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Abstract

This editorial introduction summarizes the background to, and contents of, a Special Issue devoted to children's development of conversational skills and their relation to language acquisition and use. The centrality of conversation to language development is well recognized and the paper identifies two key approaches to research: the impact of conversational processes on language acquisition itself, and the ways in which basic language skills are put to use in conversational interactions. The papers to follow were organized according to these themes and are outlined accordingly.

Key words: Children's conversations; language acquisition; pragmatic development; parent-child interaction; child directed speech

From birth on, children interact with the world and the world very often consists of people showing affect and emotions, people who touch and move them around, gesture and look at them, talk and respond to them, people with whom to communicate. Language acquisition occurs within this complex communicative environment and conversation holds a particularly privileged place in it. The collection of papers presented in this special issue illustrate the various ways in which conversation impacts on language development and use.

Conversation and language development

The relation between conversation and language development can be

considered from at least two main perspectives. One concerns the impact of conversational processes on children's acquisition of core language knowledge: phonological, lexical, morphological and syntactic. The other concerns the way these basic language resources are used. In development, core and pragmatic knowledge are often related to each other. Pragmatic considerations are often a component of meaning and contribute to acquire further basic language resources while the core linguistic resources at the child's disposal have a role to play in the adequate use of language.

Conversational processes and children's acquisition of core language knowledge

Brown, Cazden and Bellugi (1969) noted that the transformations that utterances undergo "as they shuttle between persons in conversation" may be the "richest data available to the child" for acquiring grammar (1969: 72). They reveal the structure of grammar in the same way as transformations of matter might help children discovering invariances and the physical concept of conservation.

There are several reasons to believe that conversational functioning contributes to language acquisition.

In conversation, children are active participants in communicative events, have intentions and meanings to communicate to their interlocutors, and understanding the partner is as important as making oneself understood. Thus, children are attentive to the effect that their interventions have on the partner and to the responses they obtain, including verbal ones, and children's replies reveal at the same time their understanding of them (Gallaway & Richards, 1994; Snow & Ferguson, 1977).

In conversations, children participate in the construction of communicatively valid behaviors and are placed upfront for observing and treating those of the more experienced partner. Adults interpret children's utterances and provide them at the same time with models of how their intentional meanings should find conventional expression. Adults use scaffolding procedures that clarify and render the children's utterances more language-like while making the meaning of their own language forms accessible to the child by basing them in shared context or linking them to previous discourse (Howard, Mayeux, & Naigles, 2008; Tare, Shatz, & Gilbertson, 2008; Murase et al, 2005; Tamis-LeMonda, Baumwell, & Cristofaro, in press ; Tenenbaum & Leaper, 1998; Veneziano, 2005).

Recent evidence on the specific effects of conversation on children's language acquisition accentuates the importance of recurring regular frames, extended discourse, and of corrective feedback by which children can improve their production by correcting their errors (e.g., Chouinard & Clark, 2003; Mintz, 2003; Saxton, 2000; Veneziano, 2005; Weisleder & Waxman, 2009). Adults' correction of children's grammatical errors was once supposed to be rare. However, several studies have shown that adults provide corrective feedback in the course of conversation with their children (Farrar 1992; Chouinard & Clark, 2003; Gallaway & Johnston, 1994; Moerk 1991, Saxton, 2000; Strapp 1999; Veneziano, 2005). The papers that deal with partners' repairs in this special issue provide further evidence of this phenomenon (see Corrin; Laakso & Soininen; Comeau,Genesee & Mendelson, this volume). What is important in all forms of conversationally contingent responses is that the changes in form occur while the intended meanings are supposed to remain invariant. This "shuttling of utterances" (Brown et al., 1969) might ultimately reveal itself one of the crucial features of conversation.

Conversation and language use

In conversation, children learn also how linguistic resources are used in order to function as competent speakers who address discourse and socially adequate utterances to their interlocutors, taking into account the knowledge they have of the verbal and nonverbal context, discourse characteristics and the degree of shared knowledge and "common ground" among the interlocutors (e.g. Marcos, 2001; Matthews et al., 2006; Gundel et al., 1993). They learn that others' requests should be answered, that demands are made on the assumption that the speaker cannot carry out the object of the demand, that refusals should be explained, that requests for clarification require that one's intentions should be better expressed, etc. (e.g., Clark, 2004; Fagan, 2008; Forrester & Cherrington, 2009; Garvey 1984; Marcos & Bernicot, 1994; Ninio & Snow, 1996, Quay, 2008; Shatz & O'Reilly 1990; Veneziano, 2001a,b). Pragmatics needs to be learned in the same way as grammar and referential semantics do, pragmatics being often part of this latter knowledge (e.g., Ricard et al, 1999; Salazar Orvig et al, this volume). For example, the meaning of an indefinite article is not provided only by understanding that it does not designate any particular member of a class, but also that it refers to an entity that has already been mentioned or focused upon in previous discourse (e.g., Gundel, 1999; Hickmann, 2003).

