Review of Suzanne Romaine, The Language of Children and Adolescents: The Acquisition of Communicative Competence

Barbara Johnstone
Review
Reviewed Work(s): The Language of Children and Adolescents: The Acquisition of Communicative Competence by Suzanne Romaine
Review by: Barbara Johnstone
Published by: Linguistic Society of America
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/415182
members of the global public who suffer the immediate consequences of linguistic inequality. This book will not only be a welcome addition to scholars, but it could also serve as a text in an upper-level graduate course. Finally, readers will find a refreshing change from the overtly politicized literature that has saturated this subject in popular writings. The articles are highly empirical, and contain a wealth of information that will be useful to linguists, anthropologists, and anyone concerned with the consequences of linguistic inequality.

[Received 23 January 1986.]


Reviewed by Barbara Johnstone, Georgetown University

Research on first-language acquisition in the 1960's and early 70's tended to be based on generative grammar—and hence on a view of the child as a grammarian—and attempted to account for how children discover or create the semantics and syntax of the language to which they are exposed. In the late 70's, attention shifted to what has been called developmental pragmatics (Ochs & Shieffelin 1979). Research in this paradigm, based largely in speech act theory, sees the child as a language user; it tries to explain how children discover the rules of conversational implicature, and how they learn to use non-verbal and verbal means to get things done. The most recent trend in child language research, grounded in sociolinguistic theory, is to see the child as a member of one or more speech communities and to examine such things as language socialization, the acquisition of literacy, and the development of sociolinguistic variation. Romaine's book falls mostly into this third category. Although it has some annoying drawbacks, it is on the whole a readable and useful introduction to a relatively new area of research.

On the first page of the book, and again on the last (p. 261), R provides a succinct statement of her basic theoretical claim: 'Children acquire language by using it.' The intervening chapters treat various aspects of children's language use, and are based in large part on R's research with schoolchildren in Edinburgh, though other studies are also discussed.

Chap. 1 is an introduction to the idea of communicative competence, and an overview of the rest of the book. Chap. 2 discusses the two methodological techniques for the sociolinguistic study of children: the sociolinguistic interview, and the ethnographic method. The former approach is not without problems, as R points out: very young children may not be able to deal with the structure of an interview, and no matter what the age, there is bound to be an asymmetry in status between an adult and a child. R suggests, though, that if topics are selected carefully—with a child's interests in mind—and if one is aware of the special nature of the interview as a speech event, this technique can provide fruitful results.

In Chap. 3, R uses evidence about relative clauses and passives to trace children's progression from early, pragmatic strategies for combining ideas to later, syntactic, ones. Her sociolinguistic perspective is useful here: she points out that Edinburgh children acquire get-passives first because they hear them most; similarly, relatively loose paratactic structures are never fully replaced by hypotactic, fully embedded ones, except in the sort of language associated with literacy. Some of
the syntactic argumentation in this chapter is, however, extremely difficult to follow. Ex. 5, on p. 39, seems to be mislabeled in several ways; and on p. 50 there is some real confusion as to what is a resumptive pronoun and what is not. Note also ex. 26, p. 50: *Then whoever the person that’s he catches first that person’s he in the next game.* R claims that *that person* is coreferential with *the person*, when in fact it is not. In this chapter, as elsewhere, typographical errors seem to occur in particularly confusing places, as in the diagram of the Keenan & Comrie relative clause hierarchy on p. 44.

Chap. 4 deals with the acquisition of sociolinguistic patterns. R takes issue with Labov’s (1970) claim that patterns of sociolinguistic variation emerge only in adolescence. She cites studies which show that pre-adolescent children are not ‘monostylistic’; that early non-systematic variability gives way, by the end of primary school, to consistent patterns of variation, and that pre-school children already have some awareness of what characterizes ‘polite’ vs. ‘rough’ speech. She also shows that differentiation correlated with parents’ social class and with sex can be found before adolescence—though these findings have no direct bearing, of course, on the question of when individuals learn to vary their speech.

