Learning how to mean.

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Foundations of Language Development

A Multidisciplinary Approach

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14 - Learning How to Mean

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Adult language comprises three interrelated systems, phonological, lexicogrammatical (vocabulary, morphology, syntax), and semantic. Language development studies in the 1960s focused mainly on the lexicogrammatical level; they were also predominantly psycholinguistic in their orientation. More recently, interest has extended into semantics; the present paper is concerned with the learning of meaning, and proposes a complementary approach in sociolinguistic terms.

The paper suggests a socio-semantic interpretation of language development, based on the intensive study of one child, Nigel, from 9 months to 2½ years. Nigel first developed (Phase I) a two-level system, having sounds and meanings but no words or structures, in which the meanings derived from the elementary social functions of interaction with others, satisfaction of needs and the like. This continued to expand for 6–9 months, at which time the child entered the stage of transition to the adult language (Phase II, corresponding to what is generally taken as the starting point). This was characterized by the interpolation of a lexicogrammatical level between meaning and sound, and by the mastery of the principle of dialogue, the adoption and assignment of speech roles. It was also marked by a generalization of the initial set of social functions

speech roles. It was also marked by a generalization of the initial set of social functions to form a basic opposition between "language as learning" and "language as doing."

The transition was considered complete when the child had effectively replaced his original two-level system by a three-level one and moved from monologue into dialogue; he then entered the adult system (Phase III). He could now build up the meaning potential of the adult language, and would continue to do so all his life. From a sociolinguistic point of view the major step consisted in once again reinterpreting the concept of "function" so that it became the organizing principle of the adult semantic system, being built into the heart of language in the form of the ideational (representational, referential, cognitive) and the interpersonal (expressive-conative, stylistic, social) components of meaning. All utterances in adult speech contain both these components, which are mapped on to each other by the structure-forming agency of the grammar. The original social functions survive in their concrete sense as types of situation and setting, the social contexts in which language serves in the transmission of culture to the child

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