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Linguistic and pragmatic awareness in the child

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LINGUISTIC AND PRAGMATIC AWARENESS IN THE CHILD

Very little is known about the linguistic and pragmatic awareness that young children possess with regard to the language at various stages of their speech development. The question of awareness concerning language and its usage has not attracted much attention, probably because — as proclaimed by Els Oksaar in her paper on the First International Congress for the Study of Child Language (1981, p. 273) — linguists assume that people generally do not pay attention to the language they use and that the processes of language use are automatic.

This assumption, however, is based only on production, while the perspective of comprehension is overlooked. In order to investigate the developing linguistic and pragmatic awareness of a child — not only for theoretical but also for pedagogical purposes –- methodological strategies which take into consideration both the child's production and perception have to be developed.

Research in this field is at a standstill because existing controversies have not yet allowed to find undeniable main lines. One way out of this dilemma is to extend the investigation to multilingual children. Leopold (1949) was the first to observe that bilingualism helps to break down the intimate association between form and content. Els Oksaar's studies of Swedish-Estonian children (1971, 1976, 1977a) and of a Swedish-Estonian-German trilingual child (1977b) fully support Leopold's observations. Her data placidly show that multilingual children are more capable to break down the screen which language builds between the child and the extra-linguistic reality and that these children are aware of the arbitrariness in words as well as of situations into which certain communicative acts fit earlier than monolingual children are.

For general statements, nevertheless, more studies in the development of linguistic and pragmatic awareness in both multilingual and monolingual children with regard to age-specific tendencies from various languages are needed. Our present article wants to be a contribution to researching this, no doubt, highly interesting problematics in children mastering Czech as their mother tongue.

As in Oksaar's paper, also our approach involves integrating:
— evidence from observations of children's metalinguistic behaviour on all levels of language, including paralinguistic and kinesic elements, and

— evidence from observations of their pragmatic behaviour, that is, their judgement of the use of language according to its appropriateness in particular situations.

The data discussed here come from a longitudinal project on child language acquisition and consist of observations of peer interaction of 1 to 6 year olds, recorded in home and nursery school settings. Rather than concentrating on sentences, our analysis focuses on social activities as they are enacted in various episodes. We attempt to demonstrate how such activities are signalled as part of the speech event and how they constrain the interpretation of component utterances. Some additional data from tests, directed conversation led in connection with the tests and observations of the behaviour of children when they are correcting themselves, and when they are correcting or commenting on the speech of others, were also taken as the basis for our analyses.

As mentioned above, all data were analyzed according to the principle of an integrative approach, that is, based on the fact that the child has to develop a communicative system and has, therefore, to learn rules of action and interaction.

One of the aims here is to point out that the child's verbalizations, however imperfect in the earliest stages of speech development, are goal-oriented and governed by an identifiable underlying communicative intent. The communicative skills grow out of a complex pre-linguistic communicative system which utilizes various aspects of the semantic situations and non-verbal signs. These, especially gestures and mimics are — via their implied semantic force — the first recognizable steps towards the acquisition of language as a means of communication. This is the stage, where, in Halliday's terminology (1975, p. 21), the *"tue wie ich dir sage"* function is prevailing. The data coming from this developmental stage indeed, bring confirmation of this idea. Even a very young child, with few individual differences, readily and correctly reacts, by various movements of arms, hands, head on the adult's commands such as *"wave bye bye"*, *"do clappy clap"*, *"show us how you are"* etc.

The fact that the child's pre-verbal interactions with his social environment have a very important communicative function is generally acknowledged. But it is only the interest in semiotics and research in aspects of communication that has led to systematic studies of paralanguage and kinesics. W. Raffler Engel (1973) has shown that the kinesic elements are not redundant but obligatory features in mastering the language. The integral role of gestures is very important for our understanding of the child's communicative ability, as the significant movements actually replace an uttered word at the earliest developmental stages. An uttered word, as a rule, appears at the time when the sensori-motor period is ending. During this period the child learns to organize the variety of sensations that impinge upon him into a world in which there are objects which can be perceived by senses. One aspect of this process is the progress from predominantly emotional and volitional tinge to the gradually clearer objective reference, which has perhaps been best analyzed by Lewis (1936, p. 143 ff.). This is, in all probability, an essential preliminary to the acquisition of the means of referring to objects and activities in terms of the adult frame of reference.

