

JANUA LINGUARUM

STUDIA MEMORIAE
NICOLAI VAN WIJK DEDICATA

edenda curat

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Indiana University

Series Minor, 202

THE CHILD'S COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

*Language Capacity in Three Groups of
Children from Different Social Classes*

by

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1973

MOUTON

THE HAGUE • PARIS

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Mouton & Co. N.V., Publishers, The Hague

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER: 73-80962

Printed in Belgium by NICI, Ghent

PREFACE

The research described in this monograph has been executed by a project-group of students and members of the teaching staff of the Institute of General Linguistics of the University of Amsterdam.

Initially the group intended to evaluate the effects of a language compensation program — a Dutch adaptation of the Engelmann-Bereiter program. Because no data of the children's language capacity at the time of the program's start were available, the group changed its goal to investigating the language capacity of three sociologically different groups of three- to four-year-old children. We hoped on the basis of our results to formulate some suggestions with respect to the language educational program. The results, however, were such that we restricted ourselves to discussing the problem of language compensation in general, and the differences in language behavior of the three experimental groups in particular.

Both topics have been discussed in terms of two opposing sociolinguistic theories:

- a) the deficiency theory which presupposes that the language of the lower class children is retarded in comparison with the language of middle class children;
- b) the difference theory which presupposes that the language of both groups of children is different but essentially equivalent.

We intend to make clear our position that the latter theory is the more reasonable one.

A central part of this monograph is occupied with the problem

that recent linguistic findings cannot without adaptations measure syntactic maturity. Probably this is why syntactic complexity of language use is rarely dealt with systematically and exhaustively. For measuring syntactic complexity, this study proposes a method which implements a score list by which one is able to make a systematic and almost exhaustive inventory of the semantic and syntactic phenomena of the three to four-year-old child's language use. The communicative aspect of the competence — one's capacity to react appropriately by means of language within a certain context and situation — has also been systematically covered in the score list. A factor analysis on the scores of syntactic complexity resulted in 36 variables that are crucial for the determination of a child's communicative language capacity. Finally, the authors argue for a pure observational method of data sampling.

The monograph is organized in the following way:

— In chapter one the theoretically linguistic, sociolinguistic, and psycholinguistic assumptions are discussed in some detail. A number of conclusions that are of special interest for the actual project are presented at the end of each separate section.

— In the second chapter the setup of the experiment is reported and the newly designed syntactic complexity score is discussed in detail.

— In the third chapter the findings and conclusions are reported. Ample attention is paid to the linguistic interpretation of the results of two factor analyses.

— In the fourth chapter the theoretical assumptions of the first chapter are compared with the findings of chapter three. Some tentative conclusions with respect to theoretical issues and to educational problems are drawn.

It would be impossible for us at this point to acknowledge in detail the contribution that our students have made. We would like to thank especially Margreet Beunderman, Lilian Doorenbosch, Anita Koster, Dorine Plantenga, Max Verbeek, and Evie

Visch. We are sincerely grateful to Mr. J. de Leeuw, University of Leiden, for making available and adapting the factor analysis programs. We thank Dr. Catherine Snow for the many valuable criticisms and corrections of the preliminary version of this book, as well as Mrs. Anneke Vermeer for the typing of the text, and Mr. B. H. Kaart for statistical and administrative assistance.

The authors
Amsterdam, November 1972

CONTENTS

Preface	5
1. <i>The problem</i>	11
1.1. The notion of competence	11
1.2. The measurement of children's language capacity	17
1.3. Message versus code	22
1.4. Language capacity and social environment	24
2. <i>The experiment</i>	33
2.1. The composition of the groups	33
2.2. The collecting of the language samples	35
2.3. The language measures used	37
2.3.1. Traditional quantitative measures	37
2.3.2. Traditional qualitative measures	39
2.3.3. The new Syntactic Complexity Score	40
2.3.4. Some other measures	49
2.3.5. The sentence as basis of the analysis	51
3. <i>Results</i>	53
3.1. Factor analysis of the measures of syntactic complexity	53
3.2. Differences among the groups.	62
3.2.1. Social class differences	62
3.2.2. Environmental differences on the traditional language measures	64
3.2.3. The relation between the measures of	

syntactic complexity and the different quantitative measures	66
3.2.4. Developmental differences between the social classes	67
3.2.5. Environment and play contacts	75
4. <i>Discussion</i>	79
4.1. Linguistic competence versus communicative competence	79
4.2. Qualitative vs. quantitative measures	86
4.3. The planning factor	91
4.4. The role of pragmatics in linguistics, sociolinguistics, and psycholinguistics	93
4.5. Some tentative conclusions regarding language compensation programs	100
4.6. The hereditary factor	103
5. <i>Summary</i>	105
5.1. The design of the project	105
5.2. The results	107
References	111
Appendices	115

THE PROBLEM

The purpose of this study is to describe the language capacity of three- to four-year-old children from three socio-economic backgrounds.

Since LANGUAGE CAPACITY has been used with different meanings, we will first attempt to define the term as used in this study. By language capacity we mean not only verbal skills, such as those measured by quantitative measures of PERFORMANCE (e.g. mean length of utterance), but also the underlying COMPETENCE which must be analyzed qualitatively.

This short characterization unfortunately remains inadequate because of imprecisions and inconsistencies in the definitions of competence and performance as given by linguists, sociologists, and psychologists over the last several years. We will, therefore, discuss the concepts of competence and performance in the next section.

