

**Abstract** The paper aims at questioning the notion of development currently used to explain change in child language acquisition. After a brief outline of the problems faced by students of child language acquisition in their attempts at identifying developmental stages, theoretical arguments are drawn in order to show that, given its specific structural properties, language cannot be parceled out, as presupposed by developmental theories. Following this line of argumentation, Saussure's dichotomy *langue* vs *parole*, is presented as a theoretical consequence of his efforts to understand linguistic change. The fact that the native speaker's relation with her/his own language is synchronic, that is, does not imply any awareness of historical change, leads Saussure to recognize *la langue* as an internal systemic functioning which obliterates what is external to it: namely the linguistic individual sphere, that is, *parole*, where change starts, as well as the identification processes (social forces, in his terminology) responsible for the diffusion of change. It is my view that those three poles—*la langue*, identification with the other and the child conceived as a *corps pulsionnel*—are also called upon to explain change in language acquisition. Since they cannot be seen as independent instances, but must be seen as a structure, the child's trajectory from the state of *infans* to that of subject-speaker may be seen as implying change of position in a structure to which the adult is also submitted. Data on the acquisition of Brazilian Portuguese and American English are presented in support of such a view.

**Key Words** child speech, identification processes, linguistic change, linguistic development, structural change

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## Questioning the Notion of Development: The Case of Language Acquisition

The choice of language acquisition as a field where the notion of development can be submitted to radical criticism is motivated by much more than the fact that this is my field of research. As a matter of fact, the main reason behind such a choice is rooted in theoretical questions regarding both the possibility of taking language as an object of knowledge and the nature of change in child speech.

Linguistic development is currently defined as the process of either learning or constructing the knowledge required for a child to become a native speaker of the particular language destined to be her/his 'mother tongue'. This definition amounts to taking language as an object that can be parceled out or whose properties can be apprehended through an ordered series of reorganizational processes.

There are many reasons to think that language does not fit this picture. Even if it is the case that its so-called 'components'—semantics, syntax, phonology—heterogeneous as they are, must be taken in isolation in order to be submitted to description, such a methodological procedure can only be applied to entities whose status as linguistic units is dependent on properties of the other components. Phonology, for example, as the study of speech sounds, is dependent on the recognition of units of different kinds. Their status is, in turn, dependent on semantic properties which are far from being independent of the syntactic relations which these units may possibly assume among themselves within larger linguistic units.

Elementary as they are, the above observations seem to find support in the fact that no student of language acquisition has ever entertained the idea that the mastery of speech sounds precedes the acquisition of the lexicon; nor that the lexicon is a prerequisite for learning the syntactic restrictions operating on strings of constituents.

Most attempts at describing child speech in order to identify either developmental stages or states of knowledge have had to face the impossibility of turning linguistic theories into descriptive tools. Research on child language acquisition empirically based on child speech has always been unable to relate phonological development to either semantic or syntactic development. Concerning the acquisition of semantics and syntax, both theoretical and empirical obstacles have led to proposals on semantics as both preceding and determining the acquisition of syntax.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the least one can say about syntax is that restrictions on the formation of larger units, such as those governing order and agreement, are alien to semantic categories and constraints.

The relevance of such problems becomes more evident by considering the difficulties of assigning linguistic status to children's early utterances. Given an utterance such as 'doggy', produced by a child while pointing to the picture of a dog in a book, which criteria can one use to assign to that 'word' the status of a noun, from either a semantic or a syntactic point of view? On the basis of the child's utterance-act, which includes pointing, one may assign to 'doggy' a referential value grounded on the relation between a linguistic entity and an entity

belonging to a domain external to language itself. There is, however, no basis to ground such a referential value on the relation between that linguistic entity and other linguistic entities; in other words, on the internal reference which allows us to say that the child, by uttering 'doggy', provides empirical evidence for her/his knowledge that 'doggy' is a noun and not a verb.

The fact that an adult is bound to interpret the child's utterance as 'That is a dog', 'There is the dog', 'The dog is there', or 'Let me show you the dog' shows that a crucial part of utterance interpretation consists of restricting the indetermination of the externally grounded semantic value of 'doggy' by assigning to it an internally grounded value within a syntactic (and textual) frame.