The child's confronting with new situations rouses him to express his attitude. At the earliest stages, he is content to give a name to the object, cf. the usage

of the interjection *"bú"* in the moment when he sees a cow (or better to say, any big animal). The same interjection is used by him when answering two different questions, namely, *"what is this?"* and *"what does the cow do?"* The first baby words, such as *"táta"*, *"máma"*, *"teta"*, *"bába"* have very vague meaning and this fact enables the child to use them in designating any male or female person. As the vocabulary grows, each item needs to embrace less and less semantic territory, or, vice versa, as meanings become more sharply defined, more naming units are needed. Simultaneously the primitive proto-words and interjections are replaced by more appropriate naming units. Instead of a general term, the child now uses a tool which he has found effective in a similar situation. As before, it is still the hypostasis of the most outstanding feature of the object to be named which serves him as the starting point in the labelling procedure. Hence the first names such as *"ušáček"* (he who has long ears, i.e. the hare), *"vlásk"* (he who has the mane, i.e. the lion) etc.

The dominance of the features, nevertheless, varies. It might be the f o r m (cf. the fact that one and the same child referred to *the moon "a roll"* and/or *"a ball"* according to its momentary shape), the c o l o u r (cf. the application of the label *"snow"* in reference to *white clouds in the sky* and *the soapy foam in his bath*), s i m i l a r i t y (cf. the designation of *a lion* with the proper label *"the lion"*, while *the lioness* was referred to as *"the dog"*), d i m e n s i o n (cf. the designation of *any big animal* as *"the elephant"* in one child, *"the cow"* in another). There are, of course, individual differences in children. Oksaar's son, e.g. called *the real cow* on seeing it in the field as *"the elephant"*, probably because he was shocked by its demension — compared to his conception built up on the base of his observing cows but in his picture book (1977, p. 181). The S t e r n s (1928, p. 407) have the following example where dimension has a basic role in the child's naming act, viz. *"Kindsoldat"*, i.e. *'ein aus der Ferne klein aussehender Offizier'*.

The above mentioned examples illustrate that the child, besides identifying different objects according to their attributes, comes — at certain stage of language development — to be aware of their conventional relations, such as: snow is white and so are the clouds and the soap foam; the elephant and the cow are big animals; the lion has a mane while the lioness and the dog have not etc.

The question whether he gives names to objects by recollecting those forms they have heard before or by inventing his own labels is still the subject of many a study. So are unconventional handlings of imitative material. In our opinion, the imitative aspect of language is restricted to the acquisition of basic vocabulary items and to the sounds of which they are composed. The learning of more abstract patterns of language in morphology, word-formation and syntax does not proceed by imitation of fixed phonetic material but by application of abstract linguistic principles to variable phonetic material, i.e. by analogies.

Numerous are also the questions about the semantic structures of words, according to the principle of 'Sinngebung'. This principle is the basis for the folketymology of adult language; the prerequisite is the ability of segmentation. Of many examples to illustrate this phenomenon, let us quote at least one: the child asks: *"Are there calves to be seen in the television?"* The negative answer on the part of the adult provoked the child's comment: *"Then its name should*

not be 'televize'". In explaining this behaviour, one has to take into consideration that the first component of the word, viz. *'tele'* — has identical form with the name designating *the calf*, while in the other component viz. *'vize'* the child no doubt observes the relation between the verb *"viděť"* (= to see).

The method of exploiting the child's linguistic knowledge through the study of how much he understands is, nevertheless, open to a danger of its own; we may easily overestimate the ammount the child comprehends. Considering the way in which we interpret the spontaneous utterances in terms of situations in which they are produced, it would be reasonable to suppose that many instances of comprehension by the child are attributable to the interpretations of the same kind on his part in terms of environmental cues and not in terms of the grammatical features of the adult utterances. How does the child realize that difference in the usage calls for different expression? If the child used, in more or less close imitation, for each object, action or event the word which the adult uses for it, no linguistic mistake would occur, the child's ability to speak would, however, be greatly hampered and so would be our trying to disclose the principles which the child follows in mastering the language system.