Chap. 5 discusses ‘speech events and discourse skills’. Its theme is that children progress from relatively context-dependent to more context-independent strategies in interaction, as they learn to assume the perspectives of their addressees. Communicative routines like *Hi* and *Bye-bye* are learned very early, and young children are adept at making requests; but purely referential speech (if there is such a thing) comes much later, and even twelve-year-olds have some trouble making accurate choices in coding new and old information. What R has to say about the acquisition of speech events is interesting. However, a great deal of the work on the acquisition of speech acts, indirectness, and rules of conversation which one might expect to read about in this chapter, given its title, is not mentioned by R. The most valuable part of the chapter is the long section on children’s narrative skills, in which R shows evidence that pre-adolescents can be quite sophisticated story-tellers, though young children have trouble interpreting narrative syntax when it is not iconically ordered (e.g., *Before he went upstairs, the boy turned off the light.*)

That children learn to use language through interaction with others is implicit in every chapter. Chap. 6 is a more explicit discussion of the roles of others: parents, teachers, and peers. R discusses the ongoing controversies over the nature of the linguistic input which children hear and over the role of ‘caretaker speech’—once assumed to be universal, but more recently shown not to be (by Heath 1983 and others). R presents some striking examples of how teachers force children to learn a new, elaborated way of using language by saying things like *Can you say that again in a complete sentence?*, and by reinforcing ‘sharing time’ stories that are fully explicit. Once children are school-aged, the role of other children becomes increasingly important; R cites evidence that, for many, the peer group may be the dominant source of linguistic influence, serving often to reinforce vernacular norms. She makes extensive use, in this section, of Labov’s work with Harlem teenage gangs and of work by a number of sociologists on girls’ and boys’ groups.

Chap. 7, on the acquisition of literacy, is to me the best in the book. It begins with an overview of parts of the large body of recent research on the cognitive effects of literacy, and on the differences between spoken and written language. R then discusses research bearing on the new skills which a child must acquire in the process of learning to read: the ability to pick out units which are rarely salient in spoken language (phonemes, if the writing system is alphabetic; words; perhaps even sentences), and the ability to deal with novel syntactic constructions (*Over and over rolled the ball*) and lexical items. She cites research showing that teachers cannot explain what constitutes a good expository essay, and describes a study of her own in which she analysed the corrections teachers made on students’ essays; these corrections seemed to have more to do with producing ‘complete sentences’ than with making the essays rhetorically more effective. She found also that teachers and students have very different ideas about the purpose of writing, and about what it takes to be a good writer; the students were almost completely in the dark about what they were doing and why, and were skeptical that anyone could ever learn to write well. The picture which R paints in this chapter is bleak, and could antagonize teachers who read the book; but it is probably quite accurate.

Chap. 8, the last substantive portion of the book, has to do with standardized testing and ‘language proficiency’. R points out, as have others, that standardized tests of verbal ability are often actually
tests of a student's competence in standard English and middle-class values, and that designers of tests often 'conflate the distinction between conceptual or logical form and the linguistic means for expressing it' (235). The book ends with Chap. 9, a very brief critique of generative theory as applied to language acquisition; R's argument is not new, and this chapter probably could have been omitted.

The language of children and adolescents is intended as a general introduction for students of socio- and psycholinguistics, and for teachers. (One would hope that the two categories would overlap.) It should serve this function reasonably well. However, Romaine's style is not especially diplomatic, and a book of this sort is not the right forum for her tendency to pick at small flaws in the work of others (especially Labov). If used as a text, the book would have to be supplemented with other readings in areas which are not covered (and could not be, in a single volume). Though the book seems somewhat pieced-together and has more than its share of editorial errors, it is quite readable. On the whole, it is an interesting introduction to what sociolinguistics can contribute to the study of child language.

REFERENCES


Reviewed by Adrienne Lehrer, University of Arizona


In this excellent study of naming behavior, Carroll describes a variety of laboratory studies (Part I) in which subjects were required to name different kinds of things, as well as field studies (Part II), focusing on names which people have selected for particular things. Whereas most such works concentrate on personal names, and to a lesser extent on place names, C's book emphasizes names for things—e.g. bridges, computer files, or recipes. Thus he calls attention to many phenomena that are overlooked in the best-known theories of names.

The book contains many important insights, one of which is that a theory of names must be rich enough to account for the variety of goals that people have. Although similarities in naming behavior occur across tasks, there are also important differences, depending on the task itself. Our strategies when we distinguish one individual from another are different from when we wish to categorize.

Although C asks 'What's in a name?', the basic question 'What is a name?' is never answered (or asked). As a result, important distinctions are never made. 'Name' is used for both proper names and common nouns, either for