To consider one of those interpretations as equivalent to the child's utterance amounts to agreeing with what Chomsky (1986, p. 54) says, although for other reasons: that the idealization of the process of language acquisition as instantaneous is a methodological necessity.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, it is impossible to describe early utterances such as 'doggy' as instantiations of quasi-nouns or nouns-to-be, in the same way as it is impossible to deny their being both linguistic and subject to change.

Indeed, even if linguistics, taken here as comprising the different theoretical proposals which make of it a field of research, has always attempted to provide answers to questions about what it is to know a language, one cannot fail to recognize its insufficiency when change in child speech is in question.

Yet change is not only theoretically crucial for understanding the process of language acquisition, but also impressive as an intuitively apprehensible phenomenon in the child's trajectory from the state of *infans* to that of speaker of her/his mother language.

Questions about change seem then to center on the methodological and theoretical means which are needed to move from phenomenal to descriptive and explanatory levels.

An adequate formulation of those questions would require taking into account some of the empirical findings brought to light by research on child speech. First, the fact that both incorrect and correct expressions (apparently constructed according to certain morphological or syntactic processes) can be found in the speech of the same child in the same recording session. Second, the fact that the sequence of emergence of expressions and structures are not predictable from their degree of complexity in the language to be acquired. Third, the fact that, in spite of the heterogeneous and unpredictable nature of her/his speech from a linguistic point of view, the child is addressed and inter-

preted by the linguistic community—represented at least by parents and caretakers—as a speaker of their language. In other words, fragmented utterances, errors, everything which could apparently point to the child's lack of linguistic knowledge, leads neither to teaching the language to the child nor to overt misunderstanding.

This third point could be taken as an argument in favor of pragmatic approaches. It is true that such a line of research has the merit of showing that the adult is not a mere input-provider, that her/his interpretation of the child in many ways affects the child's speech. On the other hand, it is also true that, since most of these approaches are exclusively directed to the use and function of language in adult-child interaction, knowledge of language as presupposed by the notion of use has been left unquestioned.

At this point, specific questions can be raised regarding change in language acquisition. Given that early speech shows a certain relation of the child to language which cannot be discarded, and given that such a relation cannot be described in terms of linguistic knowledge, the questions to be asked are: What changes? Is change inherently related to the notion of development?

Support for pursuing this line of reasoning is found in Saussure's discussions about linguistic change in the context of his attempts at reaching theoretical coherence as a comparative grammarian. From those discussions, it becomes clear that what is left from his work as a founder of scientific linguistics is nothing but extremely reductive interpretations. Reductionism, in Saussure's case, seems to be the result of removing his famous dichotomies—*langue vs parole*, *synchronic vs diachronic* from their conceptualizing sources.

Milner (1989), while discussing the remarkable character of the combination between necessity and contingency in the phonetic laws formulated by the neogrammarians, points to Saussure's efforts in finding a way out of such a paradox:

Within the framework of the general questions Saussure addressed to comparative grammar, it is towards this particular point that he directed his greatest effort. His answer is well known: it is formulated in terms of sign and of the arbitrariness of sign. Thanks to these notions, he is able to solve what one could call the paradox of comparative grammar: the contingent character of the phonic forms in contrast with the constancy of their relations ceases to be a contradiction and, moreover, only the contingency of phonic forms can explain the constancy of their relationships. (p. 6)

The speaker's relation to change and, following from it, the particular nature of the relationship of language with time have also been for Saussure the source of paradoxes the solution of which was, according

to him, a condition for reaching a minimal degree of descriptive validity.

Attention should be paid to the fact that what could be called the paradox of change is formulated by Saussure from the point of view of the *'sujet parlant'* and/or of the speech community. His point of departure lies in the evidence of language change in contrast with the fact that even major changes, such as the ones which brought about Romance languages from Latin, do not disrupt linguistic interchange in the linguistic community.

Although the subject-speaker may acknowledge variation, she or he is unaware of the change that can come from variation. Furthermore, the speaker's understanding of a linguistic entity, be it a word or an expression, does not involve any kind of awareness of the semantic changes which it may have undergone through time.

