

Elinor Ochs

## ACQUISITION OF DISCOURSE COMPETENCE

Discourse refers to the set of norms, preferences, and expectations relating language to context, which language users draw on and modify in producing and making sense out of language in context. Discourse knowledge allows language-users to produce and interpret discourse structures such as verbal acts (e.g. requests, offers), conversational sequences (such as question-answer), activities (such as storytelling and arguing), and communicative styles (such as women's speech). Competent language users know the formal characteristics of these structures, the alternative ways of forming particular structures, and the contexts in which particular discourse structures are preferred and expected. For example, competent communicators know the range of linguistic structures which one can use to ask for things and know which particular structures are preferred in particular social circumstances.

Discourse knowledge relates language to psychological as well as social contexts. Competent language users vary language according to their perception of cognitive states of interlocutors. Every language has linguistic structures which elicit others' attention (or heighten attention to something expressed) and which distinguish old from new information (information interlocutors presume their addressees do/do not know). Address terms, emphatic particles, pitch, voice quality, and repetition are attention-getting devices. Similarly, certain determiners, pronouns, and word order mark old and new information.

Psychological context includes perceived emotion. Languages throughout the world have linguistic resources for conveying emotion. In Thai and Japanese, for example, passive voice indicates negative affect towards a proposition. In other languages, affixes, particles, quantifiers, tense-aspect marking, word order, and intonation carry emotional meaning. Competent language-users know which structures convey affective meaning and norms, preferences, and expectations otherwise surrounding their use.

In the course of experiencing language in context, children come to know how language varies with context, how it sometimes reflects context and sometimes creates contexts. They come to know how to use language as a tool to elicit attention, to establish relationships and identities, to perform social actions, and to express certain stances. All this is part of what constitutes being a speaker of a language. Acquiring a second language entails discourse knowledge surrounding the use of that language. In



many cases, second language acquirers may be grammatically competent but their discourse competence lags, as acquirers map norms, preferences and expectations surrounding their first language on to second language situations. Second language acquirers may have different norms from native speakers for greeting, asking, essay-writing, interviewing, storytelling, instructing, or arguing; for displaying interest, fear, concern, pleasure or emotional intensity. Discrepancies between non-native and native discourse competence have both personal and economic consequences when interlocutors misunderstand the contextual meanings of one another's language behavior.

Children are born with a predisposition to be social and begin communicating long before speaking. For example, children shout, cry, point, and tug at others for communicative purposes in the first year of life. These behaviors establish joint attention, a prerequisite of communication. In this period, infants monitor and respond appropriately to expressions of emotion and to greetings, directives, and certain other speech acts. In all societies, caregivers encourage the sociability of infants, although cultural conceptions of appropriate communicative behavior for infants differ. Further, societies differ in the discourse practices expected of caregivers. In some societies, caregivers are expected to converse with infants from birth on. In much of middle class Europe and the United States, mothers engage infants in greeting exchanges as soon as 24 hours after birth. Long before infants can utter words, mothers impute communicative import to infants' non-verbal behavior and vocalizations and speak for the infant as well as for themselves. In other societies, caregivers do not presume infants are necessarily intending to communicate when they vocalize and gesture and wait until infants are somewhat older before engaging them as conversational partners. Through such differing discourse practices, caregivers socialize infants into local culture.

When infants around the world begin to speak, how do they use words to accomplish social acts and activities, express affect and constitute social identities/relationships? In other words, how does discourse competence develop? Let us examine specific domains of children's discourse competence.

**Social Acts.** All children come to know that language is a tool for not only representing the world but constituting and changing the world as well. Children use linguistic structures as resources for carrying out a range of tasks such as asking questions and making requests, offers, and promises. They also develop understandings of what others are trying to accomplish with their words and adjust their subsequent linguistic acts accordingly, e.g. accepting/



rejecting offers, assessing announcements, agreeing/disagreeing with assertions, satisfying/refusing requests, and answering questions.

Let us consider how children acquire competence in one of these acts - the request for goods and services. Before speech, in the first year of life, infants vocalize and gesture (e.g. reaching) to request desired objects. At the single word stage, English-speaking children incorporate single words such as 'more' and 'want' into these schemata for requesting. In many speech communities, young children also use affect-laden constructions to get what they want (e.g. sympathy-marked pronouns, affixes and particles). English-speaking as well as Italian children use imperatives ('Gimme bear!') and declaratives expressing want/need ('I want/need bear') before using interrogative forms (e.g. 'Can you give me bear?', 'Will you give me bear?') and declarative hints (e.g. 'I sure miss bear'). These latter forms appear in children's speech around two and a half to three years of age, but not frequently. While young children use indirect request forms, they may not distinguish diverse indirect forms of request used by others. They may respond appropriately to formally variant requests, because they attend primarily to action predicates embedded in them or because of contextual clues as to what action is desired by speakers. By four, however, children are able to comprehend a wide range of indirect request types.