This special issue

The papers in this special issue provide an abundance of new evidence and insights in respect of the themes sketched above. They address the relation between conversation and language development and use from a variety of perspectives, exploiting a range of methodologies, and covering very early to more advanced periods of language learning.

Conversation in language acquisition

Clark shows that when adults introduce new words to their 2 to 5 years old children, they place these words in final position, utter them with emphatic stress, and present them in frames appropriate to the part of speech they belong. Moreover, adults enhance opportunities to establish meaning by linking the new words not only to the reference objects or events present in the context but also to other terms in the same semantic domain. Children indeed attend to these words and are able to use them appropriately later on.

Luce and Callanan show that, at least in particular settings, parents provide their 12-, 18-, and 24-months old children with subtle cues that help them understand that names for things are in the minds of people and must be learned by listening to their talk in conversation. Parents may express uncertainty or ignorance about objects' labels, search for the right label, or qualify it with reference to internal states. Although only a minority of the labels for unfamiliar objects are presented in this way, they may be very relevant events for children's understanding this fundamental feature of words, as it is suggested by the positive relationship between parents' use of "labels in the mind" and children's productive vocabulary.

Veneziano and Parisse examine the specific role of conversational contingencies with respect to that of child-directed speech (CDS) more in general, in the production of early verbs by two children acquiring French. They show that when the children are in the single-form verb morphology period, most of the verb types in CDS are also produced by their partners in one, or in one dominant, form only. The particular form children use for a given verb corresponds to the one adults use in CDS, for that is also reinforced in conversational contingencies. Through a method that assigns weights to the information provided by CDS and to that provided by

conversation, results show that when these are not equal, conversation has a much stronger impact on children's productions than CDS.

Conversational repair sequences and the acquisition of language and discourse skills.

Corrin applies fine-grained conversational analysis to playtime conversations between child and mother in the period between 1;7 and 1;9. She argues that neutral repair initiations by the mother (e.g. hm?) are powerful conversational turns that not only call for revision of the "trouble turn", but also foster grammatical development by promoting the semantic-syntactic patterning of new constructions. Indeed, these sequences resemble another conversational phenomenon known in the literature as Successive Single Word Utterances and considered to have a very important role in the transition from single to multiword speech (e.g., Bloom, 1973; Greenfield, et al. 1985; Herr-Israel & McCune, 2009; Scollon, 1979; Veneziano, 1999; Veneziano, Sinclair & Berthoud 1990). Responses to repairs may in fact be the communicative and conversational source of certain kinds of SSWUs and the turn-by-turn in-depth conversational analysis illustrated in this paper brings us closer to understanding the motivational and communicative underpinnings of children's language learning.

Laakso and Soininen distinguish different kinds of mother-initiated repairs addressed to their 3-years-old children during play interaction and, like Corrin, analyze them through fine-grained conversational analysis. Results show their positive role in sustaining on-topic conversation and in generating self-repairs by the children. Like other authors in this special issue, Laakso and Soininen emphasize the partners' mutual influence in the realization of a conversational sequence. They point out that the kind of repair mothers provide will influence the child's subsequent reply and the kind of conversational sequence structure that the dyad will realize.

Comeau ,Genesee and Mendelson examine the conversational repair skills of 2- and 3- years old French-English bilingual children and monolingual French-speaking children, as well as their responses to consecutive requests for clarification. The comparison of bilingual and monolingual children's repairs of breakdowns in conversations reveal no differences between the two groups of children, in spite of the fact that bilinguals used the language in which they were less proficient. The authors argue that these kinds of conversational and socio-cognitive skills are not affected by the additional cognitive challenges associated with the simultaneous acquisition of two languages in the first years.

Salazar and co-authors examine the role of conversational and pragmatic factors in the production of children's third person clitic subject pronouns as they occurred in natural dialogues between 1;9 and 2;4. The pronouns' relation to the interlocutor's previous utterances and the status of its referent in shared discourse or attention state were among the variables considered. Results show that these young children use pronouns mainly to refer to entities that have been mentioned in the interlocutor's immediately preceding utterance, showing that they understand very early that the meanings and functions of morphological devices are not restricted to the realm of grammar but have inherent, pragmatic and conversational components, components that can be learned only in conversational settings. This work provides another important argument for the relevance of conversation for language acquisition and for children's early capacity to deal with mental entities (those that have already been talked about and are not there any more), with sharedness, by which the other's subjectivity becomes "common ground", and with the interlocutor's states of attention. Children's developing knowledge about conversational rules, practices and justifications.

