Lecture 5 FUNCTIONS OF CHILD-DIRECTED SPEECH

The plan:

The role of adults in SLA

Participating in conversation

The main techniques in SLA

For the infant or very young child, this may be done best by presenting the target terms at the ends of short utterances or in frames where they are perceptually salient, readily recognized, and so more easily understood. The words chosen should be appropriate to and useful for the specific distinctions being made. Initially, this might mean relying on a small number of baby-talk words (e.g., bye-bye, night-night, upsy-daisy; kitty, doggy, woof-woof) or words that are among the first words children attempt themselves. A little later, this may mean choosing words that are at the requisite level of utility (Brown 1958a) for the distinctions required, for example choosing the term fruit or apple, depending on the context of the offer. On each occasion, the joint attention shared by speaker and addressee will help the child identify the intended target of the adult speaker's utterance, while physical co-presence (talking about objects or events in the here and now) and conversational co-presence (using familiar words for the target information) provide further help for the child in zeroing in on what the adult means.

Young children often initiate conversations, and when this happens, adults must work out the locus of the child's attention and then use joint attention along with physical and linguistic co-presence to discern the child's meaning. Effectively, adults check up on what children have said with clarification questions, with prompts for pronunciation or the provision of further information, presentations of the conventional way of saying things (having made any repairs needed to word order, inflections, agreement, and word-choice), and expansions on what the child has just offered. When they expand, they add further facts (and the words for them) about activities, properties, states, and relations; they bring in nearby objects and events; they compare the present object or event with nearby relations; and they express different affective attitudes. In making sure children can make themselves understood, adult speakers make explicit corrections of pronunciation and of word-choice.

Where children make themselves understood but use erroneous forms, adults offer a plethora of tacit corrections, with almost involuntary repeats as they reformulate, in conventional terms, what the child seemed to have said, and so offer children new versions said in the way an adult would have said them (Chouinard & Clark 2003). In short, adults seem to be concerned with making themselves understood to young children and with making sure that the children, in turn, can make themselves

understood to others. They correct uses of forms and meanings, offer conventional ways of saying things, and provide a stream of additional facts and pieces of information about the topics children raise getting started What role does child-directed speech play in acquisition? Adults may adjust their speech to the perceived needs of their addressees, but that does not necessarily mean that such adjustments are necessary for acquisition. The range of adjustments made and the fact that they change with the age and linguistic sophistication of child-addressees suggests a number of possible roles for child-directed speech.

Many of the things that adults present children with tell them how to use language in various circumstances, for various purposes. Child-directed speech offers potential lessons in how to take turns and in what to say when. It also offers extensive information about how words map onto the world – information on how to talk about different situations, which words to use for what. But adults don't talk to young children to teach them language. Potential language lessons are simply a side-product of the adult concern with being understood. Parents, other adults, and older siblings don't set out to teach young children language; they set out to make themselves understood to these young and rather unskilled users of language.

The modifications they make to promote better comprehension have the incidental effect of also providing children with information about language structure and function. And since the adjustments adults make are guided mainly by how much comprehension children display, they tend to keep pace with development. That is, as children offer more evidence of understanding, older speakers make fewer modifications in how they speak to them. A rather different view is that how adults modify their speech in talking to young children is irrelevant to acquisition. All that children need is exposure to the sounds and sound patterns, and to the mappings of meanings onto forms. Given that exposure, they simply follow their own course, with development of syntactic structure unfolding as a matter of maturation (Radford 1990). That is, the structures are innate rather than learned. Children, under this view, are not sensitive to details of child-directed speech (factors such as the frequency of different word orders, choices of ways to talk about motion, manner, and location).

Adult speech simply serves as a general source of information to which children need exposure in much the same way that ducklings need exposure to a moving object (ideally a mother duck) to imprint upon it at the appropriate stage of development. This account, though, is not maintainable. Although experiments on this topic would be hard to devise, several naturalistic settings offer us a look at what happens, or fails to happen, when the speech children are exposed to lacks social, interactional properties. The hearing children of deaf parents who sign, for example, hear very little spoken language from older speakers until they enter nursery school. One parental solution to this was to turn on the radio and television as much as possible. Sachs and Johnson (1976; Sachs,

Bard, & Johnson 1981) studied one child who received such exposure to spoken English. At the age of 3;9, Jim had only a very In conversation with children 39 small vocabulary, possibly picked up from a few playmates, plus a few words from television jingles.3 While he did produce some multiword utterances using English words, he did not use English word order (e.g., I want that make, Off my mittens), and he omitted word-endings (plural -s, past tense -ed) that three-year-olds would normally have already acquired. His language was far behind other children of his age.

Although he had overheard a great deal of spoken English, he had had very little direct interaction where he used any spoken language with another person. Once he spoke with a hearing adult regularly, his language developed rapidly. Sachs and her colleagues concluded that simple exposure early on to language intended for others won't necessarily help children acquire a first language. Another natural experiment in acquisition occurs when children speaking one language are exposed to a second via television. Such children appear not to learn much or even any of the second language even after daily exposure. For example, Dutch children who watch Sesame Street in German do not appear to learn any German from it (Snow et al. 1976), even though this is a program designed for children. Because it is something to be watched, it lacks the direct interactive properties of language used for face-to-face communication.

