

## SOCIAL SETTING OF ACQUISITION

(Zita Réger)

**The microcontext of acquisition**

Few real research is done on the conversational aspects of acquisition, although both in case studies and on the theoretical level the pragmatic-dialogic nature of acquisition is recognized by all. Réger (1986a,b) is one notable exception. In her longitudinal study of two children already mentioned she has taken a conversational approach. Her most important findings relate to the changing and varied role of imitation in children. First, she had presented extremely rich data on the "learning role" of imitation. The study showed that children tend to use imitation in a flexible way to practice items and structures that are at the most sensitive moment of development at any given time. Thus, she had shown for example by total vocabulary counts how a child practices new words. Second, she has shown how imitation gradually develops from a learning device into a conversational device. As a most clear example, with a careful control over suprasegmental factors she has shown that early echolalic imitation of the last word of an utterance in Hungarian gradually gives place to repetition of the focussed element, and then questioning of the focussed element which are standard conversational devices in Hungarian. Thus, what was originally a sign of immaturity (imitation) gradually becomes purposeful and syntactically conditioned repetition. (See the example in the word order section.)

This kind of work is continued both in her longitudinal research on mother-infant dyads which has a clear conversational emphasis and in her work on the acquisition of communicative competence in Gypsy children. These works are reviewed elsewhere in this booklet.

**Studies on social class differences**

Studies classified under this heading could be characterized as dealing with the macro-sociolinguistic setting of acquisition while the ones in the previous section as dealing with the micro-sociolinguistic setting. Studies of social differences in children's language use started in Hungary within the framework of Bernstein's theory which had a great impact on sociological and educational research in Hungary in the early seventies. Pap and Pléh (1972, 1973) had the aim to test Bernstein's theory of codes under Hungarian conditions. Their studies tried to answer the following

questions: (1) can the differential code use described by Bernstein be found in the speech of 6 year old Hungarian children, and (2) if yes, are they to be related to SES differences? 65 first grade pupils in 5 Budapest schools were given different linguistic tasks. In analyzing the general level of speech and its degree of elaboration the authors used measures worked out partly by themselves, tuned to specificities of Hungarian, like exophoric and anaphoric zero subjects and the like. The results were analyses in relation to school, parental profession, social situation, residential area, and sex. Differences attributable to differences in social status were found, while no connection could be established between them and the measured intelligence level of these children.

Sugárné Kádár Julia (1986; Sugárné Kádár and Reök, 1985) investigated factors determining the language use - among them social differences - of Hungarian kindergarten children. In the full research design, 436 4-6 year old children from different social backgrounds were studied. Children performed a series of tasks which measured different aspects of their language use in different communicative situations. Data obtained were correlated to data on psychological maturity, types of family structure, previous history of institutional socialization, SES differences, residential area and sex. Age related changes were also analysed. To mention some results: manifold interrelations between SES and language was found in these children, especially in vocabulary use and text production. Language development, in general, proved to be slower in the socially disadvantaged group. With regard to sex differences, girls performed better in articulation tasks and dialogues, while boys had better scores in narrating. The importance of the availability of manifold communicative experiences for children's language development was particularly stressed in this book.

Csaba Pléh and András Vargha (1982, 1984) investigated the effect of socioeconomic status in Hungarian children of kindergarten age (n=113) coming from different social backgrounds on dichotic ear preference and on the interpretation of simple sentences of varying word order. The main results have shown that in Hungarian children of that age the social background and sex of the child are not related either to sentence interpretation performance or to dichotic ear preference. The authors argue on the basis of these results that the origins of social class related linguistic differences must be looked for not in the basic linguistic abilities, but in the more complex social factors of language use.

Réger's longitudinal study (1990) investigated social variation in input language addressed to children and its effect on children's language development. Two groups of mother-infant dyads (24 altogether, from opposite extremes of Hungarian society) were followed through two years and grammatical characteristics of speech to 1-, 2- and 3-year old children were analysed. (The full research design included analysis of discourse and conversational features as well.) Results showed that

similar changes occurred in the speech of both groups of mothers in a number of grammatical variables as a function of their children's growing linguistic sophistication. A main effect of SES was found for a number of mother variables and also for children's MLUs. Greater frequency of imperative sentences and a relative delay in the introduction of reference-establishing means were found to be the most important features of uneducated mothers' speech, as compared to that of educated ones. Both of these features were found to have a slow-down effect on children's language development. Language specific factors were found to contribute to the impact of the use of some reference-establishing means on children's language development. The author suggested that one factor in the emergence of the developmental lag in children's development should be low SES mothers' relative delay in the introduction of particular features which would promote the acquisition of particular structures at the given developmental stage. Social group differences in mothers' speech were also related to different interactional styles which seemed to be dominating in the respective groups. It was also suggested that differential use of the reference-establishing means in different social groups may probably also be related to later emerging differences in the use of decontextualized language as well as in cognitive orientation.