et al. 1998a). Adults also tell children in the course of conversation how words are related to each other. They may indicate this by listing two or more terms from the same semantic domain, such as big and wide, for instance, or they may elaborate on descriptions of properties or relations to indicate this, as in “Little tiny pieces; not too big” (Rogers 1978). They may offer information about set inclusion or membership, as in “Seal is a kind of animal”; about properties or substance, as in “That’s a street made out of stones”; about parts, as in “Those are his ears”; or about function, as in “That’s a knife for cutting chicken” (see Callanan 1985, 1989; Clark & Grossman 1998; Clark & Wong 2002).⁵ Lastly, adults don’t just offer children the conventional words for things; they also display for children the conventional way to do all sorts of things with words.

They do this, of course, just by talking to children and using the language of the community. But they go further when they check up on just what their children have said, and such checking occurs frequently in conversation when children make errors. When adult interlocutors do this, they reformulate erroneous child utterances to check on their intended meanings (e.g., a child’s “at zoo” reformulated as “at the zoo?”), and in reformulating, adults offer conventional versions, without errors, of what the children appeared to intend (Chouinard & Clark 2003; see also Clark & Bernicot 2008). These reformulations effectively offer children corrective information about their errors. If children did not get any corrections of errors, it has been assumed, they would be unable to learn the morphology or syntax of their language (Marcus 1993; Morgan & Travis 1989). But since they do learn them, they must have some innate knowledge they can call on instead. But children do in fact get corrective information about errors (phonological, morphological, lexical, and syntactic), so it is perhaps unnecessary to claim reliance on innate knowledge of linguistic categories on this score (see Part IV).

Language use varies with social class, with socioeconomic status (SES). What effects might this factor have on children’s acquisition? Do adults from different SES levels speak differently to small children, in terms of quality – the kinds of things they say, or quantity – the amount they say? SES is measured by years of formal education (completion of high school, junior college, undergraduate degree, advanced degree), type of job (car mechanic, bank teller, nurse, teacher, doctor), and earned income. In one early look at social class in language acquisition, Snow and her colleagues (1976) recorded the speech of lower, lower-middle, and upper-middle SES parents to two-year-olds in two settings, reading and free play, and found few differences. Both lower-

middle and upper-middle SES mothers used more deictic expressions (e.g., this, that, here) than lower SES ones in free play.

Upper-middle SES mothers produced more wh- questions and fewer yes/no questions than the other two groups. Lower SES mothers used more imperatives than either of the other two groups. The higher the social standing, in other words, the less direct the speech, even to two-year-olds. This finding has shown up in several subsequent studies with possible consequences for acquisition. Newport, Gleitman, and Gleitman (1977), for instance, noted that the number of parental imperatives was negatively correlated with children's subsequent development of verb-phrase and nounphrase complexity, while uses of deixis were positively related to vocabulary growth and children's later development of noun-phrase constructions. When researchers compared four settings (mealtimes, dressing, toy play, and reading), they found several differences in how lower versus middle SES mothers talked to their children (e.g., in rate of speech, number of different word-roots, mean length of utterance).

The negative relation with parental prohibitions and the positive one with parental expansions of topics are consistently associated with SES.⁶ In lower SES families, Hoff-Ginsberg found that up to 20% of parental utterances prohibited child activities. Such prohibitions were much less common in middle SES families where children heard many questions (up to 45% of parental utterances) and more frequent elaborations of topics (see also Heath 1983; Hoff-Ginsberg & Tardif 1995; Wells 1985). Hoff-Ginsberg also concluded that outcomes for language acquisition might be affected by quantity – the amount of time parents are engaged in talking to their children as they interact with them. This is further borne out in Hart and Risley's (1992, 1995) longitudinal study of parenting in American families. They made monthly observations of spontaneous adult–child interactions, for two-and-a-half years, in forty families representative of family size, race, and SES, and analyzed parenting along three dimensions: (a) amount of parenting per hour, measured by how much parents were engaged with their children, how much they said to them, and how attentive they were to their children's responses; (b) the nature of the parents' social interactions with their children; and (c) the content of child-directed speech. The first and third of these were strongly related to SES and to subsequent measures of child IQ.