Whether on the radio or on television, the language heard can rarely be matched to situations that form a joint focus of attention for the speaker and the child, and little of such speech focusses on objects or events that are physically and conversationally co-present. It therefore offers little help to very young children in mapping meanings onto forms. In addition, the stream of speech may be harder to segment under such circumstances: All children can hear is rapid speech that hasn't been tailored to them in any way. Finally, of course, exposure to radio or television does not require that the child participate in any exchange: The talk all goes one way, so the child is merely an overhearer.

Overheard speech from radio and television is not social in the ways that child-directed speech is, so it should not be surprising if it is therefore more difficult for young children to make use of. At the same time, children are often active participants in one sense as they watch programs such as Sesame Street or Teletubbies: They rarely watch TVon their own; they normally watch with a parent or caretaker and talk about what is happening with that person (Naigles & Mayeux 2000). This makes what is visible on the TV screen the focus of their joint attention. It is physically co-present and now becomes conversationally co-present as well. And while there is little evidence that children learn any grammatical structures from TV watching, they may well learn some new words from exposure to TV. Rice and her colleagues (1990) compared children's vocabulary scores on the Peabody Vocabulary test with the amount of Sesame Street they had watched over a two-year period and found that children who

had watched more made greater gains in vocabulary. However, there was no direct link between 3 This child received relatively little exposure to the American Sign Language used by his parents because they thought he should learn to talk since he had normal hearing (Sachs, Bard, & Johnson 1981). 40 getting started words used frequently on the TV program and words actually acquired. Children over three or so may well pick up some new words from exposure to TV, and the greater their knowledge of language, the more likely this becomes. (Adults do this too.) But the findings so far further suggest that it is social interaction that is essential in the earlier stages of acquisition proper.

In summary, learning a language requires proficient use for all sorts of everyday purposes – from greetings to gossip, from simple requests at the table to the telling of a joke, from giving instructions to telling a story. To do any of these things requires knowing how to use one's language. One has to know the appropriate ways to address others, depending on age, sex, relationship, and status; one has to know how to get the other's attention, how to take turns, and how to talk about the topic in question in that language. These are all skills on constant display in conversation, and it seems reasonable to suppose that children acquire these skills from conversation. In effect, they have conversation imposed upon them and must learn how to participate in it if they wish to communicate with greater detail and precision.

Conversation provides the primary setting for language acquisition, and it is in conversational settings that children display their emerging knowledge together with their skill in using a language (see Part III). Conversations with adults offer children information about word forms and word meanings, about constructions, and about conventional usage. So any language lessons children receive are lessons in language use rather than in language structure. These "lessons" converge on Grice's (1989) Cooperative Principle: Speakers try to be informative, truthful, relevant, and clear in their contributions to a conversation, and their addressees interpret what they say on the assumption that speakers are trying to follow these principles. In becoming participants in conversation, children need to know how to engage in this joint activity, how to contribute, and how to take turns. They must also know which utterances are intended for them and which for others. Adults and older speakers help by calling for children's attention with a range of attentiongetters.

Children adopt the same strategy to make sure of their addressees' attention: They may begin by tugging at clothes, touching the parent's face, or even turning it so there is eye contact first, before they begin speaking. Later, they preface their contributions with vocatives or a general You know what? as a signal that they are about to make a contribution (Garvey 1975; McTear 1985). Long before this, of course, they had as infants been induced to take turns by the imposition of a turn-taking structure upon all sorts of nonlinguistic acts – burps, sighs, smiles, blinks, and arm or leg movements (Snow 1977). Parents appear to monitor child usage, frequently repeating

with repairs what their child said, retaining the child's word order for content words but placing them in a conventional construction for the meaning the child appears to be In conversation with children 41 aiming for.4 Adults repeat and repair significantly more often for erroneous than for conventional utterances, but expand for both (Chouinard & Clark 2003; Hirsh-Pasek, Treiman, & Schneiderman 1984).

Conversations serve to introduce new words in many conceptual domains. The here-and-now nature of many conversations with young children helps guarantee joint attention along with physical and linguistic co-presence. (It also helps adults interpret what young children are likely to be saying.) This allows children to make maximum use of contextual cues in assigning an interpretation to unfamiliar words and constructions. On hearing "Can you shut the door?" the one-and-a-halfyear-old may only know the word door, but when interpreting the adult's request in context, there are only a few options possible. Shutting the door may be the most obvious course (Shatz 1983).

This action, if accepted, offers a possible meaning for shut for the next time. The same holds for open used in a similar context. Children can put together words like door, handle, open, shut, go in, and go out, linked by the uses they hear in specific contexts. Finally, the structural modifications adults make to young children provide information about how to segment speech. They identify boundaries when they speak more slowly, pause at the ends of utterances (after a word, phrase, or whole clause), make frequent use of frames, and offer frequent repetitions (Shady & Gerken 1999). These techniques for getting information over to less-skilled participants all help children find the edges of words and morphemes in the stream of speech.

Questions for discussion

1. What is the role of conversation in SLA?
2. What are the main techniques in SLA?
3. Are adult adjustments intended as language lessons?
4. Do they reflect tacit efforts to teach children their first language?