Coherency in Children's Discourse

I. INTRODUCTION:

Over the past year, the authors have been looking at one aspect of language development that has so far received little attention in the literature, the development of conversational skills in young children. Our interests are both sociological and linguistic; sociological in that conversation involves social knowledge, some aspects of which will be culture-dependent, while others may obtain universally; and linguistic in that the child's ability to use language relevantly and appropriately will be an integral part of language acquisition as a whole.

When we speak of conversational skills, we mean many things. They include the child's ability to understand the literal and conveyed meanings of utterances, his knowledge of felicity conditions for speech acts, and his conformity to those conversational maxims that Grice (1968) has pointed out, such as making contributions that are relevant, informative, sincere and so on. But rather than dealing with these specific pragmatic skills, we consider one type of behavior that is a necessary prerequisite for conversation, namely, a capacity for synchronised attention. No conversation (indeed no sort of focussed interaction) is possible without some degree of mutual attentiveness on the part of interlocutors. Therefore, we begin our inquiry into the emergence of conversational skills by asking to what extent young children evidence attentiveness in verbal encounters. We also ask to what extent young children expect attentiveness from others.

The developmental literature on pre-linguistic interaction between infants and their caretakers suggests that an interest in social stimuli emanating from human sources appears within the first few weeks of life, and probably involves a biological predisposition. By the third month, according to Wolff (1964), Stern (1974) and Richards (1974), infants are able to employ eye-contact, social smiling and vocalization to engage in sequenced interaction with adults. Towards the end of the first year, young children
acquire the ability to synchronize their eye-gaze with that of adults, and thus to focus more easily on the same object as their interactional partner. The kinds of devices that an adult must use to direct a child's attention towards an object will become increasingly conventionalised as the child develops. To begin with, it may be necessary to pick up an object and shake it; later it will be possible to gain the child's attention by pointing and vocalizing; later still, linguistic means alone will suffice.

However, this data seems to contrast with reports about the capacity and willingness of older children to interact socially with others. Indeed, if we are to believe Piaget (1926), even children as old as five or six years are reluctant to attend to one another's utterances. For the most part, children talk alongside one another but not with one another. For Piaget, the child's 'egocentrism' prevents him from adapting or addressing his speech to a listener, and he is hindered from adopting the perspective of his interactional partner. His utterances are not contingent on the listener showing signs of understanding, and therefore he does not expect the listener to respond appropriately. It seems to be a corollary of this that the egocentric child is unable to consider seriously the conversational contributions of others. Thus, rather than dialogues, children together produce collective monologues.

But if we examine these latter two claims in the light of our observations, neither of them seem to be substantiated. It is frequently the case that the speaker does make his utterances contingent on the addressee responding appropriately, and it is also the case that the addressee will often adapt his utterance to the form or content of the previous speaker's utterance. To this extent, then, we feel that the capacity of young children to engage in dialogues has probably been underestimated and that the properties of these interactions deserves more systematic study.
II. METHOD:

Let us describe briefly the kind of observations we carried out. Our subjects are twin boys, Toby and David, aged two years nine months, at the onset of the research. The twins have been taped and videotaped each month since September 1973. The primary setting for the recording has been the twin's bedroom during the early morning hours. This was selected as it provides a situation in which the children interacted totally outside the presence of an adult. Since most of the literature on children's conversations is based on child-adult interaction, we felt it would be valuable to broaden this data base. It will also be obvious that this setting provides a different social environment to that usually considered by cognitive psychologists. In most cases, children are observed in either a laboratory or a nursery school setting; usually talk accompanies some absorbing non-verbal activity. In the bedroom situation that we examined, however, the children conversed in semi-darkness, with only a set of stuffed animals as playthings.

We believe that the contrast in setting is worth stressing, since any serious study of conversation, whether for adults or children, must take into account the part played by the physical and social context. Norms of conversation which hold in an active play situation may not carry over for other situations. So for example, in this case, mutual attentiveness may play a much greater role than in other contexts since the main source of cognitive stimulation is verbal interaction, rather than some other play activity. It should therefore be borne in mind that any generalizations to be drawn from our work must be relativized to the particular kind of sample that we took. For ease of exposition, we will not always explicitly mention the limited nature of our claims.
III. THE ACHIEVEMENT OF CONVERSATIONAL EXCHANGES:

A. Assertion and Acknowledgement:

Conversation is a social task, and participant must 'work' (Garfinkel 1967) to achieve coherence by coordinating their contributions. The extent of this work is not usually perceived by competent language users, who can take for granted that their addressee will comprehend without difficulty conventional devices for making adequate reference, and for performing various kinds of illocutionary acts, such as commanding, questioning, and promising. For young children, however, these assumptions cannot always be held. It is more obvious that they must work to execute effectively even simple, unmarked types of speech acts, such as asserting.