The existence of the child's own norm which differs in many respects from that of the adult is hardly disputable. In the following chapter we shall deal with some of the differences at various levels of language.

As for phonology, the child's system is much more simple. The child, being incapable of the correct phonetic realization, drops or replaces quite a number of phonemes. This fact has led to the theory according to which the accoustic picture is scarcely accessible to the child unless he is able to coordinate it on the basis of his articulatory capabilities. Deeper insight, however, shows the very opposite: the child perceives the phonemes and their distinctive features already at that stage of speech development when he is as yet incapable of their phonetic realizations. Of many examples to support this idea, the child's mastering the category of liquids is perhaps the best plausible.

In the Standard Czech phonemic system there are two subcategories in liquids, namely, the lateral */l/* and the vibrant */r/*. They split according to different distinguishing properties, the most important being a kind of conjuction of closure and opening. While in the lateral the closure and opening occur simultaneously but in different places, in the vibrant these two properties alternate but occur in one and the same place, namely, at the point of the alveolars.

Both the phonemes belong to the later acquisition in Czech children and are — at the earliest stages of phonological development — replaced by the palatal fricative */j/*. In terms of features, both the laterality and the vibrativity are ignored and so is the point of articulation. Neither in production nor in acoustic impression is there any difference between the items such as *"Jenka"*, *"Lenka"* and *"Renka"* and the single form *Ivja:skiI* replaces both members of the contrastive pair, viz. *"vlásky"* (= hair) and *"vrásky"* (= wrinkles).

Following is the mastering of the feature of laterality and the phoneme */l/* comes to serve as a substitute for both liquids, cf. *Ivla:skiI = "vlásky"* and/or *"vrásky"*. Though homophonic in his production the child demands their correct implementation (cf. his refusal of the improper realization on the part of the adult: *"Don't say Ivla:skiI, say Ivla:skiI"* or, on the other hand,

his delightful approval when the adult hits on the form the child has intended to utter. In other words, the child shows the ability of recognizing the proper phonemes produced in their proper places by other speakers, while the ability to articulate the sound appropriate to the phonemes has not yet been achieved.

Finally with mastering the feature of vibrativity, the child comes to fulfil actively the demand of the language system, namely, that semantic contrasts should be encoded phonologically. The misplacing of $/r/$ — $/l/$ phonemes such as *"terefon"* = *"telefon"*, *"rilie"* = *"lilie"*, *"perelinka"* = *"pelerinka"*, *"cerel"* = *"celer"* etc. is now but the illustration of the instability in the correct distribution of the phonemes in the words where contrastive pairs are not present.

A glance at the child's dealing with the syllabic allophones of the liquids (that are firm elements of the phonemic system of Standard Czech) displays another interesting feature in the process of language development.

In the stage, in which the child has not yet mastered the feature of laterality, and where, naturally, the even more difficult feature of the vibrativity is also absent, the child uses the vowels $/u/$ or $/e/$ as substitutes for both the syllabic IlI and the syllabic IrI, cf. *IvunaI* = *"vlna"*, *IpescenejI* = *"plstěný"*, *IvubaI* = *"vrba"*, *IkečekI* = *"krček"*, thus showing his awareness of the feature of the syllabicity. Nevertheless, the question arises as to what makes him use two vowels in substituting one syllabic allophone and whether the alternation of the two substituting vowels is purposeful or merely accidental. A deeper insight into the child's behaviour reveals a rather surprising phenomenon: the alternation takes place even within the inflected or derived forms of the identical word unit, cf. the following examples: *Ipuši:I* = *"prší"* but *IpešejoI* = = *"pršelo"*, *IhenečekI* = *"hrneček"* but *Iv hunkuI* = *"v hrnku"*, *IvunaI* = = *"vlna"* but *IveňenejI* = *"vlněný"*.