As an example, let me refer to the work of one of Saussure's followers, namely to Benveniste's (1966) reconstruction of the homonymic relations between the French verbs *voler*, meaning 'to fly', and *voler*, meaning 'to steal', both derived from the Latin verb *volare*, 'to fly'. According to him, the derivation of the second form, that is, of the transitive *voler*, from the first one, that is, the intransitive verb *voler*, can be traced back to transitive constructions of *voler* found in historically documented texts on falconry where one finds such expressions as *le falcon vole la perdrix*, meaning 'the falcon flies and catches the partridge'.

It should be emphasized that the fact that stands as the starting-point of such a change is effectively determined by particular cultural and historical factors. However, those factors do not play any function in the French native speaker's understanding of the two verbs *voler* nowadays. *Voler* meaning 'to fly' remains a member of the set composed by *voleter*, *s'envoler*, *volée*, *volatile*, *volaille*, whereas the other *voler* is restricted to its relation with *voleur*.

Similar changes were discussed by Saussure concerning the relation between phonetics and morphology. For example:

In Old High German the plural of *gast* 'guest' was first *gasti*, that of *hant* 'hand', *hanti*, etc., etc. Later the final *-i* produced an umlaut, i.e. it resulted in the changing of the *a* of the preceding syllable to *e*: *gasti-gesti*, *hanti-henti*. Then the final *-i* lost its timbre: *gesti-geste* etc. The result is that today German has *Gast-Gäste*, *Hand-Hände*, and a whole group of words marked by the same difference between the singular and the plural. ...

Our illustration suggests several pertinent remarks:

1. In no way do diachronic facts aim to signal a value by means of another sign: that *gasti* became *geste* (*Gäste*) has nothing to do with the plural of

substantives; in *trägit-trägt* the same umlaut occurs in verbal inflection, and so forth. A diachronic fact is an independent event; the particular synchronic consequences that may stem from it are wholly unrelated to it. (Saussure, 1916/1960, pp. 83-84)

As in the case for *voler*, facts of different nature are typically involved in morphophonological change: a phonetic change resulting from relations among sounds in particular words and the change in morphophonological value this change comes to assume in the language. Yet, the speaker's awareness of the phonetic event that is at the origin of the systemic change is irrelevant to her/his activity as a speaker.

The recognition of these two types of facts, as well as of their consequences, that is, the inner duality which puts at risk comparative grammar, explains the position assumed by Saussure (1916/1960) in the following paragraph:

The first thing that strikes us when we study the facts of language is that their succession in time does not exist insofar as the speaker is concerned. He is confronted with a state. That is why the linguist who wishes to understand a state must discard all knowledge of everything which produced it and ignore diachrony. (p. 81)

This statement, often used to point to Saussure's anti-historicism, can only be understood in the light of his attempts at solving what I have called the paradox of change.

In fact, it should be understood as an argument in favor of isolating the diachronic from the synchronic point of view, which were superimposed in the comparativist's work, putting at risk its descriptive accuracy. It also stands, in my opinion, as a theorizing step in the direction of Saussure's other dichotomy, that is, *langue vs parole*.

To be more precise: for him to take the point of view of the speaker amounts to assuming the synchronic point of view as the one which captures the speaker's relation to her/his language. At the same time, the synchronic point of view points to the need to define the systemic functioning which can explain the obliteration of the historical events originating the changes which brought about the particular state of language experienced by the subject-speaker.

Such systemic functioning is, according to Saussure, obtained by removing from *le langage* the properties which belong to *la parole*, that is, to the sphere of individual actions. The product of that conceptual operation is *la langue*, defined as an autonomous system 'that has its own arrangement'—'qui ne connaît que son ordre propre' (Saussure, 1916/1960, p. 22).

Such operation may be seen as contradictory, given that it is precisely the act of assuming the speaker's synchronic point of view which leads to the principled exclusion from the object of linguistics of the action of the speaker. However, it ceases to be a contradiction seen in the light of Saussure's efforts to understand change. The second point to be made about the quotation above may further clarify the issue.