We hypothesize that because young children do not have total command of these semantic and pragmatic conventions, they require a much greater degree of feedback from their addressees than do fully competent users. The motivation for this claim stems from evidence that Toby and David observe a conversational norm that obliges the addressee to routinely acknowledge the speaker's utterance. It is around this relation between an utterance and its expected response that we have constructed our notion of conversational coherence. This will be developed by examining first the category of assertions, and second the class of relevant responses.

We are here using assertion in the familiar sense: If someone asserts a proposition, then he is claiming that given the way things possibly could be, some of these states of affairs can be ruled out of consideration as false. He is describing which of the possible states of affairs are truly the case. Within the conversations we have observed, assertions fall into three main categories:

Types of Assertions:

a. Self-descriptions: The child accompanies his actions by a linguistic representation of what he is doing.

Examples:

(1) I got feathers/
I got/ I got big one/
I rip it now/
b. *Actual-world assertions:* These make claims about what is actually the case in the real world.

(2) ABC in there/
(naming letters in alphabet)
(3) i: moth/
(pointing out a moth)
(4) some in there/
lots in there/
(5) oh/ house broken/
  oh dear/ very quiet/
  all very quiet/

c. *Fantasy-world assertions:* The child asserts that something is the case in a fantasy-world situation.

Most of the utterances that we have classed as assertions would fall into the category that Bloom (1970) calls 'comments'. She contrasts these with the category of commands or 'directions' in that, unlike the latter, they "do not attempt to influence the behavior of the receiver," *(op cit: 22)*

While we accept that the illocutionary forces conveyed by the acts of asserting and commanding, respectively, are quite distinct, nevertheless the criterion proposed by Bloom does not adequately capture the difference. The utterance of an assertion can be associated with an attempt on the part of the speaker to influence the behavior of the addressee. It typically initiates an obligation that the addressee attend to the proposition expressed by the speaker and also an obligation that the addressee, if he responds at all, make his response relevant. Although these background assumptions are tacitly accepted by adult speakers, they are often brought into the forefront during the children's conversations that we have looked at. In the case of Toby and David, there is a social norm that obliges the addressee to explicitly demonstrate that he is attending to the same topic as the speaker. It is a consequence of this norm that assertions routinely oblige
the addressee to make a relevant response. Such responses seem to fall into five main sub-categories, although the latter are not mutually exclusive. Some conversational turns will contain more than one type of relevant response.

Types of Relevant Responses:

a. Basic Acknowledgement: There are many utterances in the data where one child simply repeats what the previous child has said.

b. Affirmation: One child shows that he agrees with an utterance of the previous speaker.

c. Denial: This category consists of utterances formed by prefixing a negative particle to an utterance of the previous speaker.

d. Matching: The addressee claims that he is performing the same, or a similar action as the previous speaker.

Examples:

(6) = big one/ no/
    = big one/

(7) = Mommys silly/
    = (Mommys silly/)

(8) = got feathers/
    = got feathers/...
    = oh yes/

(9) = big one/
    = yes/
    = (big one/)

(10) = Jack and Jill/
    = no Jack and Jill/

(11) = cradle will rock/
    = cradle fall/
    = cradle will rock/
    = no cradle will rock/

(12) = you silly/
    = no you silly/

(13) = I find feather/
    = I find feather/
    = yes/ I find( ? )/
    = I get one/ now I get good one/ I get good one/ a big one/
e. **Extension:** This category comes closest to the notion of a relevant response in adult conversation. The addressee refers to an individual or set of individuals by an expression which is either the same as, or related anaphorically to, the expression used by the previous speaker. He then predicates something new of this individual or set of individuals.

Responses of this sort are routinely provided by co-conversationalists. Their prominence suggests that a norm obliging verbal acknowledgement of assertions does obtain between these interlocutors. Perhaps more striking are those instances where a response is not forthcoming. In many of these instances, it is clear that the speaker expects verbal recognition of his utterance. The child whose assertion does not receive a suitable response may react by repeating his original utterance until the addressee conforms to the norm.

The following example illustrates this point:

(16) - goosey goosey gander....
   -[^i\_\_\_] moth/[^i\_\_\_] moth/ (**gloss: there's a moth**)
   -goosey goosey gander, where shall I wander.....
   -[^i\_\_\_] moth/[^i\_\_\_\_] moth/[^i\_\_\_] moth/[^i\_\_\_] moth/
   -upstairs downstairs in the lady's chamber....
   -[^i\_\_\_] moth/[^i\_\_\_] moth/[^i\_\_\_] moth/
   -[^i\_\_\_\_] (? ) moth/
   - **mmmk** gone moth/ **allgone**/

In this context, "goosey goosey gander...." is not a relevant response. It is not accepted by the utterer of "[^i\_\_\_] moth" who, in turn, perseverates with his utterances until the other stops singing and takes note.
B. Competence in Asserting:

The kind of exchange represented by (16) reveals other important dimensions of the development of pragmatic competence in children. It shows that the process of expressing propositions can be a complex affair. Let us consider roughly what is involved in such a process.

