10 Pragmatics and Language Development

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1. Introduction: History

In the study of language, as in the study of any other phenomenon, it is necessary to define the nature and limits of the subject of study. But defining an area of study involves taking a point of view, and associating it with historical and contemporary views that support or contradict it. The theoretical stand implied by definition, then, tends to determine the kinds of research undertaken, and the interpretation given to the results. The audience to which the research interpretation is directed tends to reinforce the approach, and to further determine what will be the issues of concern. The seemingly widely divergent views of the behaviorist and the psycholinguist, and their very different approaches to research, are the result of important differences in their definitions of what language is and what development means.

Psycholinguist and behaviorist define what language is in almost opposite terms. For the psycholinguist, “language is defined as a mental phenomenon, a body of knowledge about sounds, meanings, and syntax which resides in the mind” (Falk, 1973, p. 12). Speech production can be a representation of language, but it is not language itself. This is the now familiar distinction between competence (knowledge) and performance (use) (see McNeill, 1966). Language, for the psycholinguist, is competence, a cognitive behavior. Just as a child’s stage of cognitive development can be assessed from his performance in a momentary sampling of behavior, so a child’s stage of language development can be evaluated from his or her performance on a diagnostic test, or during periodic observation. Performance may contain errors, but those very
errors are reliable indicators of the maturity of the underlying mental operations and rule systems. For the behaviorist, however, performance is the central aspect of language. The behaviorist defines language as "verbal behavior . . . reinforced through the mediation of other[s]" (Skinner, 1957, p. 2). Language is a performance system under the control of environmental events. The behaviorist studies performance without interpreting it in terms of underlying mental processes (even though he may recognize the existence, and contribution to performance, of such processes). For the behaviorist, there is not a lot of difference between language behavior and other human behaviors, just as for the psycholinguist there is not a lot of difference between language and other cognitive activities.

Their different definitions of what language is tend to commit psycholinguist and behaviorist to differing views of what development means. The extremes of the differing views may be seen in the nativist/empiricist controversy, exemplified in the papers by Chomsky (1959) and MacCorquodale (1970). The more usual psycholinguistic view of development, however, tends to correspond to the cognitivist's: development occurs as a result of interaction between a maturing organism and its environment. Language develops from the interaction between the child's perceptual and cognitive abilities and linguistic and nonlinguistic events. The key factor in development is maturation: development can proceed only within universal, predetermined stages, and according to a fixed sequence. A behaviorist is likely to accept the same primary definition of development as the cognitivist, but to emphasize, not sequential stages, but the role of interactional processes which produce more complex forms of behavior (Bijou & Baer, 1961). Knowledge of process permits intervening in the course of development, in order to, for instance, remEDIATE delay immediately, rather than waiting for age or stage to occur naturally (Risley & Baer, 1973). Just as behavioral theories are not theories about the nature of language, psycholinguistic theories are not theories about how to teach or develop language. To oversimplify, perhaps, the developmental psycholinguist studies the progressive changes in cognitive competence underlying language use, whereas the developmental behaviorist studies the observable changes in language performance over time.

Psycholinguists' definitions of what language is and what development means have led them to a particular kind of research. The initial orientation in psycholinguistics (in the 1950s) combined the experimental methods of cognitive psychology with the structuralist approach then current in linguistics (Brown, 1970). The structuralist approach was an empiricist one, in which all the essential properties of language could be described on the basis of the surface forms of the language. All that was