'Ignore diachrony', the methodological procedure present in the above quotation, adopted by Saussure and, later on, by structuralist linguistics, amounts to taking *la langue* as the mechanism which transforms an accidental, that is, contingent, *fait de parole* into a *fait de langue*. Once assimilated by *la langue*, namely once the change has taken place, the *fait de parole* is obliterated, together with the external factors which have given rise to it. Those factors, either historical and cultural, or psycho-physiological, as is the case for phonetic facts, are the subject matters of sciences other than linguistics, historical linguistics being but one.

It is, in fact, such an interpretation of linguistic change that explains why Saussure insists that neither the subject-speaker nor '*les masses parlantes*' ('the community of speakers', cf. Saussure, 1916/1960, p. 77) can interfere in *la langue*.

In spite of this, what Saussure calls 'social forces' are assigned a cohesive role which he qualifies as essential and internal to language itself. Indeed, *la langue* is also defined by him as '*sociale dans son essence*' ('purely social', Saussure, 1916/1960, p. 18). This is in apparent contrast with his arguing for the autonomy of the linguistic system and, mainly, with the theory of value he has proposed to demonstrate *la langue's* autonomous functioning.

It is my view that the coexistence of these conflicting definitions in Saussure's work is to be understood within his reasoning on change. By saying that *la parole*, as the individual act of speaking, is the locus where change starts as an accidental, that is, contingent, event, he is faced with both the impossibility of predicting which of those events will set change in motion and with the need to explain how it moves from the individual to the collective sphere.

One of his tentative answers to this is to say that 'in the history of any innovation there are always two distinct moments: 1. when it sprang up in individual usage; and 2. when it became a fact of language, outwardly identical but adopted by the community' (Saussure, 1916/1960, p. 98, emphasis mine).

Of course, that second moment is theoretically required to account for what I would call identification processes qua conditions for a

linguistic difference instantiated in a individual speaking event to be adopted by the speaking community. Nonetheless, the obliteration of both that singular event and the social identification processes which set change in motion do not seem to be explainable without conceiving *la langue* as an autonomous system of relations.

This rather long exposition of Saussure's work from the point of view of his questions about change are motivated by my own questions about change in child speech. I shall come back to them now in order to advance some tentative solutions. As a starting-point I will return to Saussure, namely to one of the few paragraphs where child language acquisition is referred to:

Speech [*le langage*] always implies both an established system and an evolution; at every moment it is an existing institution and a product of the past. To distinguish between the system and its history, between what it is and what it was, seems very simple at first glance; actually the two things are so closely related that we can scarcely keep them apart. *Would we simplify the question by studying the linguistic phenomenon in its earliest stages—if we began, for example, by studying the speech [*le langage*] of children? No, for in dealing with speech [*le langage*], it is completely misleading to assume that the problem of early characteristics [*le problème des origines*] differs from the problem of permanent characteristics [*des conditions permanentes*]. We are left inside the vicious circle.* (Saussure, 1916/1960, p. 9, emphasis mine)

It is plausible to say that the '*conditions permanentes*' which are at issue even at that point of time which may appear original are: the subject-speaker's activity as the source of change; the processes through which she or he is identified and identifies her- or himself with the other, others; being obliterated in favor of similitude; and, finally, *la langue* as the system of internal relations which obliterate both the similitude and the differences external to itself.

Given those permanent conditions, it is indeed impossible to conceive of language as an object of knowledge to be acquired by the child as an epistemic subject, whose perceptual and cognitive properties precede and determine her/his approach to language. It is language, that is, *le langage*, including the other as a subject-speaker, which precedes and determines the child's trajectory from the state of *infans* to that of subject-speaker. The child can thus be seen as captured by *le langage*, through the other's *parole* by which s/he is identified as a subject-speaker, both as an equal ('identical'), qua member of the linguistic and cultural community, and as a unequal, qua an 'other' referred to as a unique subjectivity. Since the other's *parole* is also an instantiation of *la langue* as a functioning system, the child's path through *le langage* is not conceivable as directed to fit either a final state

of linguistic knowledge or the subjective position assigned to her/him through the identification processes active in the other's *parole*.