Goetz analyses spontaneous justifications occurring in the natural adult-child conversations when the children were between 2;6 and 4;11. Results show that by 3 years children provide as many justifications as their adult partners, suggesting that they have interiorized the need to provide justifications in certain circumstances. Goetz reveals a very interesting developmental progression from an instrumental use of justifications (justifications for persuasive purposes in order to have one's intentions prevail), to an epistemic-argumentative use of justifications whose central aim is to have one's knowledge and beliefs prevail. This epistemic shift takes a step further when children start to argue in support, not of their own claims, but of those of their partners, giving rise to co-constructed justification sequences.

De Haan and Singer's analysis of peer conflicts among 2 and 3 years old children in multiethnic child-care centers in the Netherlands shows a developmental increase in children's ability to take into account both their own and their opponent's perspectives. The authors argue that this is shown by the fact that 3 years old children propose more compromises than the younger children, compromises being considered a psychologically complex strategy offering a new scenario fair to everyone. Interestingly, the less advanced linguistic abilities in Dutch of children with mixed language background, relative to children who spoke only Dutch at home, did not prevent the mixed language background children from using psychologically advanced strategies, including compromises. The authors argue that cognitive and social developments make a greater contribution to the development of complex skills in conflict negotiation than linguistic abilities per se.

Blum Kulka, Hamo and Habib analyse 4-5 and 9-10 years old children's explanations in naturally occurring conversations among peers. They clearly situate their analysis in the interactional approach whereby explanations are a socio-

communicative phenomenon whose full meaning can be captured by taking into account extended conversational sequences. They show how child-to-child talk not only manifests but also creates occasions to develop the participants' conversational competences. They suggest, in particular, that children's contributions to the conversational negotiation of conflicts help them advance from an exclusive self-centered point of view to a consideration of the actions, needs and intentions of others.

Language knowledge, conversational skills, context and partner.

Hoff's study shows the effect of context and partner on 17 to 36 months old children. They were found to use a richer vocabulary and to provide more topic-continuing contributions in book reading than during mealtime and toy play. In the latter setting, conversations with mothers were more conducive to the manifestation of these abilities than were conversations with siblings. The author argues that the level of language performance shown by the children depends not only on their underlying competence but also on the support provided by the setting and the conversational partner that, both, scaffold it.

Kyratzis and Deniz Tarim study the spontaneous free play conversations of middle-class preschool Turkish girls and show that these girls are able to adjust their expression of directives according to the context of use. They address their peer girls with egalitarian forms of directives but when they address boys or enact the role of the mother in pretend play, they use imperative forms, thus expressing authoritative stances. These conversational differences show that culturally-determined gender-linked social roles are practiced through directives and that conflict management in girls' peer group conversations could reflect the internalization of models offered by adult middle-class Turkish women in conversation in varied social settings.

Bruce, Hansson & Nettelbladt compare the conversational interactions of SLI children communicating with different kinds of partners: a typically developing age-matched and a typically developing language-matched peer. This paper nicely illustrates one of the very important characteristics of conversations mentioned earlier, namely, that conversational partners mutually influence one another's functioning. Indeed, results show that SLI children present different conversational skills when interacting with the age-matched and with the language-matched peers (higher responsiveness and coherence of topic with the former than with the latter). This study strongly suggests that low conversational skills are not an inherent and insurmountable characteristic of SLI children. Their behavior can adjust or can, at least, be shaped by the kind of conversational interaction afforded by the conversational context.

Baines and Howe show that age and task characteristics influence also four, six and nine-years-old children's conversational skills, in this case, topic management and discussion skills. In situations where goals are pursued jointly, and the interacting situation is dyadic, younger children maintain topics through collaborative discussion, something that they have difficulties in doing without the supportive structure from the setting. Older children's discussion skills are promoted by task ambiguity, while age remains a solid variable for conversational skills that require integrating the child's perspective with that of the speaking partner.

In sum, the collection of papers appearing in this special issue presents the variety of ways by which conversation can legitimately be considered a privileged eventful happening in the life of language learning children, from very young to school-age years, while bringing to light the multitude of communicatively

meaningful processes going on in conversation, their inherent dynamical nature as well as the complexity and the relativity of the skills engaged by the participants

Editing this special issue has been a challenging experience. I learned a lot from the great number of fine papers received. I also learned that editing a Journal from scratch is a daunting enterprise for a novice. I would like to thank all the authors not only for their fine contributions but also for their extraordinary patience during the long reviewing and editing process . My thanks go also to the multitude of reviewers who accepted to offer their time and intelligence to appreciate and make constructive criticisms of the papers sent to them.

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