At the most basic level, a child must come to understand what it means to assert that the world is a certain way. That is, he must learn what it is to make a claim about the world. Both as speaker and hearer, he must recognize that assertion comprise first, a reference to an object or set of objects which constitute the subject or topic of the assertion and second, a claim about that object or set of objects. Evaluation of any given assertion (e.g. as true or false) demands that at least these semantic properties be understood.

Asserting involves other sorts of competence as well. Users of language assume that their conversational partners share with them certain basic knowledge about the world. Some of this knowledge concerns interactional conventions, some concerns linguistic conventions and so on. We call the set of background assumptions shared by both speaker and hearer pragmatic presuppositions (c.f. Stalnaker 1972). Thus, for example, when a speaker points to a flower and asserts 'flower broken' (gliss; 'the flower is broken'), he presupposes that the hearer knows that flowers exist. He also presupposes that the hearer will recognize that 'flower' is the object about which an assertion is being made. Finally, if 'flower' is interpreted as a definite noun phrase (given the context), then the speaker presupposes that the hearer can identify the 'flower' in question. In general, it will be presupposed that speaker-hearers are able to attend to, and directly receive, objects in the immediate physical environment.

However, although the speaker may presuppose that the hearer can attend to the object in question, he may not always presuppose that the hearer is attending to the object. Thus, drawing the other's attention to an object is
compatible with the set of pragmatic presuppositions (specified above); however, assuming that the addressee is attending may very well be incorrect.

A critical task for the language-user is, then, to assure that conversational partners are attending to the topic at hand. For both semantic (e.g. assigning truth value) and pragmatic (e.g. making utterances relevant) considerations, it is important for interlocutors to know what they are talking about.

For both adult and child, this task is not always an easy one. The ethno-methodological literature, for example, (Sacks 1972) devotes considerable attention to the problem of topic-handling, topic-shift among adult speakers/children, however, appear to experience even more difficulties in introducing topics. manageable when the topic is an actual object in the environment that both speaker and hearer can perceive simultaneously. Thus, in (16) the utterance 'i moth' draws attention to an interesting object in the setting - a moth flying about the room. i: moth, then, seems to be a demonstrative utterance, 'there's a moth! in adult English.'

Notice also in (16) that i: moth is repeated several times before and subsequently 'moth! serves as a topic for further conversation. This pattern appears frequently. The pragmatic operation of introducing a new individual into the discourse is carried out separating from the semantic operation of precidenting something about it. (e.g. Gruber 1967) Examples (17) and (18) are further illustrations of this point.

(17)
- tree/tree/ see got grass/
- yes/ i see it/ i see it/

(18)
- a battery/ this is battery/ this is battery/ look/ i find battery/
- i see/ that jiji's/
- oh no/ that david's/ oh no/ that jiji's/ that's steam roller/
- battery/
- it's comin'/

Both children show concern that the other should identify the correct individual and should acknowledge having done so. In many instances, we find requests that the addressee should 'look' or 'see' in order to identify the correct object. The response often found, as in (17) and (18) is 'yes, i see'. Devices like ostension, high pitch and increased amplitude, and repeated requests for attention are often necessary if one child wants to change the topic.
Once a new topic has become established, the object being talked about can then be held constant, while new things are said about it. This may be marked grammatically by the use of anaphoric pronouns, as in (113) "I get one" and (115) "it's comin'". Obviously, there are cases which are more complex than the one just discussed, where the topic is not simply one object, but perhaps a set of objects, or a number of sets of objects. But the instance where just one individual is being talked about is basic and can serve as a foundation for the use of anaphor. It seems likely that the instances we have mentioned of anaphoric relations across speaker's utterances constitute an initial step towards the much more complex relations of shared topic and relevance in adult discourse.

It has been claimed that conversation which focusses on objects in the environment is 'redundant' with respect to the context. (See, for example, Halliday 1973, Bloom 1973, Piaget 1926.) In Piaget's framework, such conversations will be characterized as 'egocentric'. The speaker is failing to 'adapt information' to the needs of the listener, if he is only saying what is already 'obvious'. However, in our terminology, an utterance will only be redundant if it is presupposed to be true. We have argued above that a demonstrative utterance will be presupposed to be true if it is presupposed by the speaker that the addressee is already attending to the object being pointed out. But this is surely not the case in the examples we have given. Rather, the speaker seems to be entirely correct in his assumption that the object is not being attended to. Therefore, we believe that the notion of redundancy in these cases rests on an inadequate analysis of the semantic and pragmatic structure of conversation.

More generally, in our approach we have tried to show that the two children we have observed are not passively acquiring the conventional forms of adult language. Rather, they are engaged in constructing conventions in the process of social and linguistic interaction. The use of concepts like 'egocentrism' and 'context-dependence' sometimes suggests that there is a fundamental difference between the child's and the adult's use of language; it is therefore difficult to see how the transition between the two is made. By using different theoretical constructs drawn from semantics and pragmatics, we have to have shown that the divergence is not so great as have been supposed, and that it is important to investigate in detail the way children use language in concrete situations.