This certainly runs counter to the child's usage and the needs in the sphere of morphology where alternation — in Standard Czech obligatory — is ignored by the child and the preservation of the same vowel (or consonant) is one of the most typical features of his early grammar. For illustration, cf. the following examples: the child forms *Iku:ňI* (nom.) — *Iku:ňaI* (accus.), *IbloukI* (sg.) — *IbloukiI* (pl.) with the corresponding adult forms *"kůň"* — *"koně"*, *"brouk"* — *"brouci"*.

From what has been said follows that what is universal at the grammatical level, does not hold good at the phonological level. The discrepancy might be, in our opinion, accounted for in the following way: at that stage of language development where morphophonemics has the upper hand, the child pays little attention to morphology including the origin and function of inflections and derivations. All items are treated as independent elements. Their phonological patterning, loss or substitutions of phonemes correspond to adopting the strategy which seems fundamental in the communicative act, namely, the application of the principle of least effort and maximum economy in expression. This shows in various types of assimilations, the vocalic or consonantal harmony being one of them. Systemic simplification in phonological contrasts, phonetic variations and instability in the proper distribution of the phonemes are the next markers which reveal the, as yet, non-matured stage in the sphere of phonology.

The comparison of ways in which derivations are effected in the child

language on the one hand and the standard usage on the other hand reveals some interesting differences at the grammatical level.

The most widely-noted feature of the child's morphology is his tendency to regularize and generalize. Examples of analogical formations and over-extension of regular rules might be quoted within any of the inflected category. Let us mention here at least the fact that the child resorts to regular declension in substantives and adjectives, regular conjugation in verbs and regular comparison in adjectives and adverbs while irregularities in any form or any word-category are, as less productive phenomena, ignored.

The high degree of grammaticality is the next feature in the child's language system. The best illustration is shown in his predilection for diminutives, i.e. the onomaziological category which brings into actuality the demands of this principle almost unexceptionally, cf. the unification of the suffixes with the -k- marker ("koníček" — "tetička" — "jablíčko"), the lucid categorization as for gender (i.e. zero ending for masculines, a-ending for feminines, o-ending for neutres), plural (i.e. the ending -i in all genders), noun class, non-differentiating between animate/inanimate, hard/soft declensions etc.

The wide combinability of word-bases with affixes is the next feature specific for the child system; to arrive at the desired form the child takes practically any word-basis of which many are not used for this purpose in adults. Following is the loose connection of the derivative affixes with the word-basis in the child language. The child's ready apposing the affixes to the word-bases and their deleting with the same ease is the proof of the fact. As a consequence, the child's vocabulary is abounding with naming units which are absent from the common wordstock. Many non-existing forms have their origin in deleting the syllable which the child — because of its identical structure — misinterprets as a prefix.

The semantic contrast go hand in hand with the child's liking for antithetical statements in the field of morphology as well as word-formation. Many an illogism in the child language is due to his belief that each singular form has its plural form and vice versa; each positive has its negative correlate; each verb has both perfective and imperfective aspect; every substantive has a deminutive, resp. augmentative form as its counterpart — to mention at least those principles which seem universal in Czech speaking children.

The child's organization of extra-linguistic reality seems to provide him with his first hypotheses about what words might mean and in which situations they are to be used.

The context is, no doubt, a very important factor in communicative act. Most of the psycholinguistic studies, however, tend to assume that once the child has acquired basic syntactic skills, it is the verbal message that carries the meaning, rather than the situation. Studies from the pragmaticist perspective seem to be more sensitive to context, yet context is brought in only to account for aspects of sentence structure or for decoding isolated speech acts. Analysis continues to proceed as if children talk for talk's sake, neglecting the fact that especially young children's talk is closely tied into on-going action. And indeed, any video-tape recording clearly illustrates that children do phrase their utterances in accordance with their activities, cf. e.g., the following pictures: Being put in his bed, the child closes his eyes and says: "*Giorgie is going to sleep*"; or when lying on the floor after having slipped, he had this

verbal annotation: *"Giorgie has fallen down"*. These are the markers to show that the child not only uses speech to plan his action (cf. Lu ri a, 1959, p. 341) but also has awareness of perception of events and their customary semantic relations; the deviations from the grammatical rules of the Standard norm, however, still persist, cf. the application of his own name in reference to himself and, concomitantly, the use of the verb form denoting the third person — instead of the proper personal pronoun "I" + corresponding verb form.

Even on occasions when children refer to objects or events outside their immediate sphere of attention, the links of some of their activities or experiences are apparent, cf. the following examples: The child having touched the hot oven, runs to his mother, shows his finger and says: *"We must put on some ointment and bandage, quickly"*, in spite of the fact that there is no wound visible. Or, having dropped the tea cup, he looks at the broken pieces and comments: *"Mummy will be angry, she will spank me again"*. The latter of the two examples reveals that — besides the correct semantic match — the child has also the awareness of the probable interaction between him and another person in the given situation.

He is, nevertheless, often faced by some linguistic usage which obliges him to change his hypotheses. For illustration, see the following examples;

The noun *"hands"* was acquired in the context that human body has hands. On hearing the sentence: *We must shift the hands of the watch, it does not go, it has stopped"* he is confronted with two new realities. Not only the human being but also the watch has hands and these hands can go or stand, i.e. produce an activity which has been so far related with legs. Hence his comment: *"The watch has no hands, the child has"* and *"the hands do not go, the legs go"*. This example reveals that the referential meaning of the substantive *"hands"* was, until he was met with the above mentioned situation, narrower as compared to the Standard usage.

The child's dealing with the verb *"pršet"* (= to rain) represents the opposite phenomenon, i.e. assigning the broader referential meaning, than is common in the speech of adults, cf. the child's comment when hearing the noise of running water from the bath-room: *"Daddy is having his rain"*. His interpretation of *"rain"* = 'water is pouring down' enables him to extend its usage — besides the conventional one — to the situation when someone has a shower. In this case, we have to admit association, this however, being based on a mere contiguity and therefore too loose to allow the adult to use the same unmodified word in Standard language. The next examples then are the representatives of the child's misinterpretating of the conventional relation between the 'agent' and 'action', cf. *"the cock has bitten my little finger"; "the snowball is pricking my hands"*, *"my ear is whistling"* and the like. The lack of limitation of standard meaning (as suggested by Leo po l d, 1971, p. 98) would be a most plausible explanation for utterances as such, because the standard restriction of 'biting' to the use of teeth, 'pricking' to the use of sharp instruments, 'whistling' to the use of lips is unknown to the child as yet. Instead of saying that the dearth of vocabulary forced the assumption of related meaning by these verbs, it is more appropriate to acknowledge that the proper related verbs have not yet been learned, as the child has not yet felt the need for specified terms such as *"the cock has pecked me"* or *"my hands are numbed with cold"* (as snowballs are wet and cold). The third example reveals the fact

that the convention of idioms, such as *"my ears are ringing"* is also unknown to him as yet. (On this question, cf. the first chapter of Chukovski, 1968.)

The child's inability to organize material into hierarchical structures is demonstrated in the following behaviour. He uses the term *"animal"* not as a general name for *any mammal* but in reference to those animals whose names are either not known to him as yet or not recalled at the moment when 'reading' in his picture book, cf. e.g. in reference to *the tiger, the camel* while *the known animals* were labeled with their proper names, cf. *"the dog"*, *"the cat"*, *"the cow"* etc. Hence his protest against the adult's labeling a dog as 'an animal': *"It is not the animal, it is the dog"*. In other words, the two terms, viz. 'the dog' and 'the animal' coexist in the child's vocabulary without the knowledge that the former is subordinated to the latter. This fact reveals that, however frequent are the generalizations in children, they don't operate with abstractions until much later. Especially distinction existing on the higher level are either not used at all or not recognized in their pragmatic function, cf. e.g. the the child's enumerating individual objects such as *"meat"*, *"potatoes"*, *"soup"; "apple", "pear", "cherry"; "carrot", "cabbage", "cauliflower"* while the corresponding general terms, viz. *"dinner"*, *"fruit"* and *"vegetable"* are not used, or the coexistence of terms such as *"rose"* and *"flower"*, *"pork chop"* and *"meat"*, *"sandal"* and *"shoe"* etc.

In order to extend the range of expressible experiences, the child forms semantic clusters in accordance with his organization of extra-linguistic reality, cf. his comments on other children's behaviour or his correcting the adult: *"Stop weeping, boys do not weep, the girls do"* (addressed to his peer); Or, *"A dog does not cry, a baby does"* (as a reaction to the adult saying that he must not beat the dog, otherwise it will cry); Or, *"The sun won't come, it has no legs"* (as the reaction to the adult promise to go to have a bathe in the river when the sun comes out. Comments as such are no doubt illogical consequences of the child's application his own norms. Some other, however, reveal that the child's norm might be more logical than that of the adult. Oksaar's example (1977, p. 104) *"du gehst nicht, du fliegst mit dem Flugzeug"* as well as our analogical statement of a Czech speaking child *"my jsme nejeli letadlem, my jsme letěli"* (= we did go by plane, we flew) is the illustration of the child's chosing more appropriate semantic cluster as compared to the standard usage.

Our last example shows, how the child's comment on the newly experienced reality can be surprising and certainly independent of what he has heard before. Having put on his pyjamas, the child by chance touched his rib and asked: *"What is this"?* Getting the answer that it is 'a bone' he was shocked and cried unhappily: *"Have I eaten it"?* He, in all probability, recalled the situation that when having fish for lunch mother had said at the table: *"Be careful of the bones"*. His questions, however, offer two pieces of information: firstly, his ignorance of the fact that human body has bones (so far this word has been associated only with something left on the plate or perhaps given to dogs to eat); secondly, the belief that if he had a bone in his body, he must have eaten it as this is for him the only possible explanation as to of its getting there.

On the examples chosen from the children mastering Czech as their mother tongue we have tried to show, how the linguistic and pragmatic awareness are manifested as far as the monolingual child is concerned. For general statements, however, more studies of both regularities and deviations from the rules

of semantic congruency and choice of lexical items as well as phonological and grammatical analytical abilities in children — within one language community and crosslinguistically — are needed.

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LINGVISTICKÁ A PRAGMATICKÁ KOMPETENCE U DĚTÍ

Otázce, jaké znalosti o jazyce má dítě v různých vývojových stadiích, byla dosud věnována minimální pozornost. Autorka se ve své stati pokouší ukázat — na základě výsledků dlouhodobého výzkumu mluvního vývoje dětí osvojujících si češtinu jako mateřský jazyk — jednak vývoj lingvistické kompetence, a to ve všech jazykových rovinách, přičemž neopomíjí ani prvky paralingvistické a kinesické, jednak vývoj kompetence pragmatické v jednotlivých etapách osvojování jazykového systému v celé jeho komplexnosti.

Autorka vychází z předpokladu, že dítě si osvojuje jazyk jako komunikační systém a musí tudíž zvládnout jak pravidla vztahující se k úloze mluvčího, tak pravidla, jež jsou obecně platná pro posluchače i pro vzájemné interakce. Osvojení jazyka tudíž neznamená pouze prokázat schopnost foneticky a gramaticky správně produkovat výrazové prostředky a pochopit jejich význam v souladu s konvencí daného jazykového společenství, ale rovněž zvládnout adekvátnost použití těchto výrazových prostředků v té které situaci.

Odchylky od standardního úzu se vyskytují ve všech jazykových rovinách a jsou specifické v různých vývojových stupních. Početně nejčastější a časově nejnáročnější je odstranění těch odchylek, jež se týkají pravidel sémantické kongruence a volby vhodných výrazových prostředků. Lze tedy usuzovat, že právě tato jazyková sféra patří k nejobtížnějším a jejímu studiu bude třeba v budoucnu věnovat více pozornosti, než tomu bylo dosud, a to nejen v oblasti získávání teoretických poznatků, ale také v jejich konkrétní aplikaci při mluvní výchově.