In the following chapters we will discuss some other basic problems in describing children's language capacity:

- (1) How does one describe language capacity in general and, more specifically, in children?
- (2) What aspects of language capacity distinguish social class?
- (3) The traditional measures of language skill are limited. What sort of test or measuring device is most appropriate as an index of language capacity?

1.1. THE NOTION OF COMPETENCE

It is becoming more evident that there is a big gap between the standpoint of the linguist speaking about competence and per-

formance and that of the psycholinguist and sociologist describing the puzzle called language as a phenomenon in reality, accounting for the proficiency in the processing of linguistic information, and (or) measuring the individual's or group's progress in the development of language.

Chomsky¹ defines competence as the idealized knowledge of the language possessed by the "speaker-hearer", and performance as the actual usage of language in concrete situations. These definitions are too naive for any use beyond linguistics, as is apparent from the fact that performance is composed of at least two facets:

- (a) the process of producing and understanding language, making use of the rules pertaining to the linguistic competence; and
- (b) the result of this process in actual language use — that which results from the process in actual uttering and understanding.

Fodor and Garrett² point to another inconsistency in the competence-performance distinction: they argue that there are two (psycho)linguistic notions of competence, and therefore also two notions of performance. They posit in general that competence is the counterpart of behavior. Second, they argue that the notion is used in a rather limited sense, namely as "linguistic capacity independently of the other psychological mechanisms and competences with which linguistic capacity must be supposed to interact in the production of verbalizations". This means that there exists a distinction between competence and behavior and between the linguistic competence and such non-linguistic capacities as memory, perception, and the like. The latter distinction is taken as the starting point in modern transformational linguistic research, in the sense that linguists deal exclusively with the linguistic competence. How the influence of linguistic competence is brought to bear in the production and understanding of language is left to the psychologist to solve.

¹ N. Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge, 1965), p. 4.

² J. Fodor and M. Garrett, "Some Reflections on Competence and Performance", in *Psycholinguistics Papers* (Chicago, 1966).

Psychological research on the latter question was carried out initially on the basis of the so-called correspondence hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, the linguistic rules proposed for the grammatical derivation of the sentence and the order in which they are applied is supposed to correspond step by step to the mental processes executed when somebody produces a sentence.³ This hypothesis is also present in language acquisition research, e.g. in the studies of McNeill,⁴ when he discusses the hierarchy of categories and the development of the basic grammatical relations, and in Brown and Hanlon's⁵ article on derivational complexity in relation to the developmental sequence in language acquisition. In this article, Brown and Hanlon limit themselves to the cumulative derivational complexity according to the principle that "when the derivation of a sentence Y follows all the rules applied in the derivation of a sentence X plus at least one rule not applied in X then Y has greater cumulative derivational complexity than X".

This correspondence hypothesis is not in accordance with Chomsky's views: "...it seems absurd to suppose that the speaker first forms a generalized Phrase marker by base rules and then tests it for well-formedness by applying transformational rules... . But this absurdity is simply a corollary to the deeper absurdity of regarding the system of generative rules as a point-by-point model for the actual construction of a sentence by a speaker."⁶ It is, therefore, not so surprising that the correspondence hypothesis in its strict sense has been abandoned. Modern psycholinguistic research to a large extent focuses upon the discovery of sentence processing strategies. These strategies are shortcuts from surface

³ J. R. Hayes, "Introduction", in J. R. Hayes (ed.), *Cognition and the Development of Language* (New York, 1970).

⁴ "Developmental Psycholinguistics", in F. Smith and G. A. Miller (eds.), *The Genesis of Language* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966); and *Language Acquisition, the Study of Developmental Psycholinguistics* (New York, 1970).

⁵ R. Brown and C. Hanlon, "Derivational Complexity and Order of Acquisition in Child Speech", in J. R. Hayes (ed.), *Cognition and the Development of Language* (New York, 1970), p. 13.

⁶ N. Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, p. 139.

structures to deep structure semantic relations which enable one to avoid some of the complexities of a complete derivational analysis.

Two important problems arise in this type of research. The first originates from the fact that ambiguous sentences are usually used as testing material. If a subject is conscious of the possibility of double interpretation of a sentence, he finds himself in an experimental situation which cannot be compared with normal conversation. The second problem concerns the influence of context and situation in the processing of language. Given a normal conversational situation, the hearer can process sentences that might be only partially perceived and incorrectly or even ungrammatically realized. Moreover, in the conversational situation, sentences to which no linguist cares to pay attention, and for which he consequently does not give any rules, occur frequently; in the experimental situation these contextually-determined sentences would be uninterpretable and impossible to process. Examples are:

- (1) *Thank you, Mommy* (I — Mommy — request of you that you say "Thank you, Mommy");
- (2) *Coffee?/.!/* (Would you care for a cup of coffee?/
Coffee is the only thing I would like to have./ Look, there you can get coffee!/
etc.);
- (3) *May I?* (May I take a cigarette?/ etc.).

Context and situation clearly should be taken into account as important factors in the processing of language. It would lead, however, to enormous complications in the setup of an experiment to incorporate these factors systematically. In the experimental situation, context and situation are missing or are inadequately presented by means of a picture or a story. The conclusions of such experiments are only valid for the processing of sentences which are well-formed and whose interpretation requires a minimum of context. Context, an extremely important variable, must