Overall, the amount of talk to children, measured in number of words per hour, differed enormously by social class. Children in middle SES professional families heard around 2,100 words per hour in speech addressed to them; children in low SES, working-class families heard around 1,200; and children in welfare families about 600. Stated differently, the average number of utterances per hour ranged from 197 in

welfare families up to 482 in middle-class families (Hart & Risley 1995; see also Roberts, Burchinal, & Durham 1999).

The amount of child-directed speech was correlated with children's vocabulary size in the first years of development and in the early school grades. As children progressed to third grade at age eight, the differences in vocabulary size widened, with lower SES falling further behind middle SES ones (Hart & Risley 1995). At the same time, vocabulary measures such as the McArthur Communicative Development Inventory (CDI) (see Fenson et al. 1994; Arriaga et al. 1998) may underestimate lower SES language skills. Vocabulary is only one measure, and a vocabulary list might not be the best way to assess language skills. The vocabulary and syntactic structures children in less literate groups are exposed to in oral narratives (Corson 1995) may not be tapped in standard tests. We need to keep in mind that one-dimensional measures may miss the full range of language experiences children are exposed to. At the same time, classroom vocabularies and language use are closer to middle-class than to lower-class usage. Yet low SES parents do a great deal of one-on-one teaching of their children. In her case study of three lower SES families, Miller (1982) found that they taught children how to tease, how to talk back, how to assert themselves, and how to respond in different situations. This is another place where there is often some mismatch between home and school settings: How do teachers react to teasing and challenges in the classroom? The norms for who can talk when and how, and what is appropriate to say, often differ by social class (Heath 1983).

Lastly, in a study that looked at both social class and race, Lawrence and Shipley (1996) contrasted black and white middle and low SES parents talking to their three-year-olds at mealtimes, in free play, and in a picture identification task. The two middle SES groups differed from the low SES ones in the information they supplied about objects in all three settings and in how much they directed their children's behavior. And, as in previous studies, middle-class parents expanded more on each topic, while working-class parents were more directive about their children's behavior, independent of race. Social class, then, affects the amount of language children are exposed to early on. Language and birth order IQ declines with increasing family size. In a classic study of birth order and intellectual development, Zajonc (1976; Zajonc & Mullaney 1997) showed that child IQ declined with the number of children in the family. Shifts in family size over time predict rises and falls in national achievement tests like the Scholastic Aptitude Test in the United States and Advanced-level examination passes in the United Kingdom. Since most IQ tests rely heavily on knowledge of vocabulary, there would appear to be a link between IQ and children's language acquisition.

How might family size affect the language experiences of children? HoffGinsberg (1998) identified first-born versus later-born children in high SES versus middle SES families and studied the language addressed to them and their rates of

language development. By age, first-born children were more advanced in lexical and grammatical development than later-born children; but later-born children 46 getting started were more advanced in conversational skills (see also Huttenlocher et al. 1991). These differences seem to arise primarily from the children's linguistic experiences. Adults talk more to first-born than to later-born children, and high SES adults talk more to their children than middle SES adults do (see also Bernicot & Roux 1998; Wells 1985).

These conclusions receive further support from a study of the language addressed to children in crowded homes (Evans, Maxwell, & Hart 1999). In a secondary analysis of the data collected by Hart & Risley (1995), Evans and his colleagues examined the number of people living in the house and the amount of parent-to-child speech. Adults in crowded homes spoke to their children in simpler, less sophisticated, ways than adults in less-crowded homes. And adults in the more crowded settings were less responsive verbally to their children. This finding was independent of SES, but since there tends to be more crowding in lower SES homes, this is likely to impact lower SES children more than higher SES ones. The effects of early linguistic experiences endure over time. Differences in family SES, children's language production (amount and quality), and child IQ are all related to progress in elementary school. The follow-up of the original study, researchers assessed the children repeatedly between age five and ten, and found that the SES-related differences observed before these children entered school predicted their later verbal skills in comprehension and production of language, and their levels of achievement on standardized tests at age nine to ten (Walker et al. 1994). The more language children heard early on, the better their scores and their general progress in school.

Questions for discussion

1. How do parents' pragmatic directions influence a child's early language development?
2. In what ways does the language of the community shape children's communicative behavior and linguistic choices?
3. Why is it important to study the language addressed specifically to children (child-directed speech)?
4. How do cultural norms and family interaction styles affect the pragmatics of language use in childhood?
5. What role do social context and parental communication strategies play in developing children's understanding of meaning and politeness in language?