**Affect.** Affect is expressed emotion, including displays of moods, attitudes, dispositions and feelings. As noted earlier, early in their development, children display affect and interpret the affective displays of others. Before using words, children vary intonational contours and voice quality to indicate affect. At the single word stage, children perform a variety of affect-loaded speech acts, such as greeting, begging, teasing, cursing, and refusing; and in certain speech communities, use affect-marked pronouns and affixes, morphological particles, respect vocabulary, and switch from one phonological register to another to intensify or deintensify affect and to display sympathy, anger, deference among feelings. Research to date indicates very young children use language rhetorically and draw on affect-marked language to achieve rhetorical ends. These ends are critical to human survival and the maintenance of social institutions.

**Activity.** An activity is a set of practices that in co-ordination realize some motive. Telling a story, arguing, reviewing homework, and giving a lecture are all activities in which language plays an important role. Activities are socially constructed, even where participants do not speak. Eye gaze, facial expressions and other demeanors of those present impact the direction that an activity takes, along with more explicit verbal contributions. In this sense,



activities are joint accomplishments of at least two persons. In all societies, members guide the participation of novices in culturally relevant activities. However, societies differ in terms of what is expected of novice and member. Societies such as middle class European and American societies frequently give young children roles in language activities that place high cognitive, social and linguistic demands on them, requiring skills they do not yet fully command. In these societies, to accomplish the activity, members provide considerable assistance, speaking for the child, prompting or expanding the child's verbal contributions. In other societies, young children are given actions to perform as part of a larger language activity, but close assistance by members is rarely elicited or provided.

Activities entail complex discourse structures. Narrating and arguing, for example, have internal components and are constrained by norms, preferences and expectations concerning their order and form. These constraints vary across speech communities; what counts as a narrative for Anglo Americans, for example, does not match what counts as a narrative for Athapaskan Indians. To succeed in mainstream educational institutions, children growing up in culturally distinct, non-mainstream communities often have to acquire narrative competence in mainstream (as well as their own) terms. Most research on the acquisition of narrative skills has focussed on white middle class English-speaking children and the narrative structures preferred in their communities.

While scholarly definitions of narrative vary, most agree that a narrative contains a sequence of clauses with at least one temporal juncture. While narratives may depict future (e.g. plans) and present (e.g. radio broadcasts) events, research on acquisition of narrative structures focuses on past time narratives. The development of such narratives is rooted in children's early attempts to refer to non-present objects and to past events, observed as early as 15 months of age. Children talk about the past long before acquiring past tense morphology (around 27 months). In white middle class households, children are encouraged to remember experiences already known to mothers. The mother elicits and helps to structure such narratives, in addition to providing tokens of appreciation and support. In speech communities such as the Kaluli of Papua-New Guinea, young children are not asked to recast shared past experiences in narrative form and caregivers do not scaffold children's narratives through prompting, questioning and expanding the child's talk about the shared past.

Narratives of past experience may include an introduction, abstract, orientation (to person, time, place etc.), complicating actions (e.g. initiating event,



attempts), evaluation, result, and coda. Up to the age of three, children rarely include all of these components in their narratives. Three year old middle class English-speaking children frequently omit the abstract, orientation, and results. Five year old children more consistently provide all narrative components. In relating one clause to another within a narrative, younger children tend not to use connectives that specify consequence and causality but rather leave such meanings implicit. Three year olds routinely engage in narrative activities with peers and adults at home and at school. Four year old children not only initiate stories but actively acknowledge and comment on stories that their peers initiate. Indeed the stories of three and four year old children are often motivated by a story just related. In this sense, children are actively co-constructing stories early in the preschool years.

**Social Identities/Relationships.** A critical domain of discourse competence is the ability to create and maintain social identities and relationships through language. In every social group, children acquire ways of speaking expected of children, adults, peers, males, females, lower status, higher status, intimates, strangers and other social categories. Linguistic forms associated with social acts, stances, and activities are also associated with specific speaker/writer identities and specific social relationships. Indeed these identity/relationship contexts are part of the 'social meaning' of these forms. Very young children are sensitive to such variation and modify their speech accordingly. For example, two year old English-speaking children adjust their request forms to age and rank of addressees, using imperatives to peers while directing desire statements, questions, and requests for permission to adults and older children. Similarly Samoan-speaking children of this age switch phonological registers to create or reflect intimacy/distance and modify the form of their requests with ranking of speaker and addressee. By four years of age, children everywhere display considerable competence in altering communicative styles to establish particular identities and relationships.

Discourse competence involves the ability to build contexts through linguistic structures. Children and other acquirers come to understand that a single structure or a set of structures may, in the same moment of use, build a multitude of contexts - a type of affect, a social act and a social identity, for example. Acquirers also come to understand that contexts are built sequentially and develop the competence to create and interpret language activities through ordered acts and expressed stances.



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