From the very first moment of my work on language acquisition, I have been challenged by child speech (cf., among others, de Lemos, 1981, 1982, 1997). That is, by the fragmented character of early utterances; by both the predictable and unpredictable errors which appear later; by a subsequent moment when the stable and more homogeneous character of the child's speech is concomitant both with reformulations/corrections and with creative linguistic effects.

Challenge arose as well from the fact that, right from the start, there seemed to be a structural relation between the adult's and the child's utterances, in spite of the supposed asymmetry of their so-called 'developmental' stages.

To face those challenges meant facing both the resistance of child speech to linguistic analysis and the pressure of assigning a theoretical status to adult-child interaction in the process of language acquisition. The proposal I have been outlining in recent years (cf., among others, de Lemos, 1992, 1997) is therefore a tentative response to those empirical challenges as well as to their methodological and theoretical demands.

To be brief, in my view, language acquisition is a subjectivizing process definable by changes in the child's position within a structure where *la langue* and the other's *parole* in its full sense are inextricably related with a '*corps pulsionnel*', that is, with the child as a body whose activity demands interpretation.

Saussure's theory has provided part of the theoretical support needed to reach those conclusions and, moreover, to make my own ideas understood in the context of this paper. The following presentation of child-adult dialogues will hopefully show, at least, that part of the proposal which fits both the space and the aims of this paper. To avoid long descriptions of Brazilian Portuguese, I will restrict the analysis to that which remains relevant in the English translation of episodes (i) and (iii). Episode (ii) has been extracted from Bellugi (1982, p. 55).

Episode (i) is representative of a structural position whose dominant pole is the child's relation to the other's *parole*:

(i) (Child brings a news magazine to Mother.)

C.: 's baby ... the doggy (pointing)

M.: Doggy? Let's find the doggy.

Look, the girl is taking a bath (pointing).

linea  
chomskiana  
biologica

- C.: wash?  
 M.: Yes, she is washing her hair.  
 I think this magazine does not have any dog.  
 C.: doggy  
 M.: It has only girls, cars, telephones.  
 C.: Hello?  
 M.: Hello, who is speaking, is it Mariana? (Mariana 1;2.15)

the metonymy

The child's first utterance is a fragment of the mother's discourse in 'book-reading' situations, in Ninio and Bruner's terminology (1978). There are neither babies nor dogs in the magazine, the utterance being in fact a re-instantiation of previous book-reading events. On the other hand, the child's utterance 'wash' shows that her interpretation of the mother's preceding utterance amounts to relating part of it (a fragment?)—'taking a bath'—to previously experienced texts to which both 'wash' and 'taking a bath' may be said to belong. A similar analysis can be provided for the relation between 'telephone' and 'hello'.

If the above analysis points to the dominant nature of identification processes in such a position, it also shows *la langue's* functioning. Relations between constituents of the mother's preceding utterance and constituents of the mother's texts previously experienced by the child can be said to be internal to texts, in the sense that they are not externally grounded in situations, as is the case for the child's first utterance. Such relations, which are internal to texts, can be seen as responsible for the obliteration of the situations where those texts are externally grounded.

The subjectivizing aspects of that structural position are recognizable both in the child's identification with the mother's *parole*, incorporated by her, and in the non-coincidence between the mother's meanings and the child's meanings. In other words, 'sameness' and 'otherness' are alternative faces of an emergent subjectivity.

Episode (ii) is taken here as representative of the position in which *la langue* is the dominant pole. In the literature on reorganizational processes (cf. Bowerman, 1982; Peters, 1983, among others), it corresponds to a phase of errors within recurrent cycles of correct use without knowledge/error/correct use with knowledge.

(ii) In the middle of a session, Adam would open his eyes wide and provide me with special dialogues. In one case, Adam just claimed he had a watch, but he never in fact had one, and what's more, couldn't tell time.

- Me: I thought you said you had a watch.  
 Adam: I do have one. (with offended dignity) 'What do you think I am, a no boy with no watch?  
 Me: What kind of a boy?  
 Adam: (Enunciating very clearly) Δ no boy with no watch. (Bellugi, 1982, p. 55)

Rather than errors, 'no boy' and 'no watch' show how manifest structures may disclose the latent structures they are related to. It is plausible to say that, in this particular case, the latent structures are 'nobody', 'nothing' and at least some members of the class of negative constructions in English.

In many ways those errors show *la langue's* functioning as the dominant pole of this position. In contrast to the position discussed above, relations hold between phrases and texts which, although grounded on previous dialogues, present themselves not as the other's utterances, but as linguistic structures.

Moreover, errors qua indices of non-coincidence between the child's and the adult's speech point to the different status the other's parole assumes in such a position. On the other hand, the child's imperviousness to the interlocutor's request of clarification/correction, often mentioned in the literature and observable in the dialogue above, stands as another argument in favor of such an interpretation.

Concerning the subjectivizing process, let us focus on the fact that, rather than as a declaration of having a watch (which, in fact, he does not have), Adam's utterance may be interpreted as a claim for being a boy, that is, for being neither a child nor a girl, for example.

Episode (iii) is presented here as representative of the position whose dominant pole is the subject-speaker as a face of the subjectivizing process. In the literature on the so-called 'metalinguistic abilities', this position corresponds to the phase in which the child is able to both recognize and correct errors, as well as to submit her/his longer utterances to reformulations.

(iii) (A friend of the child's mother (T.) is drawing squares on the floor for a game of hopscotch. A square is still missing.)

- C.: You almost did not do your hopscotch.  
 T.: What, Verrô?  
 C.: There is a long time that you did not do your hopscotch.  
 T.: What, Verrô? I didn't understand.  
 C.: Δ square is missing in your hopscotch. (Verônica 4;0.18)

— impeneable

impenerous: not allowing fluid to pass through

From the point of view of *la langue's* functioning, the successive replacement of expressions sheds light on the process underlying error recognition. It is worth noticing, that the replaced expressions share at least part of their semantic content. Therefore, error recognition involves the recognition both of the way in which those expressions differ, from a semantic point of view, and of the syntactic and textual constraints operating on them at the syntagmatic level.

On the other hand, the child's interpretation of the adult's utterance as a request for clarification/correction points to an important aspect of identification processes: namely the child's recognition of the way her utterance affects her interlocutor and, consequently, the child's recognition of her interlocutor's 'otherness'.

Although this recognition is a crucial aspect of the subjectivizing process characteristic of the position in discussion, it cannot be taken as constitutive of a subject in full possession of her/himself. To the contrary, error recognition also points to the non-coincidence between what the child has said and what the child has heard as an error in her own utterance. Therefore, to state that the dominant pole of the position represented by (iii) is that of the subject-speaker amounts to conceiving the subject-speaker as divided into two non-coincident subjective instances: the one who speaks and the one who listens to her or his own speech qua speech of an 'other,' or, in other words, to a psychoanalytic concept of subjectivity.

As a final comment, I would say that, even if it is true that the above three positions seem to be ordered in chronological time, change from one to another does not imply development. Indeed, to qualify change as structural is incompatible with views on the child as an independent entity going through an ordered series of states of knowledge.

Moreover, none of the structural relations discussed above is absent from the adult's *parole*, which is far from being homogeneous across different types of discourses and situations. To say that these structural relations are submitted to obliteration does not mean that they have been cancelled. Obliteration should be taken here in the sense of eclipses. That is, the moon remains visible even within the shadow of the earth.

#### Notes

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obliterate - destroy completely  
- blot out or erase

Borner

relevant comments on the contents of the paper; to Flaminia Lodovici and Maria Francisca Lier-de Vitto for their helpful comments; and to Maria Lyra, who urged me to think on the temporal dimension in language acquisition.

1. Relations between semantics and syntax in language acquisition were extensively discussed in the early 1970s. Cf., among many others, Bowerman (1973), Brown (1973), and Schlesinger (1971, 1981).
2. The idealization of language acquisition as instantaneous stands as a methodological necessity since, in my view, states of knowledge located between the initial (SO) and the stable state (SS) cannot be predicted by generative grammar.

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