3
Infancy and First Language Acquisition

We have examined one class of views about language, what it is and does, a family of beliefs we called the received or default view. I mentioned that it has long been criticized for its severe internal difficulties. The view raises baffling questions and paradoxes, is tied to a basically incoherent worldview, and so on. Nevertheless, it has maintained dominance, mostly because no viable alternative has emerged, at least not so far. I see this failure to offer a viable alternative as closely tied to the near-total absence of any serious interest in the first steps of the infant’s acquisition of their language in those disciplines that concern themselves with language in general (linguistics, philosophy, psychology, psychiatry). This chapter will explain the nature of this surprising link between world view and first language acquisition.

The paradox

How do infants acquire their first language? Although the literature is large, ‘the topic is one without a discipline. There are virtually no university departments of language acquisition …and only one major journal is devoted to it.’¹ There is no shortage of theories, but, as far as I can see, all are based on one or another kind of cognitive behavioral model. Vygotsky and Piaget set the standard.² In psychology, linguistics, philosophy, pedagogy, the mental health fields, education, the prevalent belief is that each infant’s acquisition of their mother tongue (the logician W. V. O. Quine calls it the ‘home language’) is a relatively unremarkable, everyday phenomenon that can be scientifically or logically investigated and understood. Unless there is something wrong with the infant, of course each child learns the language of their culture. It happens, we can explain it scientifically, and that’s all there’s to it. Children learn language in much the same way as they learn to walk, to read and

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write, to do arithmetic. Occasionally one may find a dissenting view, but it fails to gain traction. The literature is sizable so I cannot be sure that I haven’t missed some relevant work, but the only philosophers I know who have gone beyond a superficial, inadequate view are Charles Taylor and, to a minor degree, Wittgenstein. (I am not aware of any comparable work by psychologists, psychiatrists, or linguists.) I draw heavily on Taylor’s analyses, especially in the earlier parts of this chapter.

I suppose one reason why this blasé perception has become the received view of language acquisition is that it fits our reductive, oversimplifying, mechanizing general attitudes and practices so well. It also may be, though, because to confront this phenomenon seriously is to run headlong into paradox, as Wittgenstein and a few others (for example, the philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder) have found.3

I strongly disagree with the received opinion, often masquerading as fact, that language acquisition is understandable, a suitable phenomenon for scientific study or else of relatively little significance. I see the process as important and utterly baffling. I’m not alone. I have already mentioned Wittgenstein; the English professor and literary critic Ian Robinson is another. In the course of his extended critical study of Noam Chomsky’s language theories, he says that

The study of language is one mode of contemplating a mystery, and a proper awe is a measure of the sense and depth of what goes on in the study of language. I mean, not that linguists should talk about their wonder and awe or use it to gain recruits to the profession… but that awe at language should be present in linguistics and inform it… Children begin to understand what is said to them and to talk. All children. That is a wonder of the world – of the specifically human world.4

The specialness and paradoxical nature of this infant accomplishment can be explained superficially, but not satisfactorily. One way or another, one always bumps up against the problem of origins, against the paradoxes entailed in Leibniz’s Principle of Reason – *nihil est sine ratione* (‘nothing is without reason’).5 How do we account for the start of the way in which we account for the start of something?6 Try to explain first language acquisition deeply raises the specter of infinite regress. The explanation will have to be explained. We can infer that Wittgenstein considered the process important because he opens his *Philosophical Investigations* with St. Augustine’s account of how he acquired his mother tongue. Wittgenstein immediately